

Feminine Plural:
Representations of Vulnerabilities and Vulnerabilities of Representations
Narratives of Women in Contemporary Egyptian Cinema

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ABSTRACT

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Huda Shaarawi's purposeful unveiling in 1919 and the violent undressing of the girl in the blue bra in 2011 trace a narrative arc that begins with the birth of the Egyptian nation and end with the collapse of the state. These representative moments are engulfed by a nationalist discourse that appropriates the female figure to raise sentiments of loyalty, solidarity and belonging, a discourse that has resurfaced in and since the 2011 Egyptian revolution. National narratives come to replace personal female narratives.

Feminine Plural explores the patterns of signification implied between both iconic moments, through a critical examination of four contemporary Egyptian films, in order to understand how various, and often divergent, representations of women's modalities affect the marked social and political positions of women in Egyptian society. What meanings does cinema as cultural production articulate, negotiate and ultimately project of women's identities and modes of being? How can we account for the complex patterns of subjectivity that we have a

moral duty to understand, and simultaneously explain the connections between the visual reproduction of women and their systematic political marginalization?

I examine the narratives constructs of female identities and subjectivities, and the complex patterns of social and political relations that four exemplary films offer: *Scheherazade Tell Me A Story* directed by Yousry Nasrallah (2009), *Cairo 678* directed by Mohamed Diab (2010), *This Is Chaos* directed by Youssef Chahine and Khaled Youssef (2007), and finally *The Yacoubian Building* directed by Marwan Hamed (2006). The content of these films provide considerable imaginative insight into the social and cultural inscriptions of gender roles and relations in society.

The disappearance of the classical Arabic feminine plural (and dual) in colloquial Egyptian, to be replaced by the ubiquitous masculine (grammatical) gender, articulates the semantic erasure of the female subject. Thus, woman is rendered the object of discourse, never its subject. The first chapter, “Semantic Vulnerability: Interstices Between Voices and Images,” examines the significant function of the storyteller. The interwoven narratives of four female protagonists provide a confessional setting to address and acknowledge the presence of the female speaking subject. The narratives deconstruct conventional conceptions of female identity, including, the importance of marriage, the role of women in husband and wife relations, and the image of the nurturing mother.

The second chapter, “Physical Vulnerability: Public Displays of Violence and the Vanishing Subject,” reveals how the semantic erasure of the grammatical subject is accompanied by a physical one. Addressing the pervasive problem of public sexual harassment in Egypt, *Cairo 678* portrays how this violation further negates the presence of women, as both citizens and subjects, reducing them to abstractions. Shamed and silenced, women struggle against a

discourse of property and propriety to redefine their experiences, so often denied, and assert their autonomous and self-determining subjectivity, including the right to own and protect their bodies. Three fragmented narratives weave continuous, yet distinct, stories that challenge identificatory binaries of victim/perpetrator, pure/impure, oppressed/oppressor, and dominant/submissive.

In the final chapter, “Symbolic Vulnerability: State of Aporia” I examine the dangers of writing the nation’s history through women’s lives. The semantic and physical vulnerabilities discussed in the first two chapters contribute to the symbolic vulnerability of women, especially when they embody the nation to the detriment of their own subjectivity. *This Is Chaos* exposes social constructs that enforce female subjection, and trap female subjectivity within the rhetorical binaries of tradition/modernity, Egyptian/Westernized norms, and purity/corruption. *The Yacoubian Building* traces the disintegration of the nation through the systematic alienation of its citizens. This alienation is reinforced by the commodification of male and female bodies, the inescapable powerlessness at the hand of the government, and the dissipation of individual dreams.

The examination of female subjectivities and representations is paralleled by an exploration of the representations of hegemonic masculinity, and the characterizations of the nation’s ideal “hero,” which the films also criticize. Ultimately, these four films provide a subversive criticism of a society in crisis over the representations of its citizens and its assertion of power. My three axes of analysis, that retrace the semantic, physical and symbolic vulnerabilities of women within those representations also reveal how those representations are equally vulnerable, and can therefore be renegotiated and redefined to reflect women, not as they are idealized, fantasized, and appropriated, but as they are: self-determining subjects.

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In memory of my father, my uncle Shawky, and Herb Blau

To my mother and brother

INTRODUCTION

From Icons to Narratives

Iconic Moments: History and Narratives

In 1922, when Huda Shaarawi took off her veil in public, a gesture that was emblematic of her liberation, she became a pioneer and an icon of Egyptian feminism, albeit a controversial one.¹ In 2011, army soldiers dragged a female protestor and tore open her *niqab* to reveal a blue bra; she came to be known as the woman in the blue bra, refusing media appearances to maintain the anonymity of her identity (Figure a). She also embodied the female resistance against the Mubarak regime.

The first moment expresses a resistance to the public imposition of the veil, and the second one exposes indignation at the state undressing its women. While both images offer opposing representations of female resistance, they both contest the state's imposed regulation and control of the female body. And indeed, while the artistic and activist expressions of dissent by women, during and since the 2011 Egyptian revolution, hoped to add their voices to the revolutionaries demands for a new, just and democratic society, women still find themselves marginalized, as all efforts to raise concerns about women's issues are quickly and swiftly contained and repressed. The three governments since the revolution, the transitioning one, the theocratic one, and finally the military, have impeded women's participation in the public sphere. In 2013, the Muslim Brotherhood overtly condemned the UN Women declaration on the grounds that it violated *shari'a* law, and would result in the complete disintegration of society. Until today, women activists are imprisoned, and despite the scandal of the virginity tests performed

¹ Her ambivalence stems from her embrace of a modernist-nationalist discourse to discuss women's position in society. See Hatem, Mervat, 1993.

by the army in 2011, women are systematically assaulted during their arrests, sexual harassment in public spaces is rampant, and the statistics about women's political representations are dismal.

I would like to examine the patterns of signification implied between the representations of Shaarawi's purposeful unveiling and the violent undressing of the girl in the blue bra. These iconic moments trace a narrative arc that begins with the birth of the Egyptian nation and ends with the collapse of the state. Shaarawi represents the rise of the feminist movement in Egypt, but also that of national consciousness.² At the beginning of the twentieth century, women, including Shaarawi, Bahithat al-Badiyah, Nabawiyah Musa participated in intellectual societies and cultural exchanges with Europeans to discuss women's changing roles, with regards to domestic and public positions, religion, class and education (1914 and 1916).³ "Egyptian women generated a nationalist discourse that both legitimized and advanced their innovations. In Egypt, nationalist women deployed the idea and practice of the 'new woman' against the colonizer" (47-8).⁴ However, national consciousness quickly engulfed women's movements, while appropriating their images. For instance, in 1928, during the public ceremony unveiling of the iconic statue *Nahdat Misr*⁵ (The Awakening of Egypt) by Mahmud Mukhtar "few women were

² "Egypt came to be represented as a woman in a process that coincided with the unveiling of Egyptian women. This was not a self-evident or seamless process, but one that took time. Egypt could not effectively be represented as a woman until the debate on women's face covering had advanced. Unveiling then became a metaphor for national independence, although veiling also remained for many Muslims a metaphor for national purity" (81). See Baron, Beth. *Egypt as a Woman Nationalism, Gender, and Politics*. Berkeley: University of California, 2005

³ For more see for instance Badran, 1996, and Tucker, 1993.

⁴ Badran, Margot. *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.

⁵ Beth Baron writes about the statue: "The work juxtaposes two images: the Sphinx rising and a peasant woman unveiling. The elements of the Mustafa Kamil statue, which was also produced in France, are thus repeated, only the man himself is missing. The Sphinx and the woman both represent Egypt: the Sphinx rising suggests a rebirth of Egypt's ancient grandeur; the peasant woman lifting her veil symbolizes the liberation of the modern nation. The linking of the two figures—the woman's hand rests on the Sphinx's head—connect antiquity to the present. The sculpture thus reinforced nationalist claims to territorial continuity, a common theme in the rhetoric of nation-building. . . . The statue became the preeminent symbol of the national struggle for Egyptians, evoking the revolution of 1919 and the optimism of the

allowed to attend the opening ceremony” (68).⁶ The use of female iconography persisted and developed (Baron 2005) during the history of Egypt’s liberation from colonialism, until the middle of the twentieth century. While my intent is not to trace the history of Egyptian feminism,⁷ I am interested in the representations of women within history, especially that, during and since the 2011 revolution, this rhetoric of female national iconography resurfaced sometimes as a young woman raped or saved, a mother betrayed by her children or welcoming her son as her savior. This time however, the images were recoded to address, not the colonial powers, but the nation’s internal struggles: images of women were appropriated by revolutionaries, Islamists, and the military alike to mobilize loyalties (Figures b, c, d, e). The image of the woman in the blue bra being beaten and undressed by soldiers incited women to swarm to Tahrir in protest against such violations, and images of the blue bra made their way to anti-military propaganda (Figure f).

Thus, representations of women are used to articulate a nation in crisis, whether the crisis is within or without, and they ultimately mobilize the masses by rousing national sentiment and fostering a sense of national belonging. These female national fantasies found their way to the silver screen. They retrace Egypt’s history through personal female narratives, like Youssef Chahine’s *The Sparrow* (1972) which addresses the 1967 defeat against Israel through the metaphor of a woman under siege. This is itself ironic because during the Nasserist era, feminist movements were repressed. As Shafik notes in her seminal book on Egyptian cinema:

following decade. But it fell out of favor among Islamists who denounced “pagan” symbols in the 1930s” (68). See Baron, 2005.

⁶ Baron, 2005.

⁷ See Badran, Margot. “Independent Women: More than a Century of Egyptian Feminism.” *Arab Women: Old Boundaries, New Frontiers*. Tucker, Judith E., ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.

the coding of the Egyptian nation particularly before and in the immediate aftermath of national independence was predominantly female. . . . This applies also to the postindependence female liberation narratives depicting women in the service of the nation. . . . In general, when picturing the homeland as oppressed or threatened by occupation and assaults (rape) whether from the outside. . . . or from within. . . . the cinematic narration was more likely to focus on a woman. (99)⁸

During the 90s another version surfaced, “where the heroine embodied, on behalf of her nation, both sexual vulnerability and the capability to fight back.”⁹ Shafik also offers a substantial analysis of a multitude of films where she looks “at the rhetoric of films that deal explicitly with the women’s question in order to evaluate the feminist legacy of ‘committed cinema’, particularly those films that explicitly raise the question of gender inequality” (121). She traces the various roles of women in cinema (including the image of mothers and prostitutes, and the virgin-whore dichotomy), she defines “misery feminism,”¹⁰ and explores the star system. Shafik frames her book as an exploration of the popularity of Egyptian cinema, where she aims “to be historically inclusive, its coverage ranging from the emergence of the Egyptian cinema in the 1920s until the present” (6). Her research addresses not only the film industry, but also the themes of nation and class, alongside gender (as her title suggests).

Shafik’s book is the most comprehensive book about Egyptian cinema, referencing hundreds of films. Other scholars of Egyptian cinema, such as Walter Armbrust, situate their

⁸ Shafik, Viola. *Popular Egyptian Cinema: Gender, Class, and Nation*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2007.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ For Shafik, “cinematic misery feminism represents in its essence a paternalistic view that positions women as objects of male power, in other words as victims of society, patriarchy, and so on, thus negating actual (even if relative) female abilities to negotiate their position and induce change” (136). See Shafik, 2007.

analyses within mass culture in Egypt, and cinema's relation to the modernist project.¹¹ Lina Khatib's essay on women, nationalism and Egyptian political cinema challenges the Orientalist treatment of women in the Third World, and her research is framed within post-colonial and media studies and their intersection with politics.¹²

However, my intent is different, as it is conceptually framed by two critical iconic moments that trace a significant narrative trajectory. Hence, my focus is on narratives and intertextual analysis in order to identify, understand and explore the production of female subjectivity. I am particularly interested in how various, and often divergent, representations of women's modalities affect the marked social and political positions of women in Egyptian society. What meanings does cinema as cultural production articulate, negotiate and ultimately project of women's identities and modes of being? How are these meaning created and mediated and ultimately subverted by a society that fashions women in the images of a fantasy for a nation, from which they become excluded? How can we account for the complex patterns of subjectivity that we have a moral duty to understand, and simultaneously explain the connections between the visual reproduction of women and their systematic political marginalization?

To answer these questions I echo Aijaz Ahmed's words about "the increasing dominance of the poststructuralist position. . . . of greatly extending the centrality of *reading* as the appropriate form of politics" (6).¹³ Since I question the reactionary politics against women, I am unequivocally interested in the extent to which implications about the cultural production of women are political. Such productions are imaginative, and deliberately construct meaningful fictions. To that end, I narrow my focus on cinema, a particularly significant form of cultural

¹¹ See Armbrust, Walter. *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

¹² See Khatib, Lina. *Filming the Modern Middle East: Politics in the Cinemas of Hollywood and the Arab World*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2006.

¹³ Ahmad, Aijaz. *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*. London: Verso, 1992.

production in Egypt, since the beginning of the twentieth century. I examine the narratives constructs of female identities and subjectivities, and the complex patterns of social and political relations that four exemplary films offer: *Scheherazade Tell Me A Story* directed by Yousry Nasrallah (2009), *Cairo 678* directed by Mohamed Diab (2010), *This Is Chaos* directed by Youssef Chahine and Khaled Youssef (2007), and finally *The Yacoubian Building* directed by Marwan Hamed (2006). The content of these films provide considerable imaginative insight into the social and cultural inscriptions of gender roles and relations in Egyptian society. It is impossible to address women's issues without discussing men; hence, my research explores constructs of femininity as well as masculinity within those films.

As I look at those iconic moments of unveiling and undressing, and considering the sociopolitical and historical upheaval in Egypt since 2011, I wonder how the future will align with the present, and overcome this aporetic state of existence. I am inevitably reminded that Elizabeth Grosz asked for “the necessity, in the future, of providing other ways of knowing, other ontologies and epistemologies that enable the subject's relation to the world, to space and to time, to be conceptualized in different terms” (13).¹⁴ Because, if, as Herb Blau says, “the society of the spectacle metastasized into the society of information” (xiv),¹⁵ a process that was abundantly clear during the Arab Spring and the voracious global media attention it harnessed, what happens when there is an influx of images that we do not know how to read, when we cannot decipher the patterns between subjects and the world they live in?

¹⁴ Grosz, Elizabeth. “Feminist futures?” *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*. 21.1 (2002): 13-20.

¹⁵ Blau, Herbert. *The Dubious Spectacle: Extremities of Theater, 1976-2000*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.



Figure a – “The Girl in the Blue Bra,” December 21, 2011. Source: NPR.



Figure b – In reference to the virginity tests:

Mohamed Tantawi, former commander-in-chief of the Egyptian Armed Forces, and head of the transition (military) government from 2011 until June 30, 2012: “We have nothing to do with it. You’re the ones who chose freedom and justice*...??”

*The Muslim Brotherhood’s political party is called Freedom and Justice.



Figure c –
January 25
June 30
The constitution
The referendum

Egypt is crossing

Concept by Ahmed Ragab
Drawing by Mostafa Hussein



Figure d – Egyptian Army vs Muslim Brotherhood



Figure e – Egypt as “The Mother of the World” holding Abdel Fattah El Sisi, former commander-in-chief of the army and president since 2014:” Thank you my son, you gave me back my status and my dignity.”



Figure f – We won't forget.

Narratives of Vulnerabilities

In an article on *Ahram Online*,¹⁶ “Where is Post-revolution Egyptian Cinema Heading? Critic Answers,” Egyptian film critic Amir El Emary says that “Many put cinema in the entertainment section, not the arts section,” and he laments that “in the past 20 years Egyptian cinema has become a form of escapism.”¹⁷ And yet, despite the “silly films that make fun of everything in a naïve manner,” there are other films that are “the stark opposite” and give “a very bleak picture of Egypt in a very upfront manner in attempts to show that there is corruption in every aspect of Egyptian life. The result is the viewer feels somewhat hopeless.”¹⁸ I question the hopelessness that such films evoke at least according to one highly visible critic. On the contrary, these films offer particular reflections on society and force the audience to reach beyond the entertainment value of cinema. There are inherent cultural meanings embedded within cinema, meanings that have a tendency to fall through the cracks of scholarship. Thus, my research precisely incorporates the existence of multi-modal discourses and narratives, and their potential to produce meaning. The power of the films in my analysis is that they acknowledge and emphasize the function of the imagination to mediate reality. Hence, I believe that they provide complex patterns that disclose the struggles and processes of the development of female subjectivity.

My point of departure is the erasure of subjectivity translated by the disappearance of the classical Arabic feminine plural (and dual)¹⁹ in colloquial Egyptian, to be replaced by the ubiquitous masculine (grammatical) gender. This vanishing of grammatical differentiation is a

¹⁶ *Ahram Online* is the English-language website published by Al Ahram Publishing House, the publisher of *El Ahram*, the oldest Arabic newspaper in Egypt, in publication since 1875.

¹⁷ Taher, Menna. “Where is Post-revolution Egyptian Cinema Heading? Critic Answers.” *Ahram Online*. July 10, 2011. <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/5/32/16001/Arts--Culture/Film/Where-is-postrevolution-Egyptian-cinema-heading-Cr.aspx>

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ It is interesting to note that the suffix used to signal the feminine dual and plural in classical Arabic is called “*noon el neswa*” or the feminine “n,” which is the name of the group that developed the graffiti campaign in Egypt “*Graffiti Hareemi*” (Female Graffiti).

twofold objectification of the feminine gender: she cannot be a subject or an object (in the grammatical sense), and she is rendered the object of discourse. Even language thus fails to account for feminine experience. However, the increase of women's presence in public spaces, from public transportation and the streets, to sports venues and the workplace, challenges this grammatical vanishing. On the one hand, this erasure engulfs women in the public sphere, as they conform, and respond, to masculine utterances. On the other, the visibility of the female body threatens public masculinity and contradicts this erasure. For what happens when she does not respond? More importantly, what happens when she speaks, up? Transgressive narratives, while they delineate the ontological violence that has come to define women's experiences, have the power to destabilize the limits of female representations, both as reality and as fantasy. They break the boundaries of the woman-as-fantasy, and through it, insinuates the woman-as-subject.

Chapter Overview

In the first chapter, "Semantic Vulnerability: Interstices Between Voices and Images," I examine the importance of the voice of the storyteller in *Scheherazade Tell Me a Story*. The disappearance of the feminine plural reveals a semantic vulnerability: women were a phonetic burden that weighed down the rhythm of utterances, and are now engulfed in the masculine plural. Adriana Cavarero writes in *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* that "woman is notoriously in the position of the object; or rather, she is thought, represented, defined from the point of view of the Man" (50).²⁰ The figure of Scheherazade embodies what Adriana Cavarero calls the "narratable self," and allows women to weave their experiences of pain and suffering within narratives of solidarity and understanding. Cavarero conveys the importance of women narrating their own stories. I examine this importance, if not compulsive necessity, through the

²⁰ Cavarero, Adriana. *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*. London: Routledge, 2000.

voice of Firdaus in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman At Point Zero*. Tracing the role of Scheherazade in *A Thousand and One Nights* reveals the significance of the film's title in framing the meanings inherent in the narratives.

The interwoven narratives of four female protagonists provide a confessional setting to address and acknowledge the presence of the female speaking subject. The non-linear plot punctuated with flashbacks presents the entrance of the feminine from the social into the political, as the women fight against a subjugating silence. *Scheherazade* thus exposes the failure of society to provide a space for women to recount their experiences and the failure of intimate relationships to safeguard women's desire for recognition, as it foregrounds the voice as the visibility of the female subject. Each woman has a story, and telling them becomes an act of agency and self-determination, through which they reconcile the past with the present. The narratives deconstruct conventional conceptions of female identity, including, the importance of marriage, the role of women in husband and wife relations, and the image of the nurturing mother. Nasrallah represents the image(s) and the voice(s) of the storyteller as the thread that weaves seemingly disparate and fragmented narratives, but that simultaneously bring together the periphery and the center. The film ultimately provides complex matrices of patterns of love as it challenges women's processes of idealization and recognition, and it creates a political framework for reflection and reflexivity.

The second chapter, "Physical Vulnerability: Public Displays of Violence and the Vanishing Subject," reveals how the semantic erasure of the grammatical subject is accompanied by a physical one. Public spaces reinforce the corporeal vulnerability of women. Addressing the pervasive problem of public sexual harassment in Egypt, *Cairo 678* portrays how this violation further negates the presence of women, as both citizens and subjects, reducing them to

abstractions. Shamed and silenced, women struggle to redefine their experiences, so often denied, and assert their autonomous and self-determining subjectivity, including the right to own and protect their bodies. The state's ineptitude at legally handling sexual harassment, and society's denial of its existence expose the problematic surrounding the experience of women who are violated in public spaces. The erasure of such experiences emphasizes the invisibility on the female body, since society refuses to acknowledge the harassed body.

The non-linear plot weaves the narratives of three women who were sexually harassed: the first one on the bus, the second one on the street, the third one during a football victory celebration. The second one is based on the true story of Nuha Rushdi, the first woman to legally pursue a sexual harassment case in Egypt in 2008, which was a catalyst in revisiting sexual harassment laws. However, reports are still scarce, and *Cairo 678* depicts how women's experiences become shrouded in a regulatory discourse of property and propriety: A woman's words are not her own, since they are denied, and her body is not hers, since it is violated with impunity. She is ashamed and socially forbidden to disclose her experience, because it reveals that the purity of her body was dishonored. The three interconnecting narratives retrace how each woman copes with the repercussions of her harassment, on herself and on people around her. Refusing to be victimized, they fight back by becoming perpetrators against men. Their offenses create a schism between how each woman sees herself, and the other women, revealing the internalized mechanisms that transform into a subjective denial. The realities of women who experience sexual harassment further expose the social implications of its pervasiveness in society (on both men *and* women), as it interrogates the roles of men in the construct of women's subjectivity and agency. The fragmented narratives weave continuous, yet distinct, stories that challenge identificatory binaries of victim/perpetrator, pure/impure, oppressed/oppressor, and

dominant/submissive. The film ultimately retraces through the urban landscape how women negotiate their position in discourse and their movements in public, while rearticulating their needs, desires, and subjectivity.

In the final chapter, “Symbolic Vulnerability: State of Aporia” I examine the dangers of writing the nation’s history through women’s lives. The semantic and physical vulnerabilities discussed in the first two chapters contribute to the symbolic vulnerability of women, especially when they embody the nation to the detriment of their own subjectivity. *This is Chaos* and *The Yacoubian Building* follow conventional filmic formulae with a beginning, middle and end, conforming more to the realist wave in Egyptian cinema. The beginning in *This is Chaos* introduces the various characters, and the plot unfolds as an exposition of the stereotypical characters, until the denouement that resolves the conflicts between them (namely the hero, the anti-hero, and the heroine). This linear framework exposes social constructs that enforce female subjection, and trap female subjectivity within the rhetorical binaries of tradition/modernity, Egyptian/Westernized norms, and purity/corruption. The film offers an explicit criticism of the authoritarianism of the Mubarak regime and the rampant police brutality. It emphasizes this criticism by aligning the heroine’s story with that of the nation. In this world replete with voyeurism, sadism, and rape, women’s identities are trapped within the binaries used to define the nation. The heroine is effaced to make way for the rise of collective outrage and solidarity in the face of subordination. Abstracted, the female body is imbued with a nostalgic nationalist sentimentality that aims at achieving a teleological restoration of a utopic order. However, the end of the film is precisely utopic because the state’s grasp is unyielding, and the nation’s future is anticipated by its bleak present.

This reconciliatory ending is paralleled in *The Yacoubian Building*. As another linear critique of the nation's disintegration, the film traces Egypt's history through the fall from grandeur of a downtown Cairo building. Hamed infuses an inescapable sense of nostalgia throughout the film that highlights the social injustices, corruption and hypocrisy that have come to define society. The intermingling stories of characters who live in the Yacoubian building expose the deep-rooted alienation that has engulfed the citizens. This alienation is reinforced by the commodification of male and female bodies, the inescapable powerlessness at the hand of the government, and the dissipation of individual dreams. The film depicts the abuse and rape of a young man, the pervasive sexual harassment that women suffer and the objectification of the female body, within the rigid stratification of society, and its portrayal of homosexuality breaks a social and religious taboo. However, homosexuality is depicted as transgressive and aberrant, and is used to articulate the nationalist binary of self/other, traditional/Westernized in an attempt to define the disintegration of society. On the other hand, *The Yacoubian Building* denounces the responsibility of the government and society for the rise of terrorism and religious fanaticism, thereby raising awareness about the result of the alienation of its citizens. The film's reconciliatory ending brings a romantic ending to the nation's history, one that looks at the future and hopes.

It is impossible to address women's positions in society in the framework of gender relations and identity formation without also addressing men's. Therefore, I weave through my critical examinations representations of hegemonic masculinity, and the characterizations of the nation's ideal "hero," which the films also criticize. Ultimately, these four films provide a subversive criticism of a society in crisis over the representations of its citizens and its assertion of power. My three axes of analysis, that retrace the semantic, physical and symbolic

vulnerabilities of women within those representations also reveal how those representations are equally vulnerable, and can therefore be renegotiated and redefined to reflect women, not as they are idealized, fantasized, and appropriated, but as they are: self-determining subjects.

APPENDIX A

Timeline of events

2011

January 18: Asmaa Mahfouz posts her vlog.

January 25: Mass demonstrations against government erupt.

February 11: President Hosni Mubarak steps down. The rule of SCAF begins.

March 9: Virginty tests performed on female protestors.

October 23: Aliaa El Mahdy posts her naked photograph.

December 17: The incident of the girl in the blue bra.

2012

June 30: Muslim Brotherhood candidate, Mohamed Morsi elected president.

2013

January 25: Mass demonstrations asking for Morsi to step down.

June 28-30: Millions of Egypt demonstrate in the streets .

July 3: Morsi is ousted with the help of a military intervention.

2014

January: New constitution bans religion-based parties.

June 8: Former chief of the Egyptian Armed Forces, Abdel Fattah el Sisi becomes president.

I

Semantic Vulnerability: Interstices Between Voices and Images

Scheherazade Tell Me a Story

Voicing Silence

In her poem “Myth,” Muriel Rukeyser traces Oedipus’ mistake, one that blinded him to a truth that was staring him in the face. She writes:

Long afterward, Oedipus, old and blinded, walked the roads. He smelled a familiar smell. It was the Sphinx.

Oedipus said, ‘I want to ask one question. Why didn't I recognize my mother?’

‘You gave the wrong answer,’ said the Sphinx.

‘But that was what made everything possible,’ said Oedipus.

‘No,’ she said. ‘When I asked, What walks on four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening, you answered, Man. You didn't say anything about woman.’

‘When you say Man,’ said Oedipus, ‘you include women too. Everyone knows that.’

She said, ‘That's what you think.’²¹

Man is the universal category that consumes difference and individuality, and is unaware of it and of the transgressive danger his mistake covers. In *Relating Narratives:*

Storytelling and Selfhood, Adriana Cavarero notes that “Man is not only monstrous in so far as he is the abstract, universal name that engulfs the uniqueness of each human being, but is also monstrous on account of his claim to include women, while at the same time

²¹ Rukeyser qtd in Cavarero, Adriana. *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*. London: Routledge, 2000.

naming them in the masculine. In other words, Man is at once the entire human species, and one of its two genders. Man is neuter and masculine” (49).²² Women are spoken in the masculine form. This is even more obvious in Arabic. In classical Arabic, the feminine plural and dual are heralded by the phonetic suffix “n:” *noon el neswa* (the feminine *n*). It has disappeared from colloquial Egyptian—the grammatical vanishing of subjects. Women, in this sense, were a phonetic burden that weighed down the rhythm of utterances, an unbearable ontological weight; they were engulfed in the masculine plural. This grammatical subtraction from the dialect of a traditionally patriarchal society removes subtle but significant traces of the female body and its corporeal residues. It limits the linguistic account of the feminine, and symbolizes an erasure of the feminine from everyday discourse. As Irigaray says, women enter into a world “where any theory of the subject has always been appropriated by the ‘masculine’” (133).²³ When the body is spoken in (alienating) narratives, we are trapped in a cultural formation of the Other, not only as object, but as abject. Who can thus speak about us, if women cannot be spoken? Who can we confide in? How can we be represented without betraying our desired absence? How can we linguistically experience our absent presence? If society has been attempting to stifle women’s words, how can we even articulate our absence?

In Egyptian narratives, women struggle against this semantic vulnerability. New spaces are now open to listen, in silence, as the feminine becomes a speaking subject. But first, they have to learn to speak to each other. “Whether ancient or modern, [female narrators/storytellers’] art aspires to a wise repudiation of the abstract universal, and follows an everyday practice where the tale is existence, relation and attention” (Cavarero

²² Cavarero, 2000.

²³ Irigaray, Luce. *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985.

54). Narration becomes thus a linguistic necessity. Because as Trinh Min-Ha writes: “Power. . . has always inscribed itself in language. Speaking, writing, and discoursing are not mere acts of communication; they are above all acts of compulsion” (52).

In Nawal El Saadawi’s *Woman At Point Zero* (1983), Firdaus, a prostitute on death row for murder, awaits her execution in silence, refusing to speak to anyone, including the (female) prison psychiatrist. However, when she decides to break the silence, she does so on her own terms, ordering the doctor to remain silent, and only listen. Within the confessional setting of her prison cell, Firdaus creates a framework through which she reclaims her own narrative. Her storytelling becomes a double act, insofar as her narrative is relayed by the doctor’s account. Firdaus’ narrative—her conscious act to tell her story—thus allows her to resist being engulfed by the masculine world that prosecuted her and reinforced her silence. Her decision to relate her story to the psychiatrist is thus an act of authority, authorization, and agency.

Although at first she refused to see her, to speak to her, when Firdaus accepts the presence of the psychiatrist. her voice “steady, cutting deep down inside, cold as a knife,” filled the ears of Nawal, and it “could only be her voice, the voice of Firdaus” (6-7).²⁴ She may not be here tomorrow, but her words will resonate, indelible, for the words of Firdaus fill the pages of the novel with her own story. Her words, her *paroles*, are her knife, because ultimately, she is accused of being “a savage and dangerous woman,” believing that all men are criminal (100).²⁵ However, she insists: “I am speaking the truth. And truth is savage and dangerous” (100).²⁶ Firdaus’ penultimate act of defiance was speaking to Nawal. Her narrative ends with her repeating what she said in the beginning, emphasizing that “truth is like death in that it kills.

²⁴ El Saadawi, Nawal. *Woman at Point Zero*. London: Zed, 1983.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

When I killed I did it with truth not with a knife. That is why they are afraid and in a hurry to execute me” (102).²⁷ Her voice may have been silenced, but it continues to echo “in the cell, in the prison, in the streets, in the whole world, shaking everything, spreading fear wherever it went, the fear of truth which kills, the power of truth, as savage, and as simple, and as awesome as death, yet as simple and as gentle as the child that has not yet learnt to lie” (108).²⁸ Her *paroles* become the words of the author, her speech, the author’s writing, a subtle movement where the “written being” and “the being written” coalesce, becoming one. “The thought of being. . . . is manifested above all in the voice: in a language of words [*mots*]” (20).²⁹ Firdaus came into being, as she told a story that killed illusion, deceit and the lies men have cloaked her in.

While Firdaus was killed to keep her silent, for “they condemned [her] to death, not because [she] had killed a man. . . . but because they are afraid to let [her] live”³⁰ (100) for fear she would contaminate reality with her truth, Scheherazade³¹ learned when to stop speaking, to ward off her own death. Over centuries, she has become the archetype of the storyteller. An ambiguous figure, some hail her courage and her diction, while other denounce her wiles and manipulations. In *Scheherazade Goes West*, Fatima Mernissi criticizes the orientalist rhetoric that has transformed the storyteller into a fetish of the Western imagination. She notes that, starting with Antoine Galland’s translation of *The Thousand and One Nights* in 1704, “the intellectual Scheherazade was lost in all these translations, apparently because the Westerners were interested in only two things: adventure and sex. And the latter was expressed only in a

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

³⁰ El Saadawi, 1983.

³¹ A note on the spelling of Scheherazade: in my own text, I use the common English transliteration of the Persian “Shahrazad.” I did however keep the original transliteration of each author I mention, so as to remain faithful to their individual choices. The same applies to other names from *A Thousand and One Nights*.

bizarrely restricted form confined to the language of the female body” (62).³² It wasn’t until Edgar Allan Poe described her as “a politic damsel” that Scheherazade apparently developed intellect, according to Mernissi (63).³³ While her stories may be sexual, “she has a political message to convey” (64). Mernissi warns us that sexualizing the content of the fables, and solely focusing on the pornographic elements, the body and female sexuality, we silence the storyteller (68):³⁴ “one could say that the West’s understanding of Scheherazade and the harem world was skin-deep, cosmetic and superficial. The storyteller’s yearning for a dialogue between men and women found no echo in the West” (74).³⁵ Indeed, this dialogue fell on deaf ears, because the West’s understanding was purely fixated on a plethora of exotic images that left no room for the voice. They didn’t understand her because they only saw her, they didn’t *hear* her.

It is not difficult to recognize how that happened. As a matter of fact, we never hear Scheherazade’s voice, and yet we know she is telling stories for a thousand and one nights. How can we not hear her voice, when even Rimsky-Korsakov let the violin carry her sound over his symphonic suite? Her voice has become over time words that we read, an echo of a presence that we do not see. Scheherazade remains the echo of absence resonating across time and space to remind us that she is indeed there, here, to tell us a story.

While her stories may have been repeated, adapted, imagined, Scheherazade is often taken as the narrator who disappears in the shadows of her tales. In her poetry collection *Emails from Scheherazad*, Mohja Kahf writes “So You Think You Know Scheherazad,” reminding us what the queen stands for:

Scheherazad invents nothing

³² Mernissi, Fatima. *Scheherazade Goes West: Different Cultures, Different Harems*. New York: Washington Square, 2001.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

Scheherazad awakens
 the demons under your bed
 They were always there
 She locks you in with them

 and suddenly you find yourself forced to meet them,
 the demons she unleashes,
 the terror that come from
 within you and within her. (44)³⁶

For Firdaus and Scheherazade, words unleash a terror that we cannot escape, and must face. This is why silence offers a comfort to those who do not want to hear. Sometimes even to those who refuse to break the silence, because that terror is inside the storyteller as much as it is outside of her. Through her, both worlds collide into a narrative moment of truth that cannot shield us from the comforting illusion of our reality. In “Love Song for Words,” Nazik Al-Mala’ika asks:

Why do we fear words?
 We took to silence
 We did not want our secrets to our lips
 We thought that words amassed an unseen monster
 Pent up inside the letters, hiding from the ear of time
 So we battened down the words
 And did not let them spread the night for us
 With a pillow of music, fragrance, hopes,
 And warm cups. (334-5)³⁷

³⁶ Kahf, Mohja. *E-mails from Scheherazad*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003.

Al-Mala'ika speaks of women who fear that “unseen monster” that words can gather, like a demon. However, the power of words is precisely to exorcize that fear, to awaken the senses to sounds and smells, and the heart and soul to warm feelings. Surely nothing is as daunting as the echo of a word unsaid, *une parole manquée*. The voice must rise courageously and be heard, against all odds—the executioner, the new dawn, the silencer.

Even “Poe betrays Scheherazade by making us associate her with Machiavelli and, even worse, with Eve” and ends up killing her (80).³⁸ What upset Mernissi is that Poe’s queen accepted her death, passive and silent. But “before a Muslim woman consents to die, she must fight—Scheherazade said so,” because “words are the only arms she has to fight the violence targeted against her” (81).³⁹ The storyteller is also killed by Théophile Gautier, Mernissi adds. “He killed her because she had run out of inspiration. Poe killed her because she knew too much” (95).⁴⁰ Isn’t death conquered when the voice echoes, resonates, vibrates, and keeps returning in the guise of another story? If so, then Scheherazade still lives in every word that frees a woman from an oppressive silence, and the archetypal storyteller shall never run out of inspiration.

Suzanne Gauch recognizes that liberating characteristic, and her epigraph “I am Shahrazad / The poem and my voice are the song of the wronged. / Rise up, captives! I am Shahrazad” pays tribute to Lebanese singer Fairuz’s song “Shahrazad.”⁴¹ Reminiscent of Aimé Césaire’s call in *Cahiers D’un Retour Au Pays Natal*, where he says “Ma bouche sera la bouche des malheurs qui n'ont point de bouche, ma voix, la liberté de celles qui s'affaissent au cachot du

³⁷ Jayyusi, Salma Khadra. *Modern Arabic Poetry: An Anthology*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1987.

³⁸ Mernissi, 2001.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Gauch, Suzanne. *Liberating Shahrazad: Feminism, Postcolonialism, and Islam*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

désespoir” (88),⁴² the voice rises to liberate captives from despair. It can indeed be viewed as the tool for natives to reclaim their identities from the colonizers, as we see in postcolonial studies. It is, however, first and foremost, the voice of resistance, one that fights the powers that do have speech and that force subjugation through silence. Hence the voice that can be heard is the one that forces us to see. Because hearing and seeing are inextricably linked in a rhetoric of understanding: the aural and the oral come to represent the visibility of a subject that is absent.

When we ask Scheherazade to tell us a story, we acknowledge the presence of the speaking subject. This is precisely what Yousry Nasrallah accomplishes in his film *Scheherazade, Tell Me a Story*. In the film, we are indeed told a story, a multitude of stories to be exact, framed by one narrative. What is lost in the translation of the title is the confessional note of “tell me a story.” In Arabic, that phrase also means to open up and confess in an intimate setting of conviviality, empathy and understanding. This is not the Western confession of wrongdoing, but the confession of a self sharing with another a paralyzing and muted burden. The main protagonist, Heba, is the host of a TV program entitled “The end of the evening, the beginning of the morning” on *Al Shams* (The Sun) channel. Her incendiary show where she interviewed political figures was an obstacle to her husband’s potential promotion to editor-in-chief at his newspaper. So he asked her to tone down her political commentaries. While she supports her husband’s ambition, she doesn’t want it to tread on her own career. Eventually, she grudgingly accedes to his pressure to change the themes of her program. Kareem is her second husband, and one of Heba’s girlfriends reminds her that she would be held accountable for any dispute between her and her husband, the implication being that she already has a failed marriage, which

⁴² “My mouth will be the mouth of those griefs which have no mouth, my voice, the freedom of those that collapse in the dungeon of despair” (89). See Césaire, Aimé, Rosello, Mireille, and Annie Pritchard, trans. *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land = Cahier D'un Retour Au Pays Natal*. Newcastle upon Tyne, England: Bloodaxe, 1995.

would undoubtedly be held against her. After all, “a virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband. Her duty was perfect obedience” (44).⁴³ Heba decides to direct her show toward social issues, namely those of women, revolving around the theme of love. This is her opening to the newly defined show:

We wanted to stay clear of problems and worries, and swim farther from the sea of politics filled with killer sharks. We wanted to lighten the mood for us and for you, and talk about the most beautiful of emotions: Eve. She is femininity and beauty; she is care and tenderness; she is the maker of bread and the maker of love; mother to a son and mother to a daughter; and man’s support and happiness, and his pleasure as well as his gratification. I will stop here so you don’t accuse me of being biased toward the weaker sex, but I am very biased.

This seemingly innocuous introduction becomes the backdrop to a show where she interviews women about their social experiences. Eve is the all encompassing figure of womanhood, who, in this case, is described in relation to her social function and the emotions she engenders. This relational description provides a safe setting for an audience looking for entertainment, a network gathering advertisements, and as Heba’s husband asked, far away from political issues.

However, the stage of Heba’s show quickly sets a very different tone. At first glance, it might have appeared light and superficial, but it emphatically reveals the political weight of women’s social issues. The live TV set transforms into a confessional of intimate whispers that recount tragic experiences by three women: Amani, Safaa, and Nahed. Punctuated with flashbacks and moments of doubt, (self-)derision, and gulps of pain, the trauma of remembering orally and aurally is embodied in the presence of a wounded subject confessing, the voice raw and naked, unadorned with any platitudes or manipulations. It is the voice that constitutes the

⁴³ El Saadawi, 1983.

identity of the women, weaving a social thread between them. We hear, we see, and we finally understand the meanings so long kept hidden in silence. The fact that these tales are film narratives is all the more befitting, because our eyes now hear.

Through their voices, the sound and the grain of those voices, we witness the entrance of the feminine from the social into the political, as their narrated stories subjugate the powers that have kept it mute. The stories speak of a personal experience that addresses the collective ear, by speaking for the feminine plural, without reducing it to one essential storyline. These feminine voices thus introduce a social rhetoric that finds a stage to perform its diction, a stage that is made political, more so than by interviewing political figures. Because, first and foremost, these stories, often cast in shadows, hiding behind a veil of shame and an aporia of expression, reveal the failure of a system to create a space for women to live, to speak of their experiences, and to simply be, without fear. By primarily positing the voice as the medium to represent their experience, the women articulate a space to reflect and to re-present themselves, to come out of the silent shadows, into the limelight, literally, of a national TV show.

Women are therefore given back—no, they *seize*—the power of speech that they were denied, in a confessional setting that inescapably connotes secrecy, as well as intimacy, because their experiences are tainted with a sense of shame. In *A Thousand and One Nights*, Scheherazade speaks until dawn, postponing her execution, and she falls silent in order to be able to speak again. Silence is detrimental to her survival, and to that of our heroines. Their own survival, their coming into being, depends on breaking this silence—for themselves and for each other. We must remember that Scheherazade starts telling her first tale to her sister, Dunyazad, while the king Shahriyar, is listening. He may have been the intended target audience, since he is the one holding her fate, but in fact, the tale is addressed to Dunyazad. Heba searches for women

to interview, and she speaks to them before bringing them on stage to share their stories with her audience. The final shot of the film reveals that the live audience is comprised mostly of women. The transmission of each story thus traces narrative threads between various women, and in so doing, telling a story is not merely a technique, an embodiment of knowledge, it is a practice that enables a polyphonic transmission, where singularity becomes multiplicity, because stories are narrated, repeated, and modified. Women resist the terror of words unsaid.

Cavarero reflects on “the type of knowledge that Scheherazade embodies: the womanly art of narration” (122).⁴⁴ Scheherazade told enchanting tales to others. “Perspicacious and courageous by nature, the young Arab girl reads, remembers and recounts. She is therefore not the author of the stories, but rather the one who transmits them. . . . Scheherazade lives in order to tell stories — and in order that other women live” (123).⁴⁵ Each dawn the king spares her life, she is in fact saving another virgin from being killed. This is the importance of the stories on stage: they are recounted for other women to hear, to eventually have the courage to break their silence, to take the relay and tell their own stories. Just like *A Thousand and One Nights*, “the narrative plot is potentially capable of proliferating the tales infinitely” (124).⁴⁶ In addition to this potentially infinite proliferation, the frame story, Heba’s story, allows each woman to narrate her own story to the public. Cavarero writes that “the *storyteller* essentially narrates stories in the course of which the protagonists of the stories themselves narrate their own stories. What is more they in turn *produce* these stories. . . . Not only do the stories intersect, but they reproduce each other” (125).⁴⁷ The narrative structure thus interweaves a plurality of plots, while preserving each story’s singularity. The art of storytelling here, “a wise repudiation of the abstract universal”

⁴⁴ Cavarero, 2000.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Cavarero, 2000.

(54),⁴⁸ allows the film to thus reveal a polyphonic expression of the feminine without recurring to essentialism or a monolithic representation of female oppression. In *A Thousand and One Nights*, Scheherazade's story is the first and last one. For the duration of those grueling nights, as she forestalls her execution, telling other stories, she keeps deferring hers. This narrative deferral is a strategy of survival, and one that ultimately allow the storyteller to tell hers. Similarly, in *Scheherazade Tell Me A Story*, Heba, who, by taking on the primary role of the storyteller, eventually has her *own* story to tell. The narrative deferral here provides interruptions during which she recounts other women's stories, whereby the complexity of the narratives threads is further enhanced.

By opening up the TV show as a live stage, these performative stories demand participation, that of the audience, that of the spectators at home, and that of the film viewers. Private experience enters the public realm of a collective memory, shared, and thus not forgotten. These voices do not exist in the void, they are the embodiment of the narratable self. Cavarero, defines the self as narratable and not narrated:

The narratable self finds its home, not simply in a conscious exercise of remembering, but in the spontaneous narrating structure of memory itself. . . .

What is essential is the familiar experience of narratability of the self, which, not by chance, we always perceive in the other, even when we do not know their story at all. (34)⁴⁹

The narratable self appears as memory remembers, because each woman is exposing her past, here and now. The voice does not disappear behind the images of the film. On the contrary, by combining narrative flashbacks punctuated by a voice over, with images of the TV plateau,

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Nasrallah represents a past and a present that collide under one moment, that of the present speaking subject. The women were silent in private, but they are vocal in public, and thereby they recover their narratable self. Through this transformation, they seize a power—the power to speak up. While these performative stories do unfold on stage, they are not made into a spectacle. This spectacular resistance, combined with the intricate polyphony of the narratives, enrich the power of film as genre. Both images and voices become crucial in embodying the subject.

The voice denies absence, it embodies a living presence of the speaking subject. And yet, it is not pure presence, according to Derrida. Because the word, *la parole*, is aural, heard by the ear, its past, Derrida warns us, cannot be represented, like an image. It lies in the intricate sequences that constitute the narrative density of *Scheherazade*. By combining both voice and image, the film creates a new representability of the narratable self, an identity that can at once be in the present and the past, in the here and in the *there*. In the infinitesimal distancing, the echo of being resonates. “The voice is present, presence itself. Freedom itself too,” as Régis Durand says (302).⁵⁰ It rises and disappears into thin air “leaving us in the immediate presence of the signified,” and the haunting memories left by the images, recollected by our storytellers, and directed by Nasrallah (302).⁵¹ It represents the past, by rendering it accessible in the present, because those experiences that have always already happened, are happening again, under our watchful eyes, and our hearing ears. The voices heard divulge a moment where the storyteller and the narrative coexist, in a unity that does not negate the presence of either. When the narratable self comes into being, both the story and the self appear. The voice is therefore a means to manifest the presence of the body. “The voice speaks of the body” and is

⁵⁰ Durand, Régis. “The Disposition of the Voice.” Murray, Timothy, ed. *Mimesis, Masochism, & Mime: The Politics of Theatricality in Contemporary French Thought*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1997. 301-310

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

simultaneously “between body and language,” in-between, “the body biologic and the body politic” (302-3).⁵² This is why it is essential that we hear the voice breaking, a suppressed cry, a silent moment where pain echoes.

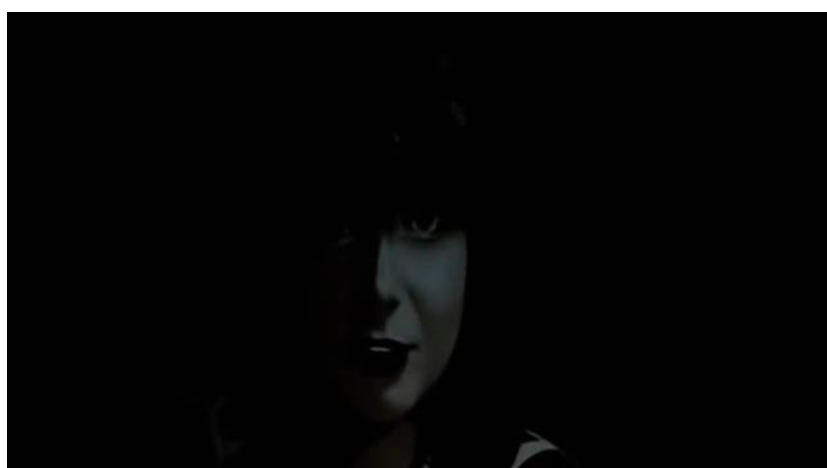
The silence that punctuates these narratives bares violent realities: the violence of remembering, and the violence of the experience itself. Through each story, the self is here reborn, just like Scheherazade is given a chance at life every morning, just like another virgin is saved from death. “I sometimes wonder whether a person can be born twice,” says Firdaus (20).⁵³ In *Scheherazade*, we find an answer: Narratives are rebirth. Amani physically steps out of the psychiatric ward where she had cloistered herself for years after her failures to find love. She was called mad, because she refused to be treated as an object, and was expecting a man to love her as an equal, and for the show, she even wears a wig, a gesture through which she is redefining her own self as a new woman. Safaa, after being sentenced to fifteen years in prison for murder, comes on stage as a woman who has paid her debt to society, she frees herself from that hysterical moment, that spark of anger, that had so far defined her life. She killed the man she was sleeping with, after discovering that her two sisters were also involved in sexual relations with him. He took advantage of the fact that their father had died, and that they were looking for a husband. Nahed, who underwent an illegal abortion, after the man she was betrothed to and had slept with, pretended he was sterile, comes out of her drunken and self-destructive stupor to tell her story. Finally, Heba, who appears on her own show, beaten and bruised, recounts her story of domestic violence. To understand her rebirth, we have to remember the opening scene and the way her show about women comes into existence. Heba picks what should have been an apolitical topic to appease her husband’s worries. However,

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ El Saadawi, 1983.

what frames the constituent narratives, is the fact that she thought she was choosing a “safe” subject: women. Her assumption reveals the film’s self-reflexivity, a reflexivity that also articulates Heba’s gradual reflection, and her understanding of her own misjudgment. The opening scene thus foreshadows the self-deception that defines her life.

The film opens with a dark shot, we hear heavy breathing and footsteps moving in an apartment. The composition, framed in chiaroscuro, reveals a partially lit portrait of Heba, accompanied by the sound of a crying baby melding into a cacophony of sounds (Figure 1.1). As



the footsteps continue turning in the apartment, we hear more sounds: someone running on a treadmill, heavy machinery, we see white curtains rising, and a shot of a man sleeping.

Then Heba wakes up from a

Figure 1.1

nightmare screaming “there are no doors.” This voiceless nightmare becomes a life she tries to adapt to, but ultimately she finds herself incapable of silencing her own desires and ambition. Heba is first and foremost reborn as a woman with a story to tell, not simply one who is telling the story of other women. She says: “I would never have believed that I, who tell other people’s stories, would become a story. I guess no one is better than anyone else.” She eventually binds the narrative circle in which Scheherazade finds herself.

Thus the voice of the storyteller is always foregrounded, even when narrative flashbacks dominate the screen. From the onset, the title of the film prepares us for listening (as opposed to the visuality of film), since we know we will hear a story. The phrase “Scheherazade, tell me a

story” could be understood as both a command and a request. The king does not initially ask to be told a story, he is merely a listener, a bystander, a witness. “Then Dunyazad said to Shahrazad: ‘Tell us, my sister, a tale of marvel, so that the night may pass pleasantly’” (23).⁵⁴ It is at her sister’s prompting that the queen becomes a storyteller. Her sister’s “discreet presence, her disembodied request from under the bed, effectively legitimates Shahrazad’s voice” (55).⁵⁵ Indeed, if it weren’t for the presence of another woman, her sister, the queen would be executed the morning after her nuptials. Gauch emphasizes this detail, when she quotes Assia Djebar’s *Sister to Scheherazade*:

Yes, what if Scheherazade were to be continually reborn, only to die again at every dawn, just because a second woman, a third, a fourth, did not take up her post in her shadow, in her voice, in her night? (83)⁵⁶

The presence of another woman is thus essential to the survival of the storyteller. In choosing that specific reference in the title, Nasrallah operates within a sophisticated sense of the historical literary example, whereby he expands the scope and the scale of what his film is achieving. It is not mimetic, simply repeating a narrative structure and stories. On the contrary, the film is reflective and reflexive, and Nasrallah sharpens the original narrative source, a source that Western readings and interpretations of *A Thousand and One Nights* tend to overlook.

We can safely read the title as a request, an insistence even, from another woman to Scheherazade. Because there is strength in the multitude’s resistance to being silenced.

⁵⁴ Dawood, N. J. *Tales from the Thousand and One Nights*. London: Penguin Classics, 1954.

⁵⁵ In her book *Liberating Shahrazad*, Gauch calls the sister Dinarzad, both names are used to refer to Scheherazade’s younger sister. See Gauch, 2007.

⁵⁶ As Algeria gained its independence, “Djebar explicitly began to meditate on the possibilities and pitfalls of representing Algerian women in a mode and language deemed even more alien to Algeria. . . . the narrator’s bilingualism draws her into a search for an elusive language in which she can triumphantly embody herself, rejecting the role of victim yet without glossing over the suffering of her sisters” (84). See Gauch, 2007.

After Firdaus had recounted her tale and had been executed, El Saadawi felt shame, “of [her] life, [her] fears, [her] lies” (108).⁵⁷ The power of sharing and confessing not only aligns a woman’s identity with her personal narratable history, but lifts the veil of delusion that other women might have in front of their eyes about their own lives. Her history is not simply a memory: the story is constructed, framed, pointed, and intentional. Without the various women’s situated reflection, the story itself is tethered to nothing and drifts into oblivion. The narratable self is a self-reflective self, one that dwells in solidarity and thrives in collectivity. None knew better than Margaret Atwood’s *Handmaids*:

We learned to whisper almost without sound. In the semidarkness we could stretch out our arms, when the Aunts weren’t looking, and touch each other’s hands across space. We learned to lip-read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other’s mouths. In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed. (4)⁵⁸

Atwood writes another tale, stressing the importance of exchanging stories between women, in order to resist the oppressive silence, to rise out of a life of ignorance and solitude, where women are reduced to their biological function of reproduction. The handmaids are separated by an institutionalized silence that prevents them from creating connections and sharing words, tales, and experiences.

⁵⁷ El Saadawi, 1983.

⁵⁸ Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986.

Thus, in *Scheherazade*, the different and interweaving narratives allow us to



Figure 1.2



Figure 1.3

apprehend the narratable self of individual women. As the film ends and Heba takes the stage to tell her own story (Figure 1.2) of how her husband beat her because he blamed her controversial show for his failure to land his coveted promotion, the camera zooms out, and we see another woman backstage, one who was ready to tell her story. The female faces of the live audience each become a story waiting to be told, to go out

from the shadows onto the TV set into the lights (Figure 1.3). The liberating quality of *Scheherazade's* storytelling is therefore one that engages women with other women, for they are the ones in need of liberating themselves, and each other, from the silent shadows that keep their voices mute, their stories unheard. The silence is interrupted, as much as the narratives themselves are. *Scheherazade* learns the value of storytelling along with the importance of silence. This functional and acutely self-conscious reticence is detrimental to the survival and liberation of the storytellers. Not only is it self-aware and reflective, it is also meticulously formulated and artfully shaped by the film. The restraint and freedom to narrate become a practical and technical choice.

In parallel to the self-imposed silence and artful interruptions in the film, women fight against a silence imposed by society, and mostly by the men within that society. *Sawt el mara'a 'aawra*: a woman's voice is taboo and reveals her shame and her nakedness. The multiplicity of voices not only dissolves the silent echo of this shame, but eventually allows a unison of shared experiences to reflect one another. This reflection is palpable in *Scheherazade*: when the women are on the TV set, facing Heba, the screen shot reveals a reflection of the other woman. In a play on mirroring, each woman's reflection is the other woman, and yet, both images remain distinct (Figures 1.4-8). An "unrepeatable uniqueness" nonetheless repeats the uniqueness of the other (58).⁵⁹ Cavarero warns us that "the gender identity cannot avoid producing. . . . a contradictory effect, in so far as it invites the uniqueness of each woman to identify herself with all other women. In the reflection of the one in the other, the very personal identity that is consigned to the tale of an unrepeatable life-story runs the risk of losing its expressive reality and founding itself in the common 'being women' that is represented here" (60).⁶⁰ The film escapes that trap.

In *Scheherazade*, the TV set therefore functions as a mirror in which the reflection is of the other, without effacing each storyteller's original image. At the end, Heba, the storyteller, is sitting instead of her guests, and behind her, there is a screen reflecting her live audience (Figure 1.9). Women and stories are interwoven, they intersect, without being confounded. Remembering Arendt, Cavarero clearly distinguishes that "a unique being is such only in the relations, and the context of a plurality of others, which, likewise unique themselves, are distinguished reciprocally — the *one from the other*."

⁵⁹ Cavarero, 2000.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

Rhetoric of reflection



Figure 1.4 – Safaa and Heba



Figure 1.5 – Heba and Safaa



Figure 1.6 – Safaa and Heba



Figure 1.7 – Heba and Nahed



Figure 1.8 – Nahed and Heba

It is interesting to note that during Amani's appearance, the screen at the back projected old pictures of her life. The development of these reflections during Safaa's and Nahed's appearances suggests that intellectual evolution in Heba's show, one that she becomes keenly aware of, and that parallels people's concerns with the content, including her husband and his bosses.

The story of a unique being is obviously never the monotonous and monolithic story of an *idem*, but is always the unpredictable and multi-vocal story of an *ipse*” (43).⁶¹ The narrative structure



Figure 1.9

of the film is thus successful in clearly demarcating the difference between uniqueness and unity, as each life-story weaves its own thread, while simultaneously connecting to others to create a united and shared tale. Again,

Cavarero emphasizes that “the etymological root that the terms *uniqueness* and *unity* share does not flatten them out into a homogenous substance, but rather renders them signs of an existence whose life-story is different from all others precisely because it is constitutively interwoven with many others” (71).⁶² Ultimately, because of the diversity of voices that are speaking out loud and to each others, they are insisting on a transformative outcome. After all, the voice demands to be recognized as presence, bodily presence. The speaking *I* is a present *I*, and she who speaks becomes present.

Nasrallah’s use of the famous storyteller to frame his film affirms that “her stories bit by bit overcome what were once seemingly insurmountable boundaries and limitations to change. They begin by aiming at the transformation of her audience’s most intimate experience of themselves” (xviii).⁶³ The film narratives could proliferate endlessly, for there are as many stories to be told, as many narratable selves, as there are women (even silent ones), and this way

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Gauch, 2007.

Nasrallah recreates the tales' resistance to narrative closure (12).⁶⁴ Translators and adapters (mostly Western) of *The Thousand and One Nights* relegate Scheherazade to an unheard role, as Gauch points out:

The very attempts by translators and adapters to usurp Shahrazad's voice by carefully delimiting her role in the *Nights* have thus only succeeded in endowing her character with an eternal quality that makes of her a powerful literary ancestor to those who call for a new status for Arab and Muslim women within and beyond the Arab world. (5)⁶⁵

Scheherazade makes the voices of a vanishing self heard. It exposes the failure of a society to listen to the silence, and urges women to recognize in each other the presence of a narratable self, one who shares her experience, and provides the other woman a thread to continue weaving narratives that defy this socio-political silence revolving around women's realities in contemporary Egypt. The storyteller becomes thus the embodiment of shared experience, urging transmission, resisting at once erasure and closure:

The story is beautiful, because or therefore it unwinds like a thread. A long thread, for there is no end in sight. Or the end she reaches leads to actually another end, another opening. . . . Every woman partakes in the chain of guardianship and of transmission—in other words, of creation. . . . Tell it so they can tell it. So that it may become larger than its measure, always larger than its own in/significance. In this horizontal and vertical vertigo, she carries the story on, motivated at one by

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

the desire to finish and the necessity to remind herself and others that “it’s never finished.” A lifetime story. More than a lifetime. (149)⁶⁶

The women, through their present speaking voices are transmitting stories, and thereby creating meaning, to themselves and to other women. When society counts on their silence, telling stories together, to each other, is a way for women to “step up, into the darkness within; or else the light” (295),⁶⁷ for we must remember that Scheherazade awakens the demon *within* and *without* herself. The truth is indeed dangerous, as Firdaus reminds us. Words, more dangerous than the threatening sword of Shahrayar, have the potential to kill a reality replete with stereotypes in which we hide daily. We are then left with the echo of a voice resonating out of silence, asking for a new reality that we still do not know how to imagine. Scheherazade’s many voices carry an ontological assertion against the negation of that silence.

Love and Other Violences

Heba’s husband, Kareem, felt safely reassured that the new topic of his wife’s show shall not interfere with politics, and would not be an obstacle to his coveted promotion. After all, how political can love be? What could be more benign than women sharing stories of love? If romantic love is a notion idealized by writers across time, space and languages, speaking of longing and yearning becomes mere sentimentality, a romantic discourse of idealization that confronts no political reality. There is, for Kareem, an existential comfort—that bespeaks of a sexist attitude—in thinking a discourse on love would reduce women to apolitical beings, expressing inconsequential feminine concerns in a world replete with more pressing issues. Little did he expect that a show about love reveals the failure of society to politically and socially

⁶⁶ Trinh, T. Minh-Ha. *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.

⁶⁷ Atwood, 1986.

safeguard women's positions, while violently exposing the ontological burden this society places on women's experiences and expressions of identity. The weight of this social impotency quickly becomes very political.

We need only look at Shahriyar and his brother Shahzaman's stories to understand the dire consequences love can have on a polis, as the prologue to *A Thousand and One Nights* reveals. After discovering the treacheries of their respective wives, both kings meet a girl imprisoned by a jinnee, and fall prey to her cunning wiles, as she forces them to copulate with her while the oblivious jinnee soundly sleeps. Even the supernatural creature could not escape the wiles of women. The story thus unfolds once the two kings realize they were deceived: they were cuckolded, and this betrayal touches their sense of manhood and their masculinity, and the episode with the jinnee reinforces a sense of universality that all women are treacherous, deceitful, sexually promiscuous. Hence, Shahriyar comes to the decision of marrying a virgin and killing her the following morning, ensuring that she would not have the chance to betray him. In the process, he terrorizes a whole city.

A Thousand and One Nights is therefore a story about love and betrayal, and women are the source of this treachery. In *Scheherazade Tell Me a Story*, the various plots also revolve around love and betrayal. However, as each woman takes the stage to recount her own narrative, we discover that men are the source of deceit, and that women who betray, ultimately betray themselves. El Saadawi's Firdaus painfully discovers this reality, this truth, and she tells the psychiatrist that "All women are victims of deception. Men impose deception on women and punish them for being deceived, force them down to the lowest level and punish them for falling so low, bind them in marriage and then chastise them with menial service for life, or insults, or

blows” (86).⁶⁸ The stories of Amani, Safaa, Nahed, and eventually of Heba, echo those words. Their self-deception is as overwhelming, if not more, than being betrayed by a man. Amani, after facing a suitor who merely wanted to subjugate her through marriage and had no regard for her wishes and demands, decides to commit herself to a psychiatric hospital to escape the social expectations about single women and marriage. These same expectations lead Safaa and her two sisters, who, in their search for a husband, end up sleeping with the same man, the one Safaa eventually murders. Nahed, to avoid a dishonorable scandal, undergoes an abortion when her husband denies paternity. Finally Heba, after her attempts to please her husband, is beaten by him because he blames her show for his professional failure. On the surface, these four women were victims of deceit and social pressure. However, the narratives refuse to be trapped in a rhetoric of victimization, and forcefully propel love in the political sphere: storytelling becomes a powerful weapon to fight against the social impositions of silence and submission.

The fictive, and yet real, plot and subplots map a social archeology of female subordination and subjugation and highlight the mechanisms of masculine power in a patriarchal society, through an investigation of madness and asylum, prison and female sexuality, marriage and abortion, and domestic violence, all centered around the theme of love and (sexual) desire. The narratives are political because they are fearless and transgressive: they break through the silent taboo of female desire. El Saadawi writes that “Ignorance, suppression, fear and all sorts of limitations exaggerate the role of sex in the lives of girls and women and cause it to swell out of all proportion and to end up occupying the whole or almost the whole of their entire lives” (67).⁶⁹ For Amani, Safaa and Nahed, this proportion encapsulates their whole life. They were reduced to

⁶⁸ El Saadawi, 1983.

⁶⁹ El Saadawi, Nawal. *The Nawal El Saadawi Reader*. London: Zed Books, 1997.

the limitations of their personal experiences until those became national confessions that reveal the social and affective obstacles that choked their sense of being. El Saadawi writes that

The patriarchal class system has robbed the woman of her most precious possession, namely her mind, and has replaced it with the hymen (an Arab proverb says that a girl's virginity is her most precious possession). The woman has been deprived of her capacity for mental, psychological and even physical creativity. Her capacity for child-bearing and her creative human motherhood have been transformed into bonds, burdens and agony, all of which exhaust and weaken her, rather than strengthen or develop her abilities. (222).⁷⁰

The four storytellers in the film are freeing themselves from these bonds, sharing their agony, and implicating society in the burdens they carry.

When we first meet Amani, she is an asylum. She kept looking for her prince charming until she ended up in a psychiatric hospital. On the stage of Heba's show, she recounts her journey after graduating college, and working as a director of public relations in a five star hotel, focusing on the story of one particular suitor. She studied English literature, speaks French and Italian, is beautiful, and stands out. She admits she was "targeted" since she was 15, although she refused to be anyone's target. Her suitor seemed like a gentleman, who had good manners, wiped his mouth after eating, and his glass after every sip, which we see in close-ups. In a flashback to their dinner date, they are sitting in an expensive restaurant. He proves to be pretentious, self-centered, and he expects her full obedience.

Conflict arise when they are about to order. He wants them to order the same dish, meat; but she wants fish. He starts by telling her what he expects in his marriage. He had her investigated when someone mentioned her name as a potential bride, and he discovered they

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

were similar. She listens carefully to his list of demands, which he reads from a piece of paper. He has an apartment, that is paid in full, and wants her to completely furnish it (which is the usual convention). Executive power in the house is hers, but he has political power: he expects to know every single detail in the house, even if she's planning on buying a kilo of potatoes. She must cook, because he likes to eat from his wife's hands. They will share the household work, because he doesn't want a maid. Their salaries will be combined, and he will maintain complete financial authority over all expenses. They will have one car, since he doesn't want her to drive, he'll pick her up and drop her off at work. She will not go to the hairdresser because he expects her to get veiled. His mother will occasionally stay at their place. Since this is a dialogue, she's listening to his conditions. Lighting a cigarette, she jokingly says when he asks her to quit smoking that she will when they come to an agreement.

- AMANI: I have one question, and if you answer correctly, I will really agree to all your conditions. I will do all you ask, but in exchange, I want to know, what are you offering me?, she asks.

- SUITOR: The dowry and the wedding ring set, he replies.

- AMANI: That's not what I mean. I mean in life, in our shared existence.

- SUITOR: I'll be your husband.

- AMANI: What does it mean: "I'll be your husband?" Raising her voice, and causing a scene, she repeats her question.

- SUITOR: Your husband means *your husband*.

Getting up, she furiously screams, "you're an idiot, a real idiot. You want to take my money, you want me to be a maid, you impose your conditions and your mother's, and then you tell me

you'll be my husband? If marriage only means sleeping in a bed, then it's my right to choose the man who sleeps with me." Insulting him, she leaves him sitting in the restaurant.

Backstage, after the end of the show, and Heba's questions remain unanswered: why did Amani agree to appear on the show? Does she intend to return to the asylum? Heba's words

resonate in a silence that translates the utter disappointment and desolation on Amani's face (Figure 1.10). In her quest for love, for a man to love her and allow her to be his equal, Amani faced the illusive romantic promise that women cling to. She never found



Figure 1.10

a man who loved her so she could love him back. She remains a virgin, a spinster relegated to the confines of a mental asylum, because she seemingly lost her mind when she failed to be compliant, and complicit in her suitor's self-serving articulation of the perfect wife. Her rejection of her suitor's impositions are interpreted as her failure to find a suitable husband, which means that society perceives her as a madwoman. Her suitor called her crazy when she left him in the restaurant, claiming that it was the reason she was unmarried. When Amani said his full name on air, Ahmed Fadlallah Darwish, the following shot was in a fancy home. A woman, calling the same name, wakes her husband up, saying he is mentioned on TV, by the crazy woman he was going to marry before her.

The false promise of love and the subsequent disappointment consolidate Amani's marked madness. Longing for an equal relationship, and facing the collapse of her romantic illusions, she was confronted with the social deficiencies that regulate and institutionalize

women's subjugation, and disavow their subjectivity. She thus preferred living in an asylum. Butler writes that desire is "*reflexive* in the sense that desire is a modality in which the subject is both discovered and enhanced" (25).⁷¹ She further adds that "the Hegelian tradition links desire with recognition, claiming that desire is always a desire for recognition and that it is only through the experience of recognition that any of us becomes constituted as socially viable beings," but "recognition becomes a site of power by which the human is differentially produced. This means that to the extent that desire is implicated in social norms, it is bound up with the question of power and with the problem of who qualifies as the recognizably human and who does not" (2).⁷² The articulation of reflexivity sought in desire here becomes estrangement from society, the marginalization of a consciousness that found no recognition from the fictive man she sought to love. Narrating her tale allows Amani to gain a sense of recognition, and by explicitly mentioning her suitor's name on air, she qualifies herself as the recognizing consciousness, reinstating the dialectic.

Amani's self-exile in the asylum is contrasted with Safaa's imprisonment. Heba hears about her story and wants to invite her to the show. Safaa's story is indeed unique, because after she finished her fifteen-year sentence for murder, upon her release from prison, she went to work and live with the same woman who was her prison guard. Heba finds her crime strange, because Safaa seems so gentle and peaceful. This thought echoes, in *Woman at Point Zero*, the prison doctor's words about Firdaus to the psychiatrist: "You will never believe that so gentle a woman can commit a murder." To which she replies: "Who says that murder does not require that a person be gentle?" (2).⁷³ Firdaus herself, after she admits she murdered someone to one of her

⁷¹ Butler, Judith. *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-century France*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.

⁷² Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender*. New York; London: Routledge, 2004.

⁷³ El Saadawi, 1983.

clients, who seemed dubious and incredulous at her confession because she seemed so gentle, asks: “And who said that killing does not need gentleness?” (99).⁷⁴ Murder, so visceral and bloody, seems unbecoming to a tender woman. However, all it takes is one moment, “a spark that can ignite a fire that burns a country,” as Safaa says.

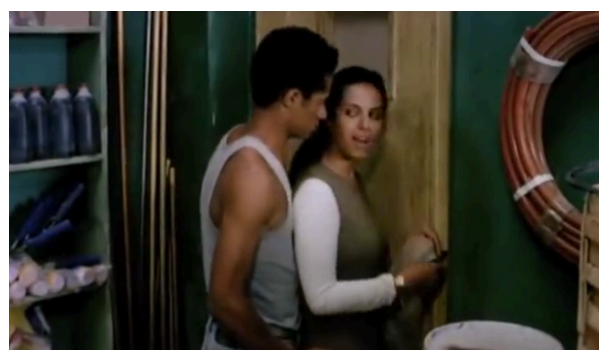
Safaa and her sisters, Wafaa and Hanaa, are from the lower class, underprivileged and poor. After their father died, they feel dejected (Figure 1.11) and they had to share their inheritance,⁷⁵ a paint and hardware shop, with their uncle, their father’s brother. He was a drug addict who took the shop’s profits, and wanted to marry the daughters off to pay for his addiction. The sisters find out the truth from Said, their father’s apprentice, after Wafaa accused him of stealing their money. When the uncle shows up with a suitor, a drug dealer, the three women throw the two men out. We discover their deplorable circumstances through flashbacks. Back in the studio, Safaa explains to Heba that the sisters believed they needed a man to safeguard them and their interests. His shadow would offer protection and security. There is a common Arabic proverb that states that a man’s shadow is better than a wall’s. This proverb explains the social rhetoric that confine women within a particular polarity: she either stands alone and vulnerable, or she stands behind a man. Heba, questioning this polarity, wonders why the sisters needed a man, and argues that a man is not merely there for protection, security and support. However, Safaa maintains that it is an undeniable truth which women cannot ignore. Safaa tries to convince her sisters that Said could be a suitable husband for one of them, even if he is from a lower social stature than they are. Initially they agreed that Said would choose which sister he wanted to marry, but for now he seems like a gullible man they can manipulate (Figure 1.12-13). He suddenly becomes the desirable man, and in a panning shot, we see him glide over a truck, like a

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ According to *shari‘a* law, when a father dies and he only had daughters and no sons, the inheritance is shared with the father’s brother(s).

knight in shining armor (Figure 1.14). Each sister starts seducing him (Figures 1.15-17). He is having an affair with Wafaa, in the shop's backroom (Figure 1.16). He also starts courting Hanaa, and we see them being intimate (Figure 1.15). Safaa, at first indignant at his suggestive advances, tells him that she'll only consent to sexual relations if they are married. So they marry in secret, because a man is three things, according to her: honor, trust, and virility (Figure 1.17). Said asks each sister to keep their relationship a secret. The sisters individually settle on an image of a man onto which they project their ideal. On the other hand, even after they give him a quarter of the store's profits, and hint at the fact that it could become half, Said feels that he is and has less than them. He does not understand the insinuation, namely that if he marries one of the sisters he would have her share. Said embodies the masculine ideal constructed by each sisters, but he proves to be simpleminded, assuming that he will not get tangled up in his deceptive charade. The audience is thus made aware of the ironic discrepancy between Said's behavior and Safaa's definition of the ideal man. Said essentially comes to articulate an inversion of those ideals: the male thinks he can get everything, although it requires three women, each with her own ambitions.

Heba wonders how they did not know about each other's illicit affairs. Safaa asserts that each one thought she was the only one involved with Said. She refuses to speak for her sisters, and declares that this is her story alone. We go back to the past, and the truth comes to light when Wafaa gets a suitor and is adamant about her refusal. The sisters physically fight when they discover that they had been all sleeping with the same man (Figure 1.18). In the morning, Safaa convinces her sisters to travel. She goes to meet Said as usual in the backroom. We then witness how, in a fit of hysterical rage, Safaa repeatedly hits Said on the head with a shovel and sets fire to the shop (Figure 1.20-22). Considering she lures him to the shop, her hysteria belies

Anatomy of a murder*Figure 1.11**Figure 1.12**Figure 1.13**Figure 1.14**Figure 1.15**Figure 1.16*

Anatomy of a murder



Figure 1.17



Figure 1.18



Figure 1.19



Figure 1.20



Figure 1.21



Figure 1.22

her premeditation. “Everything has a price, and I had to pay the price,” Safaa says to the TV host. When asked why her, Safaa replies that she was the eldest. Heba argues that murder is a huge act, that the sisters could have escaped. “And revenge, and betrayal, and honor, and the scar, all these things aren’t huge? And the sisters who could no longer look at each other?”

Safaa brings up the notion of honor on more than one occasion: when she describes what manhood means to her, and regarding the fact that all three sisters gave their virginity up to a man who used and betrayed them. The shadow they were looking for proved to be a deceptive mirage, and instead of providing the security they sought and thought they needed, it tore them apart, transforming their desires to conflict and destruction. Submission and intimacy turned to murderous violence and negation. Because when Said decided to sexually get involved with the three sisters, he in fact flattened their individuality, and reduced them to sexual objects: he negated their subjectivity. This is precisely why, when Safaa is telling her story, she refuses to speak for her sisters; it is crucial for her to disidentify from them, and affirm her own subjectivity, her own experience. The sisters’ desire for love, for a man, ultimately led to the fragmentation of their sisterhood. Said, embodying each sister’s wishes and desires, articulates a rivalry between the sisters. Safaa, the eldest, thought herself too old, and that she could not hold Said’s interest. Wafaa, the middle sister, was considered the prettiest, and Said impersonates her vanity. Hanaa, the youngest, wanted to see life and find a man with whom she could enjoy her youth. The lack of communication between them eventually paved the way for the idealized male role—or a grotesque caricature thereof—and social conventions to ultimately destroy the filial bond between the women. In the process, the women discovered the real fragility of their subjecthood and existence, and not coincidentally, this process demonstrated the incongruity of the idea of the

masculine as ideal. They lost it all for an illusion. Safaa admits to Heba that it took her fifteen years in prison to realize that the day she killed Said she killed herself. “In those fifteen years, I learned that I can live,” and indeed, Safaa learns it, at the cost of having destroyed herself (but not dying), and without the idea of a man to supplement her existence, while Said, who in trying to satisfy everything he thinks he wants is destroyed.

The story of the three sisters, the narrative of Safaa, reveals the destructive violence that intimacy and the desire for love can engender when those fail to provide the amorous subject with a sense of recognition and subjective validation, particularly when these expectations are projected onto an illusion. Safaa, as gentle as Firdaus, also became a murderess, because in a instance of rage, she needed to avenge her sense of betrayal, and lash out against the social construct of the submissive and docile woman. When Heba first meets her, Safaa is living with her former prison guard, Hajja Ayat. Heba is surprised, especially when Safaa asks that her monetary compensation for appearing on the show be allocated to the old woman’s health care. Hajja Ayat and Safaa needed each other. “She was sick and I had no place to go. I needed to find someone under whose shadow I could live.” After the events in her life and her time in prison, that shadow no longer represents the protection and security she sought in a man, but a sisterly companionship that would heal the wounds of the sisters’ betrayal. Safaa’s narrative ultimately implies that if love is taken to be the satisfaction of one’s own desires, it becomes “a spark that can ignite a fire that burns a country.” It is not love, but power with political armament.

Both Amani and Safaa were marginalized as a result of their search for love, but for the latter, what is foregrounded is betrayal, the violent failure of love when it is self-serving, and the destructive potential of idealized illusion. The destructive consequences of the search for romance are also revealed in Nahed’s narrative. The political positioning of her story is quickly

evident when we first see her: Heba, seeing a woman walking the street with a sign, and then standing in front of a police station, asks her assistant to look into that woman's story. Flashback to Nahed in her clinic: she is a dentist, the man in question has a PhD in economics



Figure 1.23

from the University of Michigan. They are both educated and from affluent families. They go horseback riding, and he tells her he's looking for a bride, from a good family, with good social and moral standards, and she came highly recommended. "So you came to inspect me?" she asks as he handles the horse. The rapprochement between choosing a bride by inspecting her like an animal, evaluating its use and its breeding prospects is clear (Figure 1.23). In the studio, she continues by telling Heba that her family approved the marriage. The house where they would live was still being finished; she saw it and it wasn't ready. She wouldn't live in a rented apartment, and it would be unacceptable for him to live with them in their house. She refused to live in his current apartment, because she couldn't emotionally bear living where he was previously married. Eventually they reached a compromise: they would hold the religious ceremony and do the wedding once the house was ready. This compromise is socially acceptable, because it cements their relationship, while reassuring the woman's parents. She stipulated that they do not consummate their marriage until the wedding.

She was happy, thinking she got a catch. However, Adham manipulates her desires and convinces her that she would not want him to cheat to satisfy his own desires. It is their right as a married couple to sleep together. In a shot of them in bed, she expresses her remorse, and admits

she is not on the pill, but he reassures her that he is prepared. After she gets up from bed, three drops of blood on the sheet indicate that she was a virgin (Figure 1.24). Adham suggestively caresses them, and then covers them with a red sheet. Despite her hesitation,



Figure 1.24

they engage in a sexual relationship, and she is now two months pregnant. Afraid of a scandal since her pregnancy will start showing, Nahed urges him to have the wedding as soon as possible. But Adham claims that he is sterile, and despite knowing she was a virgin, he expresses his suspicion about being the father. In the following shot, her mother screams at her that she could have remained respectable, and that she brought this on herself. Despite her insistence that they were married, Nahed's indiscretion is a scandal for her family.

- MOTHER: Either you are a liar or he's a crook, her mother says.
- NAHED: I was never a liar, and this is my first relationship with a man.
- MOTHER: Then he's a criminal. Call him. Ask for a divorce.

In an underground parking lot, Adham's full manipulative plot unfolds: He refuses to grant her divorce, stating that his honor was tarnished by her betrayal, and demanding three million Egyptian pounds (\$500,000) as the price for divorce, and restoration for his honor. She angrily says that he will never see a dime from her family. "Your family will crawl into holes like rats when I make your scandal public," he replies, smiling, and, as she leaves him, Adham dances on his way back to his car.

Since Nahed refused to give in to his demands, she decides to get an abortion. Nahed discovers the extent of Adham's manipulation when the gynecologist, *after* she performs the abortion, tells her that Adham's first wife, who is not American as he had claimed, but Egyptian, and who has a daughter from him, is one of her patients. Adham is indeed a criminal, a crook, and a womanizer, who preys on wealthy women from good families, and gets richer through extortion, relying on the silence of the families. Back in the studio, we hear Nahed express some guilt and anger over her abortion. Heba, who had been trying to get pregnant, is outraged and quick to judge her, stating that she could have had a paternity test. But Nahed vehemently says that she did not want to keep his child, she did not want it to be like him. Continuing her story, Nahed was eventually advised to sue for "female" divorce (*khole'*), where women forfeit all their rights. His first wife testified, and the judge granted her the divorce. Her narrative so far does not explain to Heba why Nahed was arrested. After her divorce, she goes into a self-destructive mode, drinking and smoking, until one day she sees Adham on TV: he is the new minister for financial development. Dressed in a tailored beige suit, she goes to demonstrate with a sign that

reads "how do you choose them? Their cleanliness or...?" (in Arabic, cleanliness is the word for respectability and honor) (Figure 1.25). Talking to a policeman, she says she is simply looking for an answer to her question. The street is public property, and she is neither



Figure 1.25

demonstrating or holding a bomb. Nahed is then promptly surrounded by the armed police, and we imagine that she gets arrested. Adham's denial of his child is in fact a denial of feminine

desire, and an assertion of the authority of the father figure over women. He knows he has control over her body and her social image. He exercises his power by objectifying her body and controlling her sexuality, and thereby ensuring her submission and subjugation. He ultimately expects her silence. And yet, silence is what Amani, Safaa and Nahed vehemently refuse.

Heba's show offers them the platform to escape the negating shadows of silence and masculine oppression, a platform she herself ends up using. The controversy surrounding Nahed's narrative escalates, as Heba receives a phone call from a high official, demanding the name of the corrupt politician. However, at the insistence of her guest, Heba changed his name and gave a fictive name to the ministry. Despite the anonymity of the dual figure of husband and politician in this elaborate extortion scheme, the political dimension of this narrative weighs heavily, especially on the shoulders of Heba's husband who is convinced that it is the main reason he did not get his promotion. When Amani was explaining how love led her to where she was, she stated that everything in the country today must lead to an asylum. Following Safaa's story, Kareem's sarcastic greeting "Good evening, and welcome to the program 'Let's ruin Egypt's reputation'" and Heba's angry reply: "Did we morally shock your auntie Egypt when we presented a woman who got out of jail and learned to live again, when she brought her humanity back? She paid her debt to society, and she paid it to herself" highlight the correlation between the social and the political. Finally, Nahed's question clearly links the respectability and honorability of the politician with that of her lover/husband. Love, the theme Heba chooses for her revamped show, centered around the lives of the seemingly gentler sex, the female, becomes more problematic to Kareem. He ultimately blames his wife and her TV show for his personal inadequacy to land the promotion of editor-in-chief.

In the scene following Nahed's appearance on stage, Kareem ignores his wife's pleas that the decision about his promotion was made *before* the show aired, and he blatantly accuses her: "You're a plastic doll. A parrot with colorful feathers." Indeed, throughout the film, the image of Heba is manipulated to portray her embellishment and her beauty: we see her at the beauty store buying makeup, for instance. However, Heba rejects this flamboyant objectification, and throws back: "If you think you can dance, there are people who can dance better than you. Snap out of it.



Figure 1.26

Try to grow up and be a man, baby."

She emphasizes "baby" in English, diminishing his status a man. He reacts by beating her. The portrait of a beautiful Heba starkly contrasts with the image of the

woman being beaten on screen

(Figure 1.26). The following night, she takes the stage, unadorned of any make-up to hide her bruises (which, as an audience, we are in fact aware that they *are* made up), "What you're seeing is real," she tells her audience, and taking her sunglasses off, she adds, "I was beaten to death. I had a guest who was supposed to tell us a new story, but I apologized to her. Because I'm the show's guest. I'm the oppressed and beaten guest. I never thought that I, who tell other people's stories, would become a story. It appears no one is better than any one. The director is insisting on a break. Therefore, break, and we'll be back." That break we get is between the limits of reality and fiction, stories and illusion, for at that moment, they become indistinguishable, as the camera pans out to a tour of the plateau. Women are mostly watching. Each woman is a story. Unheard, untold. Each woman is voice. They don't speak for the multitude. But for a plural

singular. The singularity of the female gender is transformed into a plurality of stories, an emotional cataclysm of voices breaking a silence imposed by a deaf, blind and mute society on the experiences of women, who, in their search for love and the satisfaction of their desires, found nothing but betrayal.

In the narratives of Amani, Safaa and Nahed, and Heba's framing one, the demarcations between private and public collapse: the intimate and the political collide in a moment of personal narrative to the collective ear. Love is political, and its failure, even more so. By exposing the failures of love, the women express the conspiratorial silence that shames women's experiences of pleasure, desire, sex and the impractical idealization of love and masculinity. The stories silence the condemning voices of the regulating parents, the expected submission to men and the resignation to patriarchal conventions. Heba's show thus offers a structure for women to confront the non-representation of their experiences, one where female subjectivity does not cede to aphasia. Our storytellers ultimately, and violently, refuse to see themselves as victims or to be victimized, and they face the illusions they assigned to their notions of romantic love. This notion is also embraced by Firdaus, who says: "Love has made me a different person. Love has made the world beautiful" (83).⁷⁶ Until she realized that the man she loved got engaged to someone else, and she was left facing a brick wall. She had expected something from love: "With love, I had began to imagine that I had become a human being. . . . in love I gave my body and my soul, my mind and all the effort I could muster, freely. . . gave everything I had, abandoned myself totally, dropped all my weapons, lowered all my defences, and bared my flesh" (85)—a vulnerability she had never allowed herself as a prostitute.⁷⁷ Amani, Safaa, Nahed and

⁷⁶ El Saadawi, 1983.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

Heba discovered their vulnerabilities when they relied on love, when they deluded themselves into believing that love for a man offers them social and emotional refuge.

In the experience of the failure of love, what emerges are the diverging views of what intimate dependency means to men and women. Where she sought a complement to the self, woman found the submission of femininity and the domination of masculinity. Even Firdaus, who thought that as a prostitute she would be free of society's grasp on women, was disabused of that illusion when she was speaking to a pimp who wanted to control her: "- There are only two categories of people, Firdaus, masters and slaves. - In that case I want to be one of the masters and not one of the slaves. - How can you be one of the masters? A woman on her own cannot be a master, let alone a woman who's a prostitute" (94-5).⁷⁸ She refused to yield to this impossibility, a limitation on her life, easily and arrogantly imposed by him. After this exchange, "she hated him, as only a woman can hate a man, a slave his master," and he feared her, "as only a master can fear his slave, as only a man can fear a woman" (95).⁷⁹ But only for a second, "then the arrogant expression of the master, the aggressive look of the male who fears nothing returned," and he slapped her.⁸⁰ They fought and she ended up stabbing him. This was the murder she was being executed for. One might argue it was for self-defense, a survival mechanism she desperately needed to affirm her own subjectivity and desire for self-sufficiency and autonomy. She would not be a slave, she wanted control over her own life and desires, which the male pimp was jeopardizing and negating. She was fighting for domination, because she refused submission. While this relationship was not a romantic one, Firdaus and the heroines in *Scheherazade* painfully discover the inequalities inherently embedded in their relationships with men.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

In *The Bonds of Love*, Jessica Benjamin writes that “many women enter into love relationships with men in order to acquire vicariously something they have not got within themselves. Others try to protect their autonomy by resisting passionate involvement with men: because their sexuality is bound up with the fantasy of submission to an ideal male figure, it undermines their sense of a separate self” (89).⁸¹ This dejection, this loss of their sense of selfhood, is what Amani, Safaa, Nahed and Heba are struggling against. The socio-political structures reinforce the premise that in a love relationship and marriage, woman must accept surrender and self-denial. Benjamin argues that “we do not need to deny the contribution of “nature” or anatomy in shaping the conditions of femininity; we have only to argue that the psychological integration of biological reality is largely the work of culture—of social arrangements that we *can* change or direct” (90).⁸² *Scheherazade Tell Me a Story* reveals the role of culture in shaping those conditions, and demonstrates the existing flaws in society that create a reality in which surrender and self-denial are the only options available for them, instead of allowing women to develop agency, subjectivity and self-fulfillment. The self-deception the women are responsible for is ultimately their way to conform to social pressures—a self-deception that Amani stubbornly rejected.

The question the film narratives bring to light is whether (heterosexual) romantic love is subjugating by nature for the female. Is the image of a submissive woman necessary to the survival of a romantic relationship? The failure of love in *Scheherazade* attests in some way to that. Our women are searching for a romantic supplement, desiring a love that is legal, and socially accepted, “once instituted for the subject, the law reveals its no longer ideal but tyrannical facet, woven with daily constraints and consonant hence repressive stereotypes”

⁸¹ Benjamin, Jessica. *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination*. New York: Pantheon, 1988.

⁸² *Ibid.*

(209).⁸³ And this “amatory we” becomes antinomic to love.⁸⁴ Or the ideal image they have of love, and their idealized expectations. These failed narratives of love are mere reenactments of the failure of patriarchal authority to account for feminine subjectivity, because “femininity continues to be identified with passivity, with being the object of someone else’s desire, with having no active desire of one’s own” (87).⁸⁵ Passivity, propriety and feminine conformity are the tyrannical facet of idealized love, and engulf women in repressive stereotypes.

These stereotypical representations fragment women’s identities. The violence of the objectification of the female body appears on screens in shots of female body parts: the lips, the legs, the feet (Figures 1.27-30). The female body is dismembered: women are not whole beings, even in their own desire; they are always objects of desire, and never the subject. The physical vulnerability of this dismemberment translates the semantic vulnerability, where the female subject is nonexistent. If woman is denied her subjective desire, “If woman has no desire of her own, she must rely on that of a man, with potentially disastrous consequences for her psychic life” (89),⁸⁶ consequences that are obvious in the different narratives. Because her desire is not her own, it is used to control, humiliate and subjugate her. This is how women participate in their own submission, according to Benjamin: many girls “express their admiration in relationships of overt or unconscious submission. They grow to idealize the man who has what they can never possess—power and desire” (109).⁸⁷ The film’s narratives obviously exemplify that. Hence, their construct of this idealized notion of love, discordant with their images of themselves, destabilizes their identity.

⁸³ Kristeva, Julia. *Tales of Love*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1987.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Benjamin, 1988.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

The female body in parts



Figure 1.27



Figure 1.28



Figure 1.29



Figure 1.30

Initially enchanted with “a feeling of safety without confinement” (127), the women are eventually disenchanted, and finally discover “in ideal love a ‘perversion’ of identification, a deformation of identificatory love into submission” (122). Idealized love perverts the initial ontological need they were clinging to, and within the narratives, we witness how “the conflict between the identificatory love that enhances agency and the object love that encourages passivity is replayed over and over in women’s efforts to reconcile autonomous activity and heterosexual love” (115). Ultimately this reconciliation proves impossible for them. Through their narratives, our storytellers are able to grasp an “authenticity for the self” (128),⁸⁸ because they develop unhindered introspection and unequivocal self-discovery in the process. The women ultimately realize that seeking their desire in another while deluding themselves, and searching for that unattainable ideal love, does not open up a space for subjectivity, recognition, and fulfillment. On the contrary, it alienates them from society and from themselves, and perpetuates feminine submission. Their sense of autonomy and their need for recognition only develop in a space that allows for recognition by another. In *Scheherazade*, on stage, they achieve authorship and recognition. This is the undeniable political dimension of the narratives, where the lines between public and private, personal and political, collapse, as mentioned earlier. “The unbreachable line between public and private values rests on the tacit assumption that women will continue to preserve and protect personal life, the task to which they have been assigned” (197).⁸⁹ Herein lies the revolutionary power of Heba’s show, of the impact that *Scheherazade* can have: it destroys that assumption, allowing women to infiltrate the male-dominated public sphere, thereby restructuring gender polarity in Egyptian society.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

While the film narratives demystify the image of idealized love and the representation of female submission and the pretense of obedience, they also shatter another stereotype: that of the nurturing mother. “The sentimental ideal of motherhood is the product of the historic separation of public and private spheres that gave gender polarity its present forms as an institutionalized opposition between male rationality and maternal nurturance” (206).⁹⁰ Nurturing mothers are absent from the storytelling. The three sisters are orphaned; Amani’s mother pushes her to conform to societal standard by getting married, and Nahed’s mother becomes the voice of patriarchal authority. They both reenact patriarchal order and filial relations. The mother must be reinvented to fit the stories of these women. It is telling that none of the storytellers are mothers, and that they emphatically refuse or fail to become one.

The image of the nurturing mother metamorphoses into that of the abortive mother. Nahed refuses to have Adham’s child, and undergoes an abortion. The representation on screen of the abortion, blood trickling on the operation table, contrasts with Nahed’s virginal blood on the sheet (Figures 1.24, and 1.31). She loses blood twice: once through intercourse, and the other through surgery. The first time is by male penetration, and the second time,



Figure 1.24



Figure 1.31

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

she expels this male penetration. The abortion hence traces the surgical removal of the child from its mother—the child who is a continuation of Adham’s bloodline. In *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, Marianne Hirsch writes that within feminist rhetoric, “motherhood remains a patriarchal construction” and “the mother is an empty function [that] connects the figure of the mother with continued bondage to men and patriarchy” (165).⁹¹ Nahed’s abortion emphatically destroys that bond. The mother is rarely seen as a subject, as Hirsch explains: “The failure of psychoanalysis to account for the mother as a subject,” because “the adult woman who is a mother, in particular, continues to exist only in relation to her child, never as a subject in her own right. And in her maternal function, she remains an object, always distanced, always idealized or denigrated, always mystified, always represented through the small child’s point of view” (167).⁹² In this radical feminist view of motherhood, female subjectivity is lost. Quoting Adrienne Rich, “The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree women, the martyr. . . . and, in a desperate attempt to know where mother ends and daughter begins, we perform radical surgery” (165).⁹³ That is precisely why Nahed rejects her unborn child, fearing that it would be like her husband, she dreads being the unfree woman, the victim, the martyr. Thereby, in the search for identity, it is detrimental to the survival of the subject to negate the mother, to kill the child: “female writing is somehow by nature infanticidal” (175).⁹⁴ Heba’s journey toward self-realization also hinges on her not becoming a mother, and hence explains why she couldn’t get pregnant.

The negation of maternal nurturance does not disparage the notion of motherhood in society. It critically emphasizes that a woman cannot, and should not, be reduced to her primary role of a caregiving mother. Her role in society should be first and foremost that of a subject, a

⁹¹ Hirsch, Marianne. *The Mother/daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Barbara Johnson qtd in Hirsch, 1989.

citizen. Motherhood is biological and, hence, reducing women to their biological function inherently reinforces sex difference and perpetuates discrimination and oppression based on those differences. It is part of an identity, *one* aspect, that cannot encompass the whole feminine experience. The rejection of the traditional terms of motherhood points to a rejection of nature. Women are redefining themselves outside the classic dichotomy, nature/culture, where nature is associated with femininity and culture with masculinity: they are no longer the embodiment of mother nature. Hence, the images of the abortive mother and the childless one call into question the concept of mothers as the founders of social harmony and order, the compliant breeders of well-adjusted citizens. These transgressive representations provide women with a different conceptualization of their selves, their identities, which are no longer posited through their nurturing capabilities as mothers. Women can be destroyers as well as creators. If not a mother, who is this woman in society? Women can now socially imagine themselves other than mothers, without being pathologically branded.

This denial of motherhood is not without guilt, remorse or judgment. After all, self-discovery comes at a price, as Safaa mentions. Heba is quick to lay judgment on Nahed's decision, who we see falter, right after her abortion, when she found out the truth about Adham's first wife and daughter. And yet, neither could come into being, had they asserted their motherhood instead of their selfhood. Had Heba become a mother, she would have given up her career. Just like Scheherazade in *A Thousand and One Nights*. We know that Shahriyar's relationships are doomed before they start, because they end in the immediate death of his bride after the nuptials. This violent and cyclic repetition is only altered through the potentially infinite proliferation of Scheherazade's storytelling. The immanence of death precedes the first words and follow the last of each story she narrates. What ultimately saves her however, is that she

becomes a viable and lasting wife by affirming her motherhood. After a thousand and one nights, Scheherazade is able to convince Shahriyar not to kill her, for she had proved her faithfulness, gaining his trust by finally becoming a mother to three sons. In “Reading—And Enjoying—“Wiles of Women” Stories as a Feminist,” Afsaneh Najmabadi, accuses Scheherazade of being “an unsuitable character for feminist reclamation” (215).⁹⁵ She writes:

Shahzad, the female narrator of some of the wildest wiles-of-women tales, becomes self-implicated: the only safe woman is a complicit woman; a woman who narrates these "healing" tales is enacting a plot of masculinity production. Far from the heroic female who saved herself and her kind through the power of her word, she turns out to be the female topos of male homosocial production, the incidental woman. . . . The reassuring ending now becomes reassuring in a different sense: the only safe woman for a man to marry is the complicit woman, the woman who repeatedly performs the healing narratives about the wiles of women. Shahzad's power of speech, her gift of being an unrivaled storyteller, in this reading turns out to be yet another patriarchal ruse. (214)⁹⁶

The powers for procreation and (self-)creation are exclusionary. Heteronormativity collapses onto itself, when it is not produced and when it does not produce. Scheherazade betrays her own narrative when she, now a mother, accepts to be relegated to the silent shadows of motherhood behind her husband’s content and the patriarchal satisfaction of fatherhood, denying even more the position of women, since the children she had were three boys.

Heba, on the other hand, rectifies this narrative betrayal by entering the stage to tell her own story. “The image that pervades feminist writing is the image of self-creation—women

⁹⁵ Najmabadi, Afsaneh. “Reading—And Enjoying—‘Wiles of Women’ Stories as a Feminist.” *Iranian Studies*. 32: 2 (1999). 203-222.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

giving birth to themselves” (166).⁹⁷ To reproduce here becomes a reflexive verb instead of a transitive one: women are reproducing themselves through their stories instead of reproducing a lineage. “Kristeva identifies the maternal with the unspeakable” (172).⁹⁸ In this way, breaking the bonds of motherhood allows woman to enter the speaking world, to escape the pre-language sphere in which psychoanalysis relegated the mothering self. The speaking subject of the narratives in *Scheherazade* is a reflexive subject, one that appears and comes into being, through the loss, and therefore the (forced) absence of the amorous object. The absent amorous object allows women to speak. In *A Lover’s Discourse*, Roland Barthes writes:

Amorous absence functions in a single direction, expressed by the one who stays, never by the one who leaves: an always present *I* is constituted only by confrontation with an always absent *you*. To speak this absence is from the start to propose that the subject’s place and the other’s place cannot permute. (13)⁹⁹

This confrontation engenders woman as the *I*, the subject who speaks this absence. However, the difference is that in Barthes’ discourse, the interlocutor is the absent lover, whereas in the film, this discourse, of the absent lover because love failed, introduces the present subject, who was born of absence.

Reading Barthes in *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Chela Sandoval finds that “the act of falling in love can thus function as a ‘punctum,’ that which breaks through social narratives to permit a bleeding, meanings unanchored and moving away from their traditional moorings—in what, Barthes writes, brings about a ‘gentle hemorrhage’ of being. This is why, for Barthes, this form of romantic love, combined with risk and courage, can make anything possible” (140).¹⁰⁰ In

⁹⁷ Hirsch, 1989.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Barthes, Roland. *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1978.

¹⁰⁰ Sandoval, Chela. *Methodology of the Oppressed*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

this lover's discourse, subjectivity emerges in a space where the lover's presence is not even necessary.

The lover's disappearance can be the result of either loss or abundance. . . . whether "severed or united," whether discrete or dissolved, "I am nowhere gathered together". . . . Indeed, this trans-forming lover is no longer part of any couple—of any binary—but through some ingress created by love, the traveller ironically comes to lose its structure as a lover altogether, to instead enter another place of possibility, Barthes insists, signs all around no longer securely anchored.

(141)¹⁰¹

Within that place, that "abyss," ideology is deconstructed, and subjectivity can be "freed from [it] as it binds and ties reality; here is where political weapons of consciousness are available in a constant tumult of possibility" (142). This process, occurring "once one recognizes this abyss beyond dualisms," "punctures through traditional, older narratives of love, . . . ruptures everyday being" (142).¹⁰² The rhetorical question that Barthes asks in *A Lover's Discourse*, "Are not excess and madness my truth, my strength?" (42),¹⁰³ opens the gateway, for the four women, to understand, beyond language's own divisive illusions and alternative meanings, "I want to analyze, to know, to express in another language than mine; I want to represent my delirium to myself, I want to 'look in the face' what is dividing myself, cutting me off" (60).¹⁰⁴ Manifesting the hidden, breaking free from an idealized and stereotypical love that oppresses. "To understand—is that not to divide the image, to undo the *I*, proud organ of misapprehension?"

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Barthes, 1986.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

(60),¹⁰⁵ and miscomprehension. Amani, Safaa, Nahed, and Heba find a consciousness that is political (if not revolutionary, because it destroys the hegemonic power that surrounds their reality).

Through their narratives, and by grasping their narratable selves as defined earlier by Cavarero, the women in *Scheherazade* create an epistemology of love that reveals the individual and social matrices that surround romantic experiences. As a source of knowledge, these narratives about failed loves reconceptualize the ability of women to trace their personal development. Their past memories, from which they are presently removed, provide them with an introspective and retrospective look that differentiates between the traditional conception of emotions “as passions,” inextricably linked and semantically marked as passive. Storytelling is a subjective process. Correspondingly, the narratives are unequivocally narratives of traumatic experiences. They are simultaneously personal confessions and therapeutic testimonies. Exploring representations of the Holocaust in cinema in “The Trauma of History: Flashbacks upon Flashbacks,” Maureen Turim explains that “Violently inserted flashbacks inscribe in narratives a shattering of complacency Postwar tranquility that might put aside or bury a past that had not been worked through will be slashed not only by a call to remember, but also concomitantly by a call to make the connections between the past and atrocities in the present” (207).¹⁰⁶ Flashbacks allow the traumatic past and the healing present to coexist on screen, creating a continuous plane of observation that connects the storyteller with the woman she was, that also links the women in the narratives together, while relating them to the audience (of both the show and the film). Turim writes that

individual and collective elements of trauma are often interwoven and inextricable.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Turim, Maureen. “The Trauma of History: Flashbacks upon Flashbacks.” *Screen* 42.2 (2001): 205-10.

When one is a member of a traumatized collectivity, what has happened to others like one's self has the potential to multiply the wounds. Ironically one of the effects of trauma is to distance the self not only from one's memory, but also from the experience of others, and from any collective formation. In many ways then the works that attempt to represent trauma become a call for attention, for an end to isolation, and for a meaningful return of historical memory. (210)¹⁰⁷

The narratives coalesce the fragmentation of female identity. Once on stage, the women become whole. The film presents us with two, and even three, degrees of separation between a woman and her image, for she is continuously torn between how she sees herself, how society sees her, and how she would like to be seen. At the high-end beauty store where Heba buys her beauty products, she meets Salma, a sales assistant. Aware of the TV star's reputation, Salma tells Heba that "no one sees us. No one sees us. You hear about people's news without seeing them. If you see with your own eyes, it'll make a difference." She wants to show her how she is split in two, as she describes. Indeed, Salma transforms from a glamorous looking, fully made up and dressed up sales assistant at the store into a woman who wears the veil in the metro on her way back home (Figures 1.32-33). Heba is skeptical of the change, at first, but as she follows Salma on her journey, she receives glaring looks from the women in the subway for the way she is dressed (Figures 1.34-36). Uncomfortable, she grudgingly covers her hair, and is led by Salma through a poor and destitute neighborhood (Figure 1.37). Fascinated by the transformation, Heba wants to do a story about "the Egyptian Salma Hayek," who is living during the day between Yves Saint Laurent, Dior, and opulent fashion, and at night she returns to her modest neighborhood a completely different woman, veiled, living between foul smells, insects, and trash.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

This transformation belies a schism that subjects women to a split identity that oscillates between two worlds, and more importantly, between two different images. As a modest veiled woman, Salma can never present that image in her working environment. And as a glamorous adorned woman, she can never present that image in her living environment. She is thus both, without being either. Without being one. Her identity is divided into fragments of reflections that the different societies project on her. “Girls and women in our countries are torn between two images. According to the moral and religious system, they are supposed to be veiled, but they are also supposed to be exposed and naked (fashionable, feminine, beautiful) in order to conform to the media advertisements and the global culture” (139).¹⁰⁸ What is lost is ultimately Salma’s ability to just be, without being seen as. Salma embodies further the schism that Amani, Safaa, Nahed and Heba suffer from. This inability to express their identity is one that not only speaks of the incapability to be one woman or the other, but of the impossibility of choosing which one to be in a society that affords women no space to reconcile those two images. In parallel, Safaa works as a seamstress making bridal gowns: she is surrounded by mannequins who remind her of an image of herself that she will never reflect, one that starkly contrasts with her enraged image when she commits the murder (Figures 1.38-39). While Salma’s story is included in Heba’s linear plot, the flashbacks method juxtaposes these dissonant images in Amani, Safaa and Nahed’s narratives. “The combination of the halting verbal articulations and the variety of fragmented images of painful memories suggest something of the poesis of trauma. Trauma invades, troubles and even forecloses by asserting the unresolved pain of events that cumulatively have overwhelmed a subject's ability to cope” (209).¹⁰⁹ Their narratives are punctuated by painful silence, and Heba’s persisting prompting to continue their stories.

¹⁰⁸ El Saadawi, 2012.

¹⁰⁹ Turim, 2001.

Two worlds, two images, one self



Figure 1.32



Figure 1.33



Figure 1.34



Figure 1.35



Figure 1.36



Figure 1.37



Figure 1.38

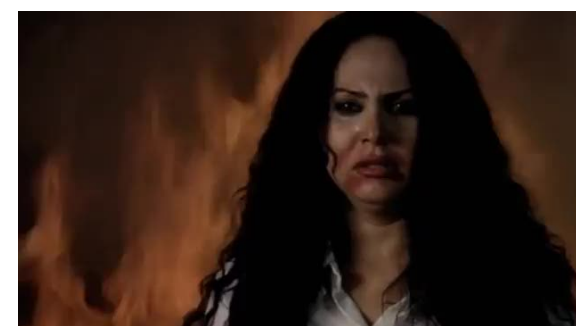


Figure 1.39

Combining the fragmented plots of the various stories with the continuous return to each woman on stage reinstates one complete subjectivity. The silent punctuation is the traumatic past hesitating to be brought to the present.

In this epistemology of love, feeling and being emerge as the counterparts to experience and narration. In “Insides, Outsides: Trauma, Affect, and Art,” Jill Bennett uses an epigraph from Edouard Claparède: “It is impossible to feel emotion as past. . . . One cannot be a spectator of one’s own feelings; one feels them, or one does not feel them; one cannot imagine them without stripping them of their affective essence” (452).¹¹⁰ She explains that “The conceptual work implied in the act of remembering—of representing to oneself—entails a kind of distanced perception: one thinks rather than simply *feels* the emotion” (452).¹¹¹ The act of remembering here is the narration itself, and the flashbacks are a sort of eidetic memory. The women are clearly piecing together their past, re-membering their stories. Narrative memory thus overcomes traumatic memory. “These representational forms do not simply frame the suffering of the individual, an expression in the form of a private language; they evince a process of coming into view—of moving out of the realm of traumatic memory through a set of social interactions” (454).¹¹² Within these narrative representations, the unspeakable, the silenced, and the traumatic are shaped through visual recollection. ‘Coming into view’ is the visibility of the present subject being heard. “As the source of a poetics or an art, then, sense memory (the one registering the physical imprint of an event) operates through the body to produce a kind of “seeing truth,” rather than “thinking truth,” registering the pain of memory as it is directly experienced, and communicating a level of bodily affect. . . . Its production thus becomes a contingent and

¹¹⁰ Bennett, Jill. “Insides, Outsides: Trauma, Affect, and Art.” *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*. Jones, Amelia, ed. London: Routledge, 2010.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*

culturally situated practice—linked to social histories—that requires framing against a backdrop of cultural knowledge” (454).¹¹³ Hence, the epistemological narratives in *Scheherazade* are indissociable from the political realities in which they are born.

While we may argue that the traumatic generally resists representation, the film establishes not only new ways of feeling and of seeing, but a new way of remembering. “Memory in this account is neither that possessed by the individual, or that which resides inside (as conventional expressionism holds), nor that which is representational or representable (the outside); it is rather the dynamic of contact”—the contact and interaction between the women, Heba, and both audiences. Bennett uses Deleuze’s redefinition of memory: “[M]emory is clearly no longer the faculty of having recollections: it is the membrane which, in the most varied ways (continuity but also discontinuity, envelopment, etc.) makes sheets of past and layers of reality correspond, the first emanating from an inside which is always already there, the second arriving from an outside always to come, the two gnawing at the present which is now only their encounter” (461).¹¹⁴ This memory’s role is crucial insofar as it produces an “affective encounter” between the audience of Heba’s show, and the audience of the film (459), where “affective imagery promotes a form of thought that arises from the body, that explores the nature of our affective investment, and that ultimately has the potential to take us outside the confines of our character and habitual modes of perception” (460).¹¹⁵ Admittedly, the film does not present us with an acquiescing audience, Kareem being a point in case.

The men are appalled at the feminine accounts unfolding on the stage of Heba’s show, because they are speaking up against the dominant narratives and values that society perpetuates. Namely that a woman who seeks to be equal to her husband in marriage is crazy, that a woman is

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

shameful if she is not a virgin, that she gives away the right to her own body and sexuality just to live in the shadow of a man, that a woman who strives to be as ambitious as her husband is selfish and subversive, that her role as a nurturing mother is primordial and overshadows her own personal aspirations and subjectivity. These situations engender emotional responses that disturb the prevailing ones that a male-dominant society wishes to preserve. What cements the subjective epistemic authority of these stories is that these emotions are collective, and present the persistent and enduring subjectivity of female subjects.

The platform they shared to narrate their experiences opens up a space for female bonding, as previously explained. A kind of sisterhood is born out the dismemberment of the traditional family and that of the female body. “The crisis with which the *Nights* begins is one that is itself initiated by male homosocial desire,” as Shahriyar desires the company and solace of his own brother Shahzaman (15).¹¹⁶ While the *Nights* begin with this male homosocial desire, *Scheherazade* establishes a female homosocial desire as the outcome of storytelling. “Ending her stories with herself transformed from storyteller to good mother-wife, that is, closing the tales with an ending least threatening to monstrous and murderous kingly men made it possible for the tales and their working-through effect to survive for women—for herself, her sister, and her sisters-in-kind” (221-2).¹¹⁷ Unlike Scheherazade who gave up the word once her husband pardoned her for an act she had not committed (but one he thought she could), the women in the film do not relinquish their power to narrate stories. While in *A Thousand and One Nights*, Scheherazade gives up the word, and finds closure, and her power is rehabilitation, the narratives in the film are all transgressive and the plot is open-ended, the shot panning out, from Heba sitting on the stage to an audience of stories to be told, waiting to be heard.

¹¹⁶ Malti-Douglas, Fedwa. *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.

¹¹⁷ Najmabadi, 1999.

Subversive, transgressive, self-reliant and self-affirming are the characteristics of the narratives and of the women. The looming destructive violence of solipsism becomes creative dissidence, the art of storytelling. “We live in fear and we die in fear. Dissident people liberate themselves from fear, and they pay a price for this process of liberation. . . . Non dissident people pay a price too: the process of subordination. So if we have to pay a price anyway, why not pay the price and be liberated?” (172-3).¹¹⁸ Our dissident heroines and storytellers silence that fear. “Where do you find the strength?” Heba asks Amani, who replies, “We’re women, strength finds us.” The frame story in the *Nights* is primarily about the tricks and treacheries of promiscuous women. In the film, the tricks and treacheries of men are the points of departure. This reversal deconstructs the ancient quranic tradition that *qadahuna ‘aazim* (“your guiles are great,” where “your” refers to the feminine plural in Arabic). With the disappearance of a traditional romantic relationship, where the woman submits to the masculine power within it, a subversive image rises. The arousal of a feminine consciousness, that refuses that power dynamics, translates a demystification of the passive woman. The failure of love is accompanied by the death of the woman who nourished that mythical love. She is no longer submissive or nurturing. She is subversive, transgressive and self-reliant. The conventional dualism that has so far sustained the illusion of love in society—passive femininity, active masculinity—has collapsed. The polarized representation of gender differences crumbles.

While men’s deception is a point of departure, the stories reveal more than mere vengeful reaction to betrayal. The weaving threads between the narratives expose the real complexity of the film. This complexity is translated in the fragmentation of the plot and the gradual assemblage of its diverse parts; hence its non-linearity reinforces its goal. Let’s return to *A*

Thousand and One Nights where

¹¹⁸ El Saadawi, 2012.

Desire is at the root of the frame of the Nights, but desire as a problem. There are proper desires as there are improper ones. Or, to speak more precisely, there are proper and improper patterns of desire, and ways of using and fulfilling desire. Proper and improper, here, are more than moral antinomies: they reach beyond the relatively restricted domain of the just and the unjust to the more worldly regions of the appropriate and the ultimately satisfying. (15)¹¹⁹

Reaching beyond the proper and improper dimension of the narratives, the film retraces the patterns of love, desire and power, on a social and an individual level, without merely reducing the stories to those themes. It also delineates the inherent irony in each plot, insofar as the search for a particular objective precisely ends in its destruction. When Heba concedes to her husband's wishes to reduce the political content of her show in order to save her marriage, she ends up creating a more provocative show that eventually destroys her marriage and transforms her into a "story." Amani refuses to undermine her search for equality in a marriage, to the detriment of her sociability. Safaa and her sisters pick up the thread by settling on a projected masculine ideal who turns out to be an illusion, that betrayed them and made them betray each other. Nahed's sense of betrayal leads her to abort her own ideals. Finally, tracing back to Heba, who ideally wanted to secure her relationship, she unites all three narratives with her own, as she takes the stage. Nasrallah emphasizes that without the stories, one is not in a position to recognize that what one subject wants and associates with love always starts out as self-regarding and proceeds to self-destruction. This realization does not reject ideals or the possibility of love: it indicates the necessity of disclosing these narratives as inescapably political, and an awareness of the complex patterns that reinforce them.

¹¹⁹ Malti-Douglas, 1991.

There is no closure to the modern Scheherazade. Kahf's Scheherazade goes on to become a renowned writer, occasionally writing to her former husband.¹²⁰ By the end of the film, women remain the narrators of their own stories, subjects of their own utterances, and not objects in narrative closure and semantic erasure. *Scheherazade Tell Me a Story* represents an escape from the linguistic impositions enforced over women. For once she becomes a speaking subject, she defies the social, political, and cultural impositions on her representations. This act is politically transgressive, and is born and borne out of violence. Ultimately Amani, Safaa, Nahed and Heba demonstrate how the act of remembering, persevering, and recounting is essentially self-reflective and self-reflexive.

¹²⁰ Kahf, 2003.

II

Physical Vulnerability: Public Displays of Violence and the Vanishing Subject *Cairo 678*

Reflecting on the schism between their past and their present, the female protagonists in *Scheherazade Tell Me A Story* are transformed into narrators. The speaking subject reclaims her right to speak in complex narratives that subvert the linguistic erasure of the feminine plural (and dual) in colloquial Egyptian. In the film *Cairo 678* (2010), the rhetorical denial that is exposed is the one that regulates women's experiences of sexual harassment. The linguistic vulnerability of women is translated into a physical one, as public violations of their bodies are a constant threat. The film articulates how women are negotiating their urban citizenship, and their mobility within a city that seems to question the visibility of the female body. Director Mohamed Diab develops a poetics of revelation that connects, within the seemingly oblivious landscape of the city, disparate narratives of three women who struggle against sexual harassment and its implications on their lives. This poetics gradually reveals an understanding of the socio-political framework that allows such pervasive behavior as it denies its existence. However, while three fragmented narratives come together to create an interwoven whole, the women themselves are informed by this poetics, as they learn to question, change, and transform not only their circumstances, but their own abilities for self-reflection and introspection, and their understanding of other women.

When Nelly, a twenty-something Egyptian woman, enters a police precinct in a neighborhood of Cairo to file a sexual harassment report, the officer emphatically refuses, urging her to amend her request and file it under assault. It is less shameful to her and her family, he maintains. The young woman is adamant, and the defensive officer commands her to go to the district police station, because they do not report such cases in the substations. Therefore, Nelly, her fiancé and her mother have to transport the offender to the police station in their own car.

While the man sits comfortably in the backseat, the three of them are uncomfortably and awkwardly squeezed in the front seats (Figures 2.1-2.2).

This pivotal scene in *Cairo 678* epitomizes the treatment of sexual harassment in Egypt: the female victim is confined within the legal and social limits of an offense that men are more or less free to commit, with impunity, while her experience is cloaked in shame, and relegated to the silent shadows. While women are denied the words to express the violence committed against their bodies, space is here given to the dominant gender. *Cairo 678* brings to light the struggles of three women, Fayza, Seba and Nelly, against sexual harassment, and their individual strategies to fight against it. Frame after frame, *678* retraces how sexual harassment affects women in their daily struggles to exist and move around the city, and how their experiences disturb their quotidian lives and the lives of those around them. This perverse behavior ultimately unfolds as symptomatic of a social epidemic, since we discover that the environment that fosters this conduct is fueled by the state's ineptitude at legally handling such cases, and socioeconomic contingencies that are redefining the role of women and men in today's Egyptian society.

678 is the number of the bus Fayza takes to work everyday. She is a young, veiled mother of two, married to a security guard, and is a government employee. The film opens with the bus stopping at the station, and after it leaves, she is standing alone, in a long shot. She doesn't want to get on the overcrowded bus because it is where she gets harassed daily, as random men routinely stand behind her and rub themselves against her body. Therefore, she starts taking a taxi to work more often. Nelly is a middle-class telemarketer and an aspiring stand-up comedian. One day, crossing the street in front of her apartment building in downtown Cairo, a man driving a pickup truck grabs her by the front of her shirt and drags her along (Figures 2.3-2.4). Seba is a



Figure 2.1



Figure 2.2



Figure 2.3



Figure 2.4

welder and jewelry designer from a more privileged background, who gets sexually harassed by a mob of football fans after a game she was attending with her husband at the Cairo stadium.

Women are subjected to sexual violence daily in Egypt: the female body becomes a site of verbal and physical violation, from aggressive and salacious catcalling, to molestation, mob attacks and gang rape.

When the officer refuses to file a sexual harassment report for Nelly, he inherently denies her the right to define her own experience. He prefers to use the term assault, which, according to him is the correct crime, since he deems, after briefly looking at her, that her injuries require more than 21 days to heal. He adds that the punishment is more severe for assault (*'aateda'*) than for sexual harassment (*taḥarush jinsi*). The former denotes a neutral physical transgression against a body, while the latter articulates a sexual violation, which would dishonor her and create a scandal for her and her family. However, Nelly insists and the officer refuses under the pretext that this is a police substation and that her sexual harassment report needs to be filed at the district level by a prosecutor. When her mother asks how he was going to file the assault suit, he replies that he was being courteous, since he has a daughter just like Nelly, and, looking at her fiancé, he adds that he was safeguarding and protecting the woman who was to be his wife. The officer's rejection of Nelly's experience as sexual harassment in favor of a more neutral designation is in fact a denial of the sexual transgression against her body. She is left facing a system that refuses to linguistically acknowledge her experience, and she is thereby denied the right to inscribe her suffering in words with which she can identify.

The linguistic erasure of this particular female experience renders these transgressions against the female body invisible. When Nelly manages to stop the man who harassed her on the street, an aging sheikh in the crowd asks her what the culprit had stolen from her. She says:

“Nothing, he sexually harassed me.” The sheikh promptly replies: “Thank God, no harm done. We thought he stole something from you.” The violation against her body becomes secondary to the theft of an object, as if this corporeal transgression, invisible to the naked eye, carries little or no meaning when compared to the theft of a personal possession. The stolen object is a tangible and substantial reality that the sheikh can recognize, while the concept that her body is her own possession seems absurd, insignificant. The sexually harassed body is stripped of words, and becomes a mere abstraction, unsubstantiated, as it loses its right to exist in the cacophony of the



Figure 2.5



Figure 2.6

Cairene streets. Diab represents this abstraction in an immensely revealing scene: Fayza does not only get harassed on the bus, but also on the streets. As she is walking, we see a young man who is singing suggestively come from behind her. This scene, repeated three times, is shot in shadows (Figures 2.5-2.6). The female body thus loses its physical shape, and morphs into a disappearing silhouette whose contours do not delineate the limits between the outer world and the inner one, the Other and the Self. It becomes a body

that does not matter, to play on Butler’s words. “What constitutes the fixity of the body, its contours, its movements, will be fully material, but materiality will be rethought as the effects of

power” (2).¹²¹ Reformulating the materiality of bodies, Butler recasts “the matter of bodies as the effect of a dynamic of power, such that the matter of bodies will be indissociable from the regulatory norms that govern the materialization and the significance of those material effects” (2).¹²² The reiteration of the denial of its materiality constructs in shadows a female body that is indefinite, insofar as it no longer delineates the perimeter of a woman’s physical sanctity and inviolability, and the outside. Her body is not hers, it is a site of transgression. Transient, its experience dissipates.

Nelly attempts to rectify this denial, when she appears live on a TV show to relate her experience, and is surprised to find out that she is the first woman in Egypt to pursue a case of sexual harassment. She assumed many had complained before. A woman calls, giving the name Buthayna, admittedly a pseudonym, but we recognize Fayza’s voice. She congratulates Nelly for her courage to speak up. Then a man, Ahmed, calls and expresses his outrage about this media frenzy regarding sexual harassment, claiming that the women around him have never said anything, and that maybe Nelly was wearing something provocative. She calmly replies that she was wearing the exact same outfit she is now wearing, and that his sisters go through the same thing she did, but they don’t like to admit it. Society is blind to women’s experience in public spaces, and when the words are enunciated, they are rejected. The gaze is unseeing, the words unspoken, because women’s bodies are looked at, but their experiences are invisible and denied. Social discourse thus fails women, and limits their corporeal experience to a language that denies them the specificity of their pain and their suffering, relegating them to a secondary clause of irreality and negation. The female body is only interpreted within a masculine rhetoric that defines it as meaningless and hollow.

¹²¹ Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “sex”*. New York: Routledge, 1993.

¹²² *Ibid.*

Nelly is trying to break into the masculine world of standup comedy, but so far her jokes seem to be falling on deaf ears, inciting a few stifled laugh. As she tries to perfect her comedy routine, Omar, her fiancé, who is also a comedian, advises her to use her experience as a girl to give more meaning to her skit. “I talked about my age, no girl likes to divulge her age.” “More,



Figure 2.7

Nelly, you need to say more.” So she decides to relate her experience of sexual harassment on stage, to an audience waiting to hear the punch line. Which never comes. Because when she tells the story of the sheikh, despite some laughter,

her pain becomes clear, visible (Figure 2.7). The audience’s uncomfortable silence continues, as she admits that her family wants her to drop her case, for fear it will shame them if she pursues legal action, thereby making it public. “I’ll shame you because I said ‘ouch’? It’s shameful to say ouch.” Nelly performs her pain, and the pressure to keep it muted unfold, not as a joke, but as a traumatic memory that translates the lack of security and safety women feel. Her comedy routine reenacts the dramatic experience of her femininity. Did the audience not want more of her life? Did the spectators not want to learn more about her? Did they not want to laugh about her life as a woman? But what lies beneath isn’t comedic; it’s tragic. And while some people, mostly men, are snickering at her jokes, the muffled laughter rings hollow, and the women in the audience are not laughing.

Speaking directly to a live audience that wanted her to imbue her monologue with anecdotes about being a woman, the humor is lacking. Her experience, formerly denied by the officer, the sheikh, and male strangers such as Ahmed, may not be inscribed in a language that

she is allowed to recognize, but it appears in her performance. She can only imagine her state of being a woman as misunderstood and silenced shame, it is a tenuous joke at best, and one that is converted into an emotional outburst. Showcasing her vulnerability, she emphasizes the danger of abstracting the female body and its experience of sexual harassment. For the linguistic and social disavowal of female corporeality reinforce the subordination of women: they are forced to submit to a masculine language and behavior, in which they become a mere commodity (or even less). Women are thus a property of men's language, their existence is unilaterally imposed by a society that decides of its value. The inability of women to articulate their own experience in words they and those around them would recognize, and the repudiation of this experience articulates a sense of female powerlessness. This is notably a realization that a young Fatima Mernissi comes to in *Dreams of Trespass*: when Mina, a slave in the harem, tell hers: "a cosmic frontier splits the planet in two halves. The frontier indicates the line of power because wherever there is a frontier, there are two kinds of creatures walking on Allah's earth, the powerful on one side, and the powerless on the other." Mernissi asks her how she would know on which side she stood: "Her answer was quick, short, and very clear: 'If you can't get out, you are on the powerless side'" (242).¹²³ The three protagonists struggle against this powerlessness they are made to feel, precisely because they refuse this divisive frontier. Nelly infringes on this invisible limit, and through the audible intensity of pain, the gulps, and the silent pauses in her comedy routine, her vulnerability unfolds, like a silent scream, the origin of which is unknown, the sound of which, incomprehensible.

Vulnerability makes women prone to shame. The body abstracted, unadorned of appropriate description, trapped in a world not of its making, is weighted by stigmatization, and

¹²³ Mernissi, Fatima. *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*. Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co, 1994.

becomes a site of social contestation, from which women find themselves excluded. Property and propriety are confounded, as Ahmed reminds Nelly in his phone call during her TV appearance: he asks if she does not have parents to tell her what should and should not be said. Should and should not be said: Ahmed relegates her story to a transgression against the sensible and the social, while redirecting her to a patriarchal and corrective discourse to regulate her words, because an adult woman would not and *should* not speak of such matters, especially on national television. The body is thus engraved with a regulatory discourse of propriety and propriety. Her words are not her own, and her body is not hers. Both are socially reproduced to maintain the invisibility of female corporeality and suffering, until they are allowed to speak up. And they never are because permission is not given—but taken. Society inscribes women's existence within a frame of purity, since it is not “proper” to say one was sexually harassed; it is in fact shameful and dishonorable.

Seba faces the same constructs of purity and propriety. Before the mob assault, while jogging one day, she is subjected to some catcalling by a man in a car. Upon hearing of it, Sherif insists that she uses the treadmill at home to avoid facing people on the streets. “You should keep me locked at home,” Seba says. “That’s a good idea, then you’ll only be mine,” he replies. After Seba is assaulted, her husband becomes distanced, and refuses to look at her, let alone touch her. He does not recognize her suffering, and he is unable to envision this violation as anything but a loss of purity, a corruption of her “clean” and untouched body. “Every time I see you I remember what they did to you.” He claims that she cannot imagine how *he* feels and refuses to think about how *she* feels. After her assault, her body was no longer his property, as if its ownership had been transferred to those who violated her: her amorphous body is now contaminated. Her experience is further debased, when Seba indicates to her mother her intention to press charges.

Her appalled mother tells her what happened to her is not rape. “It isn’t rape when someone takes the right to touch my body?” she asks. “Even if you press charges, it will be a public record, and your father’s position does not permit such a thing.” Her father’s honor takes precedence over her rights. In parallel, since the sheikh is also incapable of seeing the transgression against Nelly’s body, the officer only sees her as belonging to her fiancé, and Ahmed, to her parents, who are also concerned about their reputation if she takes her case to court, it becomes apparent that a woman’s body is not her own to “sully.” In an economy of patriarchal exchange, women’s claims over their (violated) bodies are considered superfluous, secondary to their families’ social position and honor, since “Filial relations rests with the name and not with the flesh” (237).¹²⁴ Thus, the taxonomy of a whole society fails to provide a description, identification, naming, and classification of sexual harassment, other than its vehement negation. This particular female experience is thereby circumscribed by a linguistically misconstrued reality and the unspeakable, and foregrounds the vulnerability and shaming of the female body.

What becomes of an experience one cannot define, or is not allowed to define? When sexual harassment becomes an unspeakable and unspoken act, how does the female body internalize, recognize and come to terms with an experience that is ineffable? Language here fails to account for female corporeality as words no longer carry the weight of their meanings, and women cannot identify with how their experience is defined by others. And while meaning dissipates, the body is weighted down by its inexpressible affliction. The sexually harassed body is outside of language, and without language, the mind is conflicted between the external reality and internal assimilation.

After her terrible experience, Seba organizes a self-defense workshop for women, during which she asks the attendees to answer three questions on paper: Have you been harassed? How

¹²⁴ Kristeva, Julia. *Tales of Love*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1987.

many times? How did you react? Even though her class is always filled to capacity, which the audience is privy to through a bird eye shot (Figures 2.8-2.9), none of the women admit they were sexually harassed. Even Fayza, who attends the class five weeks in a row, denies it each time.

- SEBA: If you go to the doctor for a stomach ache, but don't tell him where it hurts, he can't help you.

- FAYZA: But a stomach ache is nothing to be ashamed of.

- SEBA: And sexual harassment is nothing to be ashamed of. The one who should be ashamed is the animal who did this to you.

As Seba presses Fayza to say the words, "I have been harassed," Fayza still refuses to admit anything happened to her. A frustrated Seba pulls a pin from Fayza's veil and tells her: "If you just want to defend yourself you can do it with this. Don't come again, I have nothing to teach you." This exchange anticipates Seba and Fayza's tumultuous relationship, and their reactions to their circumstances: where they diverge, converge, diverge again, to ultimately reach an understanding. The pin becomes a significant weapon in Fayza's fight. However, she is at first defensive about being harassed, as much as Seba is when she creates self-defense classes.



Figure 2.8



Figure 2.9

Fayza's denial eloquently translates the internal repressive mechanism of a victim, as she struggles emotionally, mentally, and often physically, to come to terms with her traumatic experience. Women are ashamed to admit what happened to them, thereby reflecting the way society, and mostly men, look at them: they redirect society's gaze towards themselves. Thus, the linguistic erasure and abstraction of her experience and her body is internalized by each victim differently, and is transformed into a subjective denial, as women fail to accept and recognize it. The familiarity of the words spoken are dissonant, and since they no longer conform to the reality others perceive, they eventually transform a woman's own perception of her traumatic reality. The words Fayza needs to speak aloud, to acknowledge, are words that have the potential to taint the purity of her body, a purity that she has been socialized to maintain and express. As a veiled woman, her piety and her corporeal existence should reflect this purity. The admission of sexual harassment produces her sexualized body, one that she keeps sacred and shielded from society's gaze by adopting the veil. Fayza is unwilling to utter the words because they make her improper, unclean, which does not align with how she views herself. The linguistic erasure enforced by society is thus transformed into an internal erasure: the social denial of the female body and its experience is internalized as a disavowal of the self and its corporeality. Fayza eats a raw onion every night so her husband does not touch her, and after her mob assault, Seba also refuses to touch her husband, but her defensive mechanism is to project a stronger corporeality, through learning to defend herself (hence, her self-defense classes).

On the other hand, when Nelly acknowledges her violation on national TV and is subsequently made to feel improper and out of her place (a place that is dictated by a patriarchal society, enacted through the voice of the parents), she struggles to confront those shaming practices. Both Fayza and Seba reenact their shame after their physical violation, albeit through

two opposing manners, at first. They are made to feel aware of their difference as sexual difference, and are reduced to it. Shame here is a learned, reactive response to the other's negation, and it is internalized especially when confronted with the social and legal mechanisms of repressive and normative coercion. Women are thus robbed of their agency, of the linguistic power to name and define behaviors that are detrimental to their corporeal existence and subjectivity. Shame ultimately becomes the tangible manifestation of the denial of women's experience of sexual harassment, because of the physical signs of shame, such as averted eyes, flushed cheeks, etc. Fayza bears the marks on her face in the bus (Figure 2.10), and Seba



Figure 2.10

recognizes the signs when she sees her, as she does in all the women who attend her workshop. Shame provides them with the process to cope with society's denial, but the desire to forget, is overwhelming for a dejected subject. This sense of dejection

and the marks of shame betray their need to be heard. Seba and Fayza recognize in each other the need to validate their experience, to recognize the harm done to them, physically and mentally. As the film traces the women's journey, we witness our female protagonists oscillating between shame and guilt. Facing society's prohibitive discourse and inability to handle sexual harassment cases, they look for means to confront the surrounding passivity. Seba, Fayza and Nelly are not idle victims and do not see themselves as such. On the contrary, they become proactive, and transform their perceived passive experience into an active reaction. They were each attacked simply for being women, whether veiled or not, pious or not, regardless of their outfits, as Nelly

notes. However, before seeking restoration and retribution, they face society's shaming of the female body, at once abstracted and sexualized through sexual harassment.

The denial of female corporeality is not only manifested through a voluntary rejection of desire—an internalized erasure of femininity—as evidenced by Fayza and Seba rejecting their respective husbands, but the film adds another layer, in the guise of an involuntary erasure, almost fateful, albeit, in the arrangement of the plot, not unexpected. Before her attack, Seba finds out she is pregnant, but she never gets the chance to share the news with her husband. After her assault, they become estranged, since he is unable to cope with her violated body. She refuses to tell him about his pregnancy, and even threatens to kill herself if someone from her family tells him. She admits that she no longer wants his child. By refusing her violated body and wounded self, her husband in fact betrays her: he withdraws his support at her most vulnerable. When Seba has a miscarriage, her choice is, in a way, made for her. Rejecting the wife becomes rejecting the (potential) mother. The two functions are inextricably linked in one body, the female body. The lived body, marked by sexual harassment, is the body that carries the whole of feminine experience. Denying one part is denying the whole.

The delegitimized body, the one muted by the shattering violence of privation and shaming, confined within the limits of a filial structure to which the flesh is invisible, forms the female experience of abjection. “What is abject. . . . the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses” (2).¹²⁵ The abjected subject carries the burden that society inscribes, or refuses to inscribe. Women are made to wear this abjection and disappear, ellipses in social discourse, their existence is omitted, trailing off into shameful silence. Their bodies come into being in between extended pauses and outraged gasps. The

¹²⁵ Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

danger is that these external and internal erasures are detrimental to the formation of female subjectivity. Fayza, Nelly, and Seba run the risk of fading into inchoate entities, especially since their vulnerability is so visible in public spaces. They cannot dwell in the streets, they cannot just *be*.

In *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, Butler recognizes the paradox of subjection, that in order to become a subject, one has to subject oneself to the rules that govern social existence, namely language. Women are not only struggling through the grammatical erasure of the feminine subject in colloquial Egyptian, as explored in the previous chapter, they are also confronted with a semantic impasse to define their own experiences in the world. This paradox of subjection becomes a double negation of the subject. Women are suffering through an epistemic, as well as a physical, violence. If words are denied to a woman to describe her experience, then she cannot imagine her life, or she can only imagine it in states of shame and degradation, as Butler says. “I may feel that without some recognizability I cannot live. But I may also feel that the terms by which I am recognized make life unlivable. This is the juncture from which critique emerges, where critique is understood as an interrogation of the terms by which life is constrained in order to open up the possibility of different modes of living” (4).¹²⁶ *Cairo 678* precisely offers such a critique, as it reveals how Fayza, Seba and Nelly navigate the discursive lacuna, the social stigma, and female subjectivity and agency, to produce a threshold to enter into being, to disrupt these regulative inscriptions on their bodies, identities, and subjection. How can women subvert the social norms that constrain their mobility? How can they reconfigure and imagine a mode of living that does not repeatedly articulate their punitive embodiment?

In a revealing scene, Fayza tries different outfits and keeps looking at her reflection in the

¹²⁶ Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender*. New York; London: Routledge, 2004.

mirror. Her choice of modesty, namely wearing the veil, “does not declare women’s place to be in the home, but on the contrary, legitimizes their presence outside,” as Leila Ahmed writes in *Women and Gender in Islam* (224).¹²⁷ The veil is, in this sense, not a retreat into the private; on the contrary, it is a sartorial choice that affirms women’s entry into public spaces. Fayza believes that she should be able to move outside her home, in public, with impunity. Frustrated, she knows that regardless of her outfit, she will inevitably be confronted with sexual harassment, whether she takes the bus, a taxi, or simply walks. However, Fayza refuses to be victimized, and when, standing in the crowded bus, a man stands behind her and rubs himself on her, she pricks him in the groin with a pin from her veil. The man makes a scene on the bus, screaming that he did nothing to her, “it’s not like she got babies from me, we’re all crammed together in the bus, standing respectfully.” He starts calling her crazy, even though she says that that next time she’ll poke his eyes out. Nevertheless, when asked why she had pricked him, and under the weight of his accusations, she remains silent, and, eyes lowered, she eventually gets off the bus.

Even if she feels her actions are justified, the man’s words engulf her: his righteousness overtakes her (silent) justification, because she cannot express out loud her reasons. In another scene, as she is walking in the street, a young man comes from behind and grabs her. She turns around and stabs him in the groin: he doubles in pain and falls to the ground. The victim becomes the aggressor. Fayza fashions from her veil, which is supposed to protect her from the threatening male gaze, a weapon to defend herself against her harasser. She goes to Seba and confides in her, knowing that she will not condemn her actions, because she understands. Some blood from her victim was transferred on her dress, so Seba gives her a short, sexy dress, that she wears on top to cover the stains. When asked how she feels, Fayza replies: “I feel like I took justice in my own hands.” Her pin becomes a symbol of some equality, where she feels that she

¹²⁷ Ahmed, Leila. *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*. 1992.

can respond to an assault, instead of fading into painful silence. This sense of restorative justice gives her some security as she ventures into public spaces. A sympathetic Seba creates a sharp metal necklace for Fayza, so she can use it as a potential weapon to ward off attackers. The necklace becomes thus a weapon of opportunity instead of a weapon of intent. Fayza's actions, however, come at a price: the fear of being arrested. Because as the aggressor, she is now the offender.

Fayza's offensive behavior escalates, as she starts stabbing men who harass other women on the bus. Seba is appalled at her actions, as she realizes that Fayza's action this time is no longer a reaction: it is premeditated since she gets on the bus knowing exactly what she is planning to do. In a panicked frenzy, Seba calls her crazy, but takes it back, and Fayza cannot help wondering if indeed she is: "Every day I take the bus, and every day I experience this dirty thing. Every day. How do you want me to be sane?" Without naming the act, she finally acknowledges that she is harassed, something she had adamantly refused to do in her first meetings with Seba. She recognizes her victimhood only once she becomes the aggressor, because it simultaneously allows her to overcome her victimization. She is no just defending herself anymore, she becomes the avenger. Because in her mind, and her words, the man who does something like this to a woman deserve it, since "if he himself finds out that his sister, wife or his daughter was harassed, he'd say the man deserves it." Seba had originally encouraged Fayza to defend herself, and ultimately in this scene, Fayza is seeking moral justification from Seba.

On the other hand, Seba herself chooses a different avenue to fight her fear, and to overcome her assault. She finds empowerment in providing self-defense classes for women. During her class, she repeats the words: "I am not a victim." The sexual aggressor looks for a

weak woman, a silent one who will not talk. Being able to defend herself, a woman counters the expected silence that surrounds sexual harassment. Since her class is always filled, it proves that there is indeed a void in society that she is filling. Moreover, she appears on TV to talk about her initiative, which is how Fayza first finds out about it. The space she uses for her class is in a cultural center called El Sawy Cultural Center, the same place where Nelly and her fiancé perform their standup comedies. Seba is thereby one of the threads that ties the three narratives together. Eventually, Seba's sense of empowerment allows her to reject her husband after he refuses to stand by her and support her when she needed him. When he tries to reconcile with her, she tells him that she can now protect herself.

- SEBA: You're late. I don't want you.

- SHERIF: It's not true, if you didn't want me, you would have asked for a divorce.

By the end of the film, Seba cannot forgive Sherif for his denial and rejection, and she does ask for a divorce. She may not have exacted justice against the mob that attacked her, precisely because it was a mass of anonymous and faceless men, but she attempts to overcome her ordeal through a morally acceptable solution, by being self-reliant.

In parallel, Nelly struggles, against all odds, to pursue justice through legal procedure. While it is possible for her because she manages to catch the man who assaulted her, the criminal justice system regarding sexual harassment has its shortcoming. Since it makes her case public, she is faced with the shaming discourse, both at the level of the administration, and of her family. Before her harassment on the street, working as a telemarketer, she was also subjected to salacious suggestions from her male customers. And when, disgusted, she hangs up, her (male) boss commands her to always let the customer speak, no matter what he says. Her constant

objectification for merely having a female voice, is what pushes her to chase her assailant, both in the streets and through the legal system. However, Nelly finds herself not only facing a society that negates her experience, but her own family and her future family-in-law as well, who are concerned with the moral and social repercussions of her publicized assault. Her fiancé, Omar, encourages her to pursue legal action. Because he loves her, he compromised his career as a comedian, taking a banking job, so her parents would not oppose their marriage, since he has to have the means to provide for their daughter. However, both his and her parents voice their objection about her case: There are rumors that Nelly is a spy sent to infiltrate society to ruin Egypt's reputation. "I either shut up or I'm ruining Egypt's reputation," she cries. Her loyalties to her own country come into question, her accusations against sexual harassment transform into an attack on the nation's honor.

She can either accept her status as a crimeless victim, trailing in the silent shadows, or she is a traitor to society. If she wants to break the moral and social imperative of silence, she must defend herself against conspiratorial accusations, because society relegates female experience of sexual harassment to an urban myth. Since no women officially complain, as Ahmed tells her during her TV appearance, she must be imagining this, or else, it's an isolated incident. Nelly however, wants to stand up to this behavior and the social attitudes that revolve around it. She decides to shut people off, including her mother, because she refuses to care what others think, and wants to base her decision about whether to pursue legal action on her own judgment. And yet, her steadfast resolve is shaken, during the unfolding of the plot, especially when she is confronted with Fayza's actions of restorative justice.

While the three women are united in their shared experience, they are separated by their ideologies and the way they choose to fight against their socially ascribed modes of being. Fayza

opts for the personal offensive response, Nelly pursues legal means, and Seba learns how to defend herself. These three responses are indicative of their socio-economic and personal differences, and the circumstances of each harassment. Nelly is the only one who *can* pursue legal action, since she caught her aggressor; but she is also, as a comedian, trying to break into a male-dominated world. Her pursuit is in line with her character, as she is giving access to women to a process from which they were excluded. Fayza's modest economic status affords her limited means for transportation, and her use of the pin from her veil to defend herself is very symbolic, since it is precisely the veil that is supposed to protect her from predatory males. Finally, Seba achieves a sense of self-reliance that excludes her husband, who excluded and rejected her after her attack. She needs that feeling of autonomy from her husband. These differences ultimately prove significant and fundamental to the dynamics between the three women.

While Seba accuses Fayza of being crazy for stabbing men in the groin, Nelly discovers that Fayza's way is creating a social ripple effect that is more heightened than her own pursuit of justice. Fayza's actions are pivotal in demonstrating society's response to female victimhood and women's internalization of victimhood. Have they done something to provoke such attacks? Is it what they wear, as Fayza reflects? Women bear a sense of guilt and self-blame, and they question their own actions, and sometimes their sanity, as Fayza and Seba do. The lines between right and wrong are blurred, as the three women feel trapped between society's rejection, the social response to a restorative justice that reduces the offenders to victims, and the knowledge that their plights are no longer invisible.

The stabbing of men in buses catches the media's attention, as well as the police: the world around them has started paying attention. A YouTube video discusses "the phenomenon of stabbing sexual harassers," and men are keeping their distance from women. While men are

afraid of taking buses, women are agreeing that the offenders deserve it. Fayza's actions bring the issue of sexual harassment into the limelight. It no longer is an urban myth. However, this alternative search for justice has victimized men, and made her a criminal, sought by the police. Fayza may be eschewing the social shaming associated with her status as a victim, but her actions are morally questionable. On the path to renegotiate their urban citizenship, to exercise their mobility in the city, to affirm their female corporeality in public space—to ultimately protect themselves and feel safe—the women find themselves on the wrong side of the law. They go from being victims to criminals, as their intentions become harmful. But that's when society is finally paying attention to them

The first time Nelly and Fayza meet, the former goes to Fayza at her job, and asks her to draft a power of attorney to Seba. Fayza recognizes Nelly from the television, and Seba's name. In the following shot, Fayza faces Nelly and Seba: she is furious that Seba told Nelly about Fayza's criminal actions, especially since she knows that the police interrogated Seba about the crime. Despite Nelly's reassurance, Fayza remains frantic, claiming she does not even know Nelly.

- NELLY: You do. Seba told me you were Buthayna who called me on air.

- FAYZA: I don't know any Buthayna, my name is Fayza. I don't know you and I don't know her either.

- SEBA: Calm down Fayza, I really told no one else. This is the girl who is filing a legal suit. Didn't you tell me you admired her? She told me she admired the person who was stabbing these dogs in the buses.

- FAYZA: (to Seba) This won't fly with me at all. And for your information, if I get arrested, I will say that you incited me to do this. (To Nelly) Nice meeting you.

I don't want to see you either of you again. I have a son and a daughter that I would like to bring up.

- NELLY: Don't you realize what you have done Fayza? The world has changed. People are forgetting what is happening to us. If another ten days go by without another stabbing... Fayza, I have to drop my lawsuit against my will.

- FAYZA: Do you want me to stab another guy so you feel safe, and I get screwed?

- NELLY: No, Fayza, we want to do what you do.

- SEBA: Fayza, understand. People don't want us to do as she (Nelly) did. The only solution is to act like you.

This exchange portrays how, as the media frenzy dwindles, the two women are worried the status quo will be restored: men are letting their guards down, preparing for more offenses, and most importantly, all women will be victims again. Fayza's actions have empowered women and given voice to their painful and discredited whispers. Nelly is unable to hold her legal ground in the face of all the objections and accusations. Fayza's way seems more successful than Nelly's tenuous path. They have to find the means to renew society's attention and men's vigilance. Vigilante justice has gained a momentum they do not want to lose. It has however, rendered Fayza more alert, afraid, and defensive (as well as offensive). She does finally concede.

They try to renew their efforts, but since the buses are under surveillance and sexual harassment is everywhere, Seba suggests a crowded and perfect place to find a male perpetrator: a football match. Zambia and Egypt are playing, and the stadium will be filled to capacity. As they eye the buzzing crowd, Nelly and Seba point out to a young man, standing behind a woman. They are bewildered when Fayza says not him. "Isn't it crowded enough?" When she remarks

that he is not a harasser, they wonder how she knows. “If he were, he would be standing, focusing on one particular point. And he’d hover around her to see if someone is watching him. This one’s standing, neither worrying nor hovering. Just a guy standing,” she admits resignedly. In her universe of perpetual humiliation, she has learned to recognize the signs of a sexual offender, the look in his eyes, his stance. This young man has permission to stand close to this woman. Meanwhile the detective in charge of the cases of the male victims, figures out the connection between the women, despite the lack of evidence: at the police station, he menacingly tells them to stop their attacks. From there on, the women feel exposed, and are afraid of being seen together. They go their separate ways, in an attempt to resume their “normal” lives.

However, normal life includes daily harassment, and the cycle of violation starts again. A young boy slaps Seba on her buttocks, as she is leaving work. A crowd stops him only because she screams “thief.” The boy maintains that he is not a thief, but she starts beating him, until the people implore her to stop. In her eyes, he is a thief: he had taken liberties on her body that she had not given him the right to. But thief is also the one word she can say out loud that would garner people’s support. As she is beating him, the camera starts with a close up on the boy and eventually pans out, revealing Seba holding the boy by his clothes and the men surrounding her: she has become the offender. In another scene, Fayza is approached on the street by another man, who starts catcalling and singing to her. As she turns around hitting him with her bag, she discovers it’s Adel, her husband. He brought her a red flower, and is attempting to romance her. He had seen a nice sexy nightgown in her wardrobe, and had assumed she was trying to seduce him. That nightgown is the dress Seba had given her to cover the stains from the blood of the man she had previously stabbed. Fayza says the price of the dress is too high, and she can’t afford it so she’s returning it. Adel apologizes for having said he only married her for sex. “You

can't pleasure yourself anymore, so you come to me?," she asks him. As they go their separate ways, a world of miscommunication between them, the camera comes back to a shot of the flower on the ground, its petals scattered (Figure 2.11). Adel's apology and attempt to reconcile with his wife are meted out with her defensive attitude and her disgust at men's sexual behavior, which she transposes onto her husband. Her attitude is inexplicable to Adel. The image of the flower on the ground emphasizes the break in their relationship. In



Figure 2.11

parallel, at work, Nelly is making a marketing call to a potential male client. Her boss listens in to ensure that she behaves properly. When she asks the client if he has five minutes to talk to her, he replies suggestively that he does not, but that he has something else for her. Her boss signals her to engage with the man on the line.

- CLIENT: Why are you silent, are you shy?
- NELLY: No, I'm taking down your number, so I can get your address, and bring you the card myself, she says.
- CLIENT: Really?
- NELLY: Yes, and that other thing that you are so proud of, I'll come and cut it off for you.

He hangs up, promptly, and her boss is appalled at her actions. Nelly flippantly replies that he told her to wait until the client hangs up. "Well, he hung up." In the following shot, as she is rushing down the office stairs, Nelly is taking off her engagement ring, and the sound of the dial tone follows her until she gets in the car with Omar. We assume that she has been fired from her

job. Nelly can no longer conform to the image of the docile woman, at the expense of her job and maybe even her relationship.

The three protagonists, frustrated and unable to go about their daily lives without being harassed, transform their defensiveness into offense: even without their recourse to physical attacks on men, their adversarial behavior is still perceived as inappropriate, and divisive. Seba is filled with self-condemnation, as she has a nightmare about beating the boy. Fayza has become so defensive and paranoid, she does not even recognize her husband's voice. Nelly feels that she can either drop her case, or lose her fiancé. Facing the consequences of whichever (re)action they decide to take, and the fact that regardless of their decision they are still confined, each woman feels an unavoidable sense of loss in the burdensome aftermath. And yet, what remains unchanging is the fear that their unrecognized plight will fade into oblivion.

Seba, Fayza, and Nelly meet again and discuss the moral ambiguity of vengeful justice. Seba feels that as they break the law, they are becoming compromised subjects. Fighting a wrong with another wrong is not an appropriate response, especially as she finds herself plagued with nightmares. Her cathected energies have taken on psychosomatic symptoms, which she refuses. However, her position is revealed only when Nelly, showing them a small blade, confesses that she has decided to adopt Fayza's way. She feels defeated in her path, because whichever option she chooses, dropping her suit or breaking up, she is losing something valuable to her. And when Fayza frantically asks her if she wants to end up in prison, Nelly replies that she is already in prison. "Nothing has changed." Faced with the bleak and inevitable reality that society is reverting back to its denial of their experience, she offers herself as the sacrificial lamb, intending to claim full responsibility for all previous stabbings as well. Seba, trying to discourage her, is more resigned in her reasoning, claiming that it is not important: the frenzy passes, and the

expected calm after any storm restores the troubling status quo. Fayza is livid when she hears Seba's words. "You never told *me* it's not important:" she calls her out on her hypocrisy, and using an Egyptian proverb, points out to the fact that her double-standards are similar to the state's corruption, insofar as it targets poor people and not wealthy ones, because those are socially more connected. Seba admits she was wrong.

- SEBA: I was blinded by what happened to me.

- NELLY: It's over. I will continue it.

- SEBA: No, you won't continue anything. What we did was wrong. It's wrong to try and correct a wrong with another one. Or we will be like them. You [pointing to Nelly] are not like this, and I am not either.

- FAYZA: And I am?

- SEBA: Don't you feel anything bothering you? That you did something wrong?

- FAYZA: No.

- SEBA: Can you sleep?

- FAYZA: You want to say now that I'm the abnormal one.

- SEBA: No one in their right frame of mind who would do something like this and feel fine.

- FAYZA: There is. If one doesn't feel guilty.

- NELLY: What guilt?

Fayza accuses Seba of wearing provocative clothes, too revealing and short: case in point, her husband thought the dress she had given her to cover the blood stains from her crime, was a nightgown. She then mentions her unveiled hair, the fact that she lives alone, with no one asking her whereabouts. "How are your parents letting you live like this, I don't understand." And when

Nelly asks about Fayza's explanation for Nelly's guilt, Fayza points to her coming and going with her fiancé, and that no one, including her parents, are monitoring her activities.

- FAYZA: You made men think that all women are like you, and in the end, people like me pay the price. Us, who walk next to the wall, so no one looks at us.

- NELLY: What happened to you is my fault, Fayza?

- SEBA: It's not your fault, it's hers [pointing at Fayza] and her backward ideas that brought us to this point. . . . People used to wear short clothes in the past, and this didn't happen.

- FAYZA: Because they could get married, not because nudity taught them virtue.

Fayza further wonders why Seba tells people to do things she does not. Giving her back the necklace Seba had made for her, she notices that she never wears copper jewelry. "So not one dog can look at me," Seba angrily replies. Fayza finally remarks before leaving: "Maybe you should have covered your hair, and stopped wearing tight clothes. You know, if you didn't feel guilt, you would have been able to do what I did. But you can never be like me. Because you know for sure you are wrong."

In this heated conversation, self-blame becomes accusations. Fayza's attempts to make the world around her intelligible are venomous. She adopts a sense of moral superiority, relying heavily on the fact that she adopts the more traditional, conservative and modest Islamic dress. By the end of the exchange, she is standing on the stairs, looking down at the other two women. The *mise-en-scène* reveals the upward looks of Seba and Nelly, and Fayza's lowered one (Figures 2.12-2.13). Diab thus concretizes her sense of superiority, and the rift between the two sides. Fayza carries within her the nagging doubt that some women have contributed to this punitive environment that she must venture in daily. The social normalization of such perverse



Figure 2.12



Figure 2.13

behavior perpetrated by men must undoubtedly mean that women are to blame. And if not herself, then other women. Seba and Nelly are more westernized in their lifestyles, dress codes and even aspirations. Let's remember that Fayza is a government employee, Nelly an aspiring standup comedian, and Seba a jewelry designer.

Modernity and tradition clash: women's corporeality is the site of contestation between Westernized and traditional ideals. Audre Lorde writes in "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women

Redefining Difference," that those who are oppressed, those outside of the "mythical norm" in which power resides, "often identify one way in which we are different, and we assume that to be the primary cause of all oppression, forgetting other distortions around difference, some of which we ourselves may be practicing. . . . There is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word 'sisterhood' that does not in fact exist" (375).¹²⁸ Their experiences of sexual harassment do not make them identical, even if those experiences are silenced or misnamed: "the need for unity is often misnamed as a need for homogeneity" (377).¹²⁹ Their seemingly uniform reaction against society's blindness does not reflect a homogeneous treatment of women or a homogeneous female reaction to sexual harassment. A schism finally appears.

¹²⁸ Lorde, Audre. "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference." McClintock, Anne, Aamir Mufti and Ella Shohat, eds. *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. 374-380.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

Coming from different classes, their navigation of public space is worlds apart: Seba has a car, Fayza suffers through public transportation; Fayza is veiled, the other two are not. The antagonistic behavior against women in general does not reduce women to a monolithic entity. Far from it, it reveals their disparate mentalities, including how they view each other. Lorde mentions how Paulo Freire's *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* shows that

the true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations that we seek to escape but that piece of the oppressor that is planted deep within each of us and that know only the oppressor's tactics, the oppressor's relationships. (380)¹³⁰

Fayza's oppression is such that she is incapable of looking at the other two women without seeing see what men see: she has internalized the masculinist gaze. Seba seems to judge her veil as a reflection of Fayza's regressive religious attitude. Fayza herself struggles in her everyday life to find the balance between her public activities and her domestic responsibilities as a mother and a wife. She feels remorseful for using the money meant for her children's tuition to pay for the cabs she takes to work to avoid the bus. Escaping her daily humiliation means compromising her role as a mother. Being ashamed of her body leads her to refuse her husband's sexual advances. Finally, she expresses her frustration in outlining her own identity by attacking Seba's and Nelly's apparently "easier" life, where they do not seem to be torn between the same choices. She imagines that their lives are not as unimaginable as hers. Their strife reflects how gender politics "relates to the perceived ability to move between the worlds of 'tradition' and modernity by exercising choice" (41).¹³¹ Fayza thereby relativizes the other two women's life, highlighting

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ Srivastava, Sanjay. "Masculinity and its Role in Gender-based Violence in Public Spaces." *The Fear That Stalks: Gender-based Violence in Public Spaces*. Pilot, Sara, and Lora Prabhu, eds. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2012. 13-50.

the same prohibitions (or lack thereof) that dictate the three women's mobility and existence in society. Mernissi notes that

A harem was about private space and the rules regulating it. . . . Once you knew what was forbidden, you carried the harem within. You had it in your head, “inscribed under your forehead and under your skin.” That idea of an invisible harem, a law tattooed in the mind, was frightfully unsettling to me. (61-2)¹³²

This is the harem in Fayza's head, the inescapable law tattooed in her mind. It is invisible to her, as well as Seba and Nelly, for the three are trapped within the external/social/masculinist formation of woman as the Other. And it is indeed “frightfully unsettling,” since it dislocates their own sense of identity and inhibits them from recognizing the same in the other, as much as the other in the same.

In response to Fayza's accusations, Seba cuts her hair. The scene is constructed so there are two reflections, and Seba standing with her back to the camera (Figure 2.14). These three images would correspond to three different perceptions and representations of



Figure 2.14

herself: how she is, how she sees herself, and how others view her. She carries a knife to prove to herself and Fayza that she does not feel guilt or remorse, and that she can definitely stab a man. Her actions would thereby attest to the fact that she did not do anything morally wrong. After stabbing in the groin a man who harassed her on the bus, she turns herself in to the police. The detective, who by then has become much more sympathetic to the women's circumstances, says: “Go and wash up, and talk to the media in the calmest of voices. I don't want them to say you're

¹³² Mernissi, 1994.

crazy. If they do, everything you're doing will be in vain." She refuses to talk to anyone, because she did not commit this crime for publicity, but to gain a sense of self-affirmation, to disavow Fayza's accusations. However, since there are no official complaints filed by any men, the detective lets her go free. While she feels that her actions are morally justified, like Fayza, she is left facing the part of her that believes she did do something wrong, at least legally. "I've become a criminal like them." In her attempt to deny Fayza's reasoning, Seba betrays her own principles.

In parallel, Fayza learns the truth in Seba's and Nelly's words, when she discovers the fallacy of her own reasoning. On the bus, ready for another attack, Fayza sees one of her female colleague from work, and a man standing behind her. She realizes that the man is rubbing himself against her, and she is letting him. Fayza is incredulous (Figure 2.15), drops the knife she was carrying, and hurriedly leaves the bus.

Her colleague sees her on the street from the window, and averts her eyes in shame, somehow confirming that she enjoys this clandestine encounter, an encounter that in fact terrorizes Fayza. She comes to the implausible



Figure 2.15

understanding that "women like her," ones who are veiled, like her work colleague, are pretending to be respectable and pious: they are welcoming, and maybe even encouraging those types of advances. Not the women who are different than her, like Seba and Nelly. When she later finds out that her husband has been stabbed in the groin: reality hits her even harder: "You too, Adel? Get married again, divorce me, but don't touch a woman against her will." The man

closest to her is one of those “dogs,” “those animals,” that perpetuate women’s terror. These two realizations disprove her righteous indignation at Nelly and Seba.

Following her confrontation with her husband, Fayza goes to her children’s school: they have been suspended because tuition has not been paid. Fayza protests this decision and punishes herself: she stands in the middle of the school yard, and facing the wall, she raises her arms, in a gesture similar to a child’s time out (Figure 2.16). This self-punishment is Fayza’s stand against society’s incessant punitive behavior towards women. She demands that the school never punishes her children again. Reenacting this infantilizing process, she in fact rejects it, by being its agent. This gesture also suggests that she is punishing herself for her own delusions.



Figure 2.16

The reality she has constructed around her to explain to herself her circumstances and justify her behavior prove to be nothing more than a self-generated illusion. While she had refused to accept the similarities between herself and the other two women, she can now apprehend sameness in difference, and difference in sameness.

Meanwhile, Nelly’s court date has finally arrived, and she has decided to drop her suit, giving in to the pressure around her. However, when the judge asks her what her intentions are, Omar gets up and screams that she will not drop the case. Nelly repeats then that she won’t. Even her mother looks relieved, and the courts explodes in applause. Seba, Fayza, and the detective were all attending the court session. Thus, the film offers a final, and somehow optimistic resolution to the issue. The editing between the final scenes repairs the schism that occurred between the various characters. When Seba asks Fayza if her hair looks better short, Fayza

replies: “It’s nice, but it was also nice before.” These final moments in the court restore a feeling of solidarity between the women, and a renewed awareness and understanding of similarities in differences. They all stand against the same issue: Nelly and her family, Seba, Fayza, and the detective.

Ultimately, differences must be acknowledged, they cannot be assimilated under the pretense of fighting the same fight. On the sense of solidarity that should be fostered, bell hooks writes:

to develop political solidarity between women, feminist activists cannot bond on the terms set by the dominant ideology of the culture. We must define our own terms. Rather than bond on the basis of shared victimization or in response to a false sense of a common enemy, we can bond on the basis of our commitment to a feminist movement that aims to end sexist oppression. (398)¹³³

The complexities of women’s experiences must be taken into account, “we must overcome the alienation from one another that exists when sexist socialization. . . . has not been unlearned” (400).¹³⁴ Seba, Fayza and Nelly are three different women, even if they seem to share a similar experience, it is in fact an individual one. Mapping the diversity within the unifying experience is detrimental to the cohesion and success of their struggle against society and sexual harassment. A common enemy does not automatically create a sense of support, solidarity, and sisterhood. They must unlearn the sexist socialization. And, as Trinh Minh-Ha writes in “Not You/Like You: Postcolonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference,” “Hegemony works at leveling out differences and at standardizing contexts and expectations in the smallest

¹³³ hooks, bell. “Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women.” *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*. McClintock, Anne, Aamir Mufti and Ella Shohat, eds. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. 396-412.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

details of our daily lives” (416).¹³⁵ Within their interactions, the three women are essentially reenacting the hegemonic definitions which they are at heart fighting against. Once they face the reflection that society is giving them of themselves (and other women), they are able to recognize the discordance. This dissonance is all the more pronounced as women become aggressors, instead of victims.

Society has no qualms accepting female victims drifting in the shadows of discourse, their sexed objectification trapped in a rhetoric of dishonor and shame. Stepping out of the darkness, they emerge as spies or outlaws. They are at once a threat to the normative discourse in society, and a threat to hegemonic practices, since they no longer embody the passive and compliant female body. Only when they are an affront to men’s sense of security, impunity and mobility, does the system notice these subversive shadows. As public space primarily guarantees masculine dominance, “the police reinforce patriarchal privilege and masculinist ideals” (24).¹³⁶ These female transgressions are meted out with severe pursuit, since they no longer know their appropriate place, they threaten the hegemonic subject, the male subject. The police is now looking for the one who stabs men in the groin: the perpetrator who makes them bleed.

The state ignores women’s complaints about sexual harassment, as reflected in Nelly’s interaction with the police officer. The police thus operate within the dominant discourse of property and propriety, and contribute to the linguistic erasure of female experience. “Most male police officers abase a woman complainant and sometimes even refuse to file a complaint by labelling it as ‘spurious’” (9),¹³⁷ superfluous, or simply inappropriate. When the detective finally

¹³⁵ Minh-Ha, Trinh. “Not You/Like You: Postcolonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference.” *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*. McClintock, Anne, Aamir Mufti and Ella Shohat, eds. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. 415-419.

¹³⁶ Srivastava, 2012.

¹³⁷ Bhattacharyya, Rituparna. “Understanding the Spatialities of Sexual Assault Against Indian Women in India.” *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* (2014): 1-17.

gathers the three women at the station, he angrily tells them that he has more important issues to handle than their inane concerns. The state thus fails to safeguard women's rights, and reinforces their constraints. "The State plays a key part in determining the nature and extent of women's liberation—whether by restricting women's lives through legislation or failing to intervene in situations of sexual discrimination" (11).¹³⁸ When it comes to handling violence against women in public spaces, the laws on harassment are "vague and unenforced" and "do not protect women" (Rizzo 463),¹³⁹ and the state has "a cultural legacy of tolerating negative male behavior and a social tradition of blaming the victim" (464):¹⁴⁰ hence harassment often goes unreported to the authorities. Not only does *Cairo 678* demonstrate the state's ineptitude and unwillingness to handle sexual harassment cases, but it exposes its inherent sexism, since the state intervenes only when the crime is committed against men.

When the detective is called to the scene of the first incident in the bus, he is in his car with his pregnant wife, Magda, who is in labor in the back seat. Magda says that giving birth to girls is always hard. He replies that no one in his family has daughters. The film shows us that the detective is not a father to daughters, and does not have sisters. He operates in a universe solely ruled by men. Upon seeing the blood stain on the bus floor, he orders that a police informer be present in every bus (which is factually an impossible task, considering the number of buses in Cairo). The close up of the blood stain followed by the aerial shot of the night station where the buses park put the impossible task and the looming threat in perspective (Figures 2.17-2.18). When the detective starts his investigation, the first male at the hospital pretends he does not know why he was stabbed in the groin. However, after another male victim, Maher, is

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ Rizzo, Helen, Anne M. Price, and Katherine Meyer. "Anti-sexual Harassment Campaign in Egypt." *Mobilization*. 17.4 (2012): 457-475.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

brought to the hospital with the same injury, the detective becomes suspicious about the significance of the wound, and asks them if they were harassing women on the bus. The men



Figure 2.17



Figure 2.18

deny it, playing the victims. Upon inspecting Maher's clothes, besides the stain in the groin area, the detective finds a lemon in the pocket. Maher says, "Maybe I was buying groceries for my wife." Only once the detective threatens to tell his wife, is the man more truthful. The cop asks him if he does the "lemon test," where a man puts a lemon in his pocket and rubs himself against a woman. If she says nothing, he continues the motion until he relieves himself. If she gives him dirty looks, he shows her the lemon, saying that he must have forgotten it when he bought the groceries. The detective is not concerned with the issue of harassment, as long as he does not have an official complaint. All he wants to know is whether it is the reason he was assaulted. Since now the issue has gained the media's attention, and with Seba's defense class being televised, the detective goes to her and asks if she might have noticed a woman in her class acting suspicious. His attitude completely disregards the reason women are taking the class in the first place, and inherently disavows the ubiquitous experience of sexual harassment.

By then, the man on the street has been stabbed, and the detective asks him if he saw her face. He did not. "How come you didn't see her face? Can you hit on a woman without seeing her face?" The young man replies: "I don't care about her face." His response further confirms

the objectification of the female body, a faceless mass, shot in shadows. Since his investigation started, the detective has ascertained that Seba, Fayza and Nelly know each other. The police had raided Seba's class, looking for clues in the papers women use to write their answers. At the station, when he arrests them after the football match, he threatens them, telling them he has no time to invest in catching them red-handed, but that they would get a life sentence. He does not want to deal with women's rights group, who would just give them a heroic status, or other vigilante women who would start acting the same, "like Batman, like you." He is not sympathetic at all to their cause, and wants the victimization of men to stop. He ultimately believes that there is nothing to be restored through their restorative justice. It is nothing but absurdity.

However, everything changes for the detective when, busy with his investigation, he misses his wife's delivery. At the hospital, he finds out that his wife died in labor. Later at home, as his mother-in-law is handing him the newborn, she asks him "what are you going name her?" "Her?" He had not even realized that he now has a daughter. His new sense of fatherhood considerably changes his attitude toward Fayza, Seba and Nelly. When Seba turns herself in, he lets her go, and is more understanding of her plight. He additionally refuses to let her be called "crazy," as he asks her to freshen up and fix her disheveled appearance. Finally, his presence at Nelly's trial confirms his support for their cause. This change of heart suggests is laden with a sense of romanticism, suggesting the idealization of the role of the father (of daughters), significantly reinforcing the patriarchal notion that he now knows that women, hence daughters, should be safeguarded. This idealized change in attitude rearticulates "patriarchal and masculinist notions of 'protecting' women (and hence men's honour)" (37):¹⁴¹ the patriarchal

¹⁴¹ Srivastava, 2012.

voice returns in the guise of an ally. The state ultimately normalizes and regulates social discourse, and maintains the power structure that already exists.

“Violence is a weapon for subordinating women. As long as the present system of domination [is] maintained and juridical and social inequality continues, both men and State will feel legitimated to pursue violence against women” (2).¹⁴² The state’s role in perpetuating sexual harassment has been heavily criticized. In “Turning the Gendered Politics of the Security State Inside Out?: Charging the Police with Sexual Harassment in Egypt,” Paul Amar questions the role of the state in not only fostering, but in creating such an threatening environment to women.

Women who protested [against the State] were sexualized and had their respectability wiped out: not just by innuendo and accusation, but literally, by sexually assaulting them in public and by arresting them as prostitutes, registering them in court records and press accounts as sex criminals and then raping and sexually torturing them in jail (El-Nadeem Center 2004, 2006; Tisdall 2006). The aim was to render impossible the figure of the respectable, pious woman who is a legitimate protestor against the police rather than a victim protected or rescued by the police. (309)¹⁴³

The state hence is a vocal interlocutor in verbalizing “a politics of respectability” to police (311), regulating and disciplining women protestors. A female dissident of the system was categorized as a prostitute, an unrespectable woman. The state thus helped propagate the notion that women in the public sphere were not respectable and deserved injury and violence. Although he is aware

¹⁴² Ennaji, Moha, and Fatima Sadiqi. *Gender and Violence in the Middle East*. New York: Routledge, 2011.

¹⁴³ Amar, Paul. “Turning the Gendered Politics of the Security State Inside Out?: Charging the Police with Sexual Harassment in Egypt.” *International Feminist Journal of Politics*. 13.3 (2011): 299-328.

of the rise of the NGOization of women's rights, and the need to work in tandem with the government, Amar is critical, because

Concern shifted from the police and security state as the agent of sexual harassment and sexualized torture to a national problematization of the libidinal perversion of working class boys, which inscribed the international neocolonial discourse of the Arab street or Islamist mob into the fabric of class politics and police enforcement. (314)¹⁴⁴

He notes that now, "All focus must be on policing and rectifying the deviant behavior of youthful, working-class men" (317), while the role of the state has faded. Amar criticizes anti-sexual harassment campaigns for appearing as "'protests' that mobilize to demand that an authoritarian state expand its policing powers! These are protests that want more policing and enforcement and punitive sanctions" (317).¹⁴⁵ He fails to see that the demand for legitimate juridical measures against sexual harassment must come from the state and be enforced by state institutions, from police stations to the judiciary. While claiming to demand rectification of masculine behavior and the return to gallantry, he writes that

it became apparent that civil society organizations were ignoring the role of the police and the security state in the *generation* of sexualized violence, the interior and security establishments jumped on board and embraced the anti-harassment campaign enthusiastically. They sensed the chance as 'gallant, protective real men' to utilize the sexual harassment campaign, extending their prerogative power to

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

‘protectively’ detain women in public, and to round up working-class boys in ways that would degrade and depoliticize their collective aspirations. (319)¹⁴⁶

Indeed, when addressing the issue of sexual harassment in Egypt, we should not discard the role the state plays in reinforcing its securitization power, and its initial comportment against women, which invariably created impunity against the female body. “Women, however, can be oppressed and deprived of rights not just for being dissidents but merely for being women” (231).¹⁴⁷

Therefore, in order to be able to talk about sexual harassment, we have to lay down a social and legal nomenclature that foregrounds the offense against women and their bodies, and addresses the corporeal violence women suffer in public places. Because of “the long tradition of the state’s involvement in disciplining the respectability of the nation’s women” (312),¹⁴⁸ this discourse was assimilated in society.

Cairo 678 demonstrates that sexual harassment is a serious problem and not “a set of isolated incidents where individual women could be blamed for their dress, behavior, and/or being overly sensitive to so-called “harmless flirtation” (468).¹⁴⁹ It is a social epidemic, carried out by men, in public spaces. In “Youth, Gender, and the State in Cairo: Marginalized Masculinities and Contested Spaces,” Salwa Ismail asks “how gender relations, state practices of control, and construction of masculinities, as sites of power and domination, traverse one another and contribute to a state of flux that may open up possibilities for challenge and defiance on the part of differently situated subordinate subjects” (222).¹⁵⁰ She emphasizes that “state practices—themselves gendered—shape gender constructions in terms of negotiating masculinity and

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ Ahmed, 1992.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ Rizzo, 2012

¹⁵⁰ Ismail, Salwa. “Youth, Gender, and the State in Cairo: Marginalized Masculinities and Contested Spaces.” *Arab Society and Culture: An Essential Reader*. Khalaf, Samir, and Roseanne S. Khalaf, eds. London: Saqi, 2009. 223-239.

femininity” (222). The film not only follows women who are renegotiating their urban citizenship, but it also highlights the social contexts that create and perpetuate sexual harassment.

Fayza realizes her husband is a sexual offender, when she finds a lemon in his pocket, which implies that she knows the “lemon test” and may have been subjected to it. Adel is sexually frustrated since his wife denies him his conjugal rights. In a scene where he is at home, masturbating to a Haifa Wehbe video clip, a Lebanese singer renowned for being a sex symbol, his wife and daughter walk in on him, and as Adel and Fayza fight, she admits that she *cannot* sleep with him. She never confesses the reasons, but her husband berates her. He has also taken another job to increase their income, and has given up smoking and going to coffee shops to reduce their expenses. Omar, Nelly’s fiancé, has put a hold on his dreams of being an actor and a standup comedian to pursue a career in banking, one that can afford him the means to get married, and avoid his in-laws’ objection. He says he does all this because he loves Nelly. On the other hand, Sherif, a doctor, is more affluent, but his response to Seba’s assault is one that exposes his own shortcoming about being unable to protect his wife, and his imbedded belief that her body belongs to him alone. The tenets of an idealized sense of masculinity are all crumbling.

The men feel they cannot provide for their female partners, and neither can they protect them. The city is populated with disillusioned male citizens, and broken dreams. The lemon, that the sexual offenders carry in their pockets, would stand for a fear of castration in psychoanalytical terms. As a phallic symbol, it delineates a man who is lacking masculine attributes: he is socially impotent. Therefore, his way of asserting his masculinity is by affirming his sex role. In *Masculinities*, R.W. Connell notes that “True masculinity is almost always thought to proceed from men’s bodies—to be inherent in a male body or to express something

about a male body” (44).¹⁵¹ This view translates the “dominant ideology into the language of biological science, the body is a natural machine which produces gender difference” (44). The dominant ideology thus articulates sexual difference, and also produces the female body as a sexed body. Since “Masculinity is what men ought to be,” the men in the film are confronted, in fact, with what they are *not* (70).¹⁵² Moreover, Connell argues that the state “is a masculine institution,” which unsurprisingly explains how and why it reproduces gender difference in its regulation and policing practices (73).

Adopting Connell’s definition of “hegemonic masculinity” as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (77),¹⁵³ we inevitably see that *Cairo 678* articulates the failure of such masculinity. In her ethnographic fieldwork in Cairo, Ismail finds that “by virtue of their class position and their experience of subordination, young men locate themselves in the power hierarchy through constructions of masculinity that not only express their marginalized position but seek to reproduce hegemonic masculinity” (222).¹⁵⁴ As such, men not only suffer from a wound stab in the groin, but from an “injured masculinity” (222). Their wound is double: physical and mental. This sense of injury and impotency is reinforced through their daily encounters with the state. Despite the fact that the film does not portray such encounters at length, it is nonetheless crucial to know that the young men in Ismail’s research describe them “in terms of humiliation and injury” (237),¹⁵⁵ and it becomes an experience they reenact in their encounters with women through sexual harassment, where they in turn seek the humiliation and injury of

¹⁵¹ Connell, R. W. *Masculinities*. 2nd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ Ismail, 2009.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

someone else, in this case, women, whose compliance is generally guaranteed.

In addition to the internal destabilization of their ideas of masculinity, when men believe “the construction and assertion of their masculinity is articulated in terms of the preservation of the patriarchal relations of domination over women” (222),¹⁵⁶ they will react to female transgression with antagonism and corrective behavior. Ismail notes that the young men in her narratives construct an imaginary “of women as potential transgressors and as strong candidates for breaking the moral code” (230). Because women “interrogate patriarchal terms of domination” (232), the enactment of sexual transgression “bears the mark of marginalized masculinities” (231), and seeks to restore the normative discourse that regulates gender roles. Fayza, Seba, and Nelly interrogate their social confinements, challenge the linguistic erasure of their experience, and thereby they trespass, transgress, against the social status quo. After all, Fayza herself doubts the propriety of Seba’s and Nelly’s behaviors. Ultimately, *Cairo 678* portrays how both genders are confronted with respective images that no longer align with their own self-reflections. Men and women are found lacking. Where the lemon symbolizes this lack in male characters, the knife and pin the women use to stab the sexual offenders, indicate how women are filling the void with another phallic symbol, to assert their corporeality, subjection, and agency.

Since sexual harassment in Egypt specifically refers to public spaces, the city becomes the canvas on which are traced the matrices that define social behavior regarding the female body. “The city, as represented by its architecture and topography, becomes the expression of the economy, politics, and social relations which exist within it” (65).¹⁵⁷ In its streets, the powerlessness of women is reenacted, and their erasure reinforced. Urban space is a threatening space for women, as their dwelling is regularly interrupted by men transgressing against their

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ Mehrez, Samia. *Egyptian Writers between History and Fiction: Essays on Naguib Mahfouz, Sonallah Ibrahim, and Gamal Al-Ghitani*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1994.

bodies, or the thought that they will. It emphatically reminds them of their corporeal vulnerability, of the cultural inscriptions on their bodies, and the burden of the social discourse of property and propriety, that follow them like a predatory shadow. In “Bodies-Cities,” Elizabeth Grosz notes that

The city is one of the crucial factors in the social production of (sexed) corporeality: the built environment provides the context and coordinates for contemporary forms of the body. The city provides the order and organization that automatically links otherwise unrelated bodies: it is the condition and milieu in which corporeality is socially, sexually, and discursively produced. (381)¹⁵⁸

Echoing Lefebvre’s idea that social space is the space of a *mise-en-scène*, since the nature-space (*l’espace-nature*) is not (86).¹⁵⁹ For Lefebvre, nature creates, it does not produce. The opposing space, “entails, includes and conceals *social relations*” (my translation, emphasis in original, 100).¹⁶⁰ While these social relations inherent within this space are visible they are not legible (100). For Grosz, the city, “the built environment,” exhibits how these relations produce the (female) body, socially, sexually and discursively. In Diab’s film, the urban space that is Cairo, the one that is not “nature-space,” reproduces the social relations and discourse, as well as the power structures that subordinate women’s sexed corporeality. The three sexual assaults occur in public spaces, and throughout the film, women are constantly negotiating their mobility within the city. The opening scene dictates Fayza’s solitude and marginalized position, as she stands alone after her bus leaves the station. Even when she tries to escape the bus—the site of her daily violation—by taking taxis, she is all the more confronted with the pervasive reality: the cab

¹⁵⁸ Grosz, Elizabeth. “Bodies-Cities.” *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*. Price, Janet, and Shildrick, Margrit, eds. New York: Routledge, 1999. 381-387.

¹⁵⁹ Lefebvre, Henri. *La Production de L’Espace*. Paris: Anthropos, 2000.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

driver has strategically placed mirrors on his windshield, and, looking at her, he licks his lips suggestively, while lyrics of a song resonate in the car, “don’t take her seriously” (Figures 2.19-20) In response, Fayza visibly shrinks in the backseat, ashamed. Wherever she goes, she is unable to escape her objectification. Facing mirrors, she is constantly looked at, seen. Her lived space is perpetually reproduced, transformed, perverted, by someone else’s—a man’s—perceived space. Men have authority over the female body, its articulation, movements, expressions, and visibility.



Figure 2.19



Figure 2.20

This masculinist perception of a woman’s place reveals how the city becomes a realm of scopophilia. Diab directs a voyeuristic camera, that follows women’s experiences around the city. While the harassed female body has no place in social discourse and disappears, the physical body cannot escape this masculinist gaze. It is threatening, and transforms women’s dwelling in urban space to a journey of constant alertness, expected horror, and potential humiliation. Far from being a *flâneur* immersed in the text of the city, exploring its contents and wandering intoxication, women fear the devaluation and degradation of their bodies. In opposition to the cacophony of the streets of Cairo, the buzzing of the crowds and the cars, the pedestrians who seem to be going somewhere, or who are strolling, the female body is silent and immobile. Its movements are constricted, constantly threatened to be touched, to be addressed lasciviously; it dreads moving, it fears being seen.

In her analysis on sexual violence against women in India, Bhattacharyya writes that “Public spaces are those spaces where all citizens—irrespective of gender, class, sexuality, disability or any other social identity—have the right to access” (4).¹⁶¹ Women’s fear of being sexually harassed limit their interactions and mobility in public. Their practices of everyday life differ greatly from that of men’s. These coded interactions emphasize the dichotomous binary public/private, insofar as the violence is public, and the women’s traumatic experience is personal (4).¹⁶² This threatening public space does not foster a sense of belonging for women. As a matter of fact, using de Certeau’s notion of “sense of belonging,” Bhattacharyya explains that

Indian society witnesses a culture of misogyny: most public spaces lack a sense of ‘belongingness’ (de Certeau 1984) and suffer from a general animosity towards women. By the notion of ‘belonging’, de Certeau means the process of transformation of a particular space into a place through emotions and sentiment, which grow out of everyday practices of an individual. (6)¹⁶³

Since they are repeatedly and violently made to feel out of place, “women’s lack of a sense of belonging in public spaces reinforces the persistence of gender inequalities” (6).¹⁶⁴ Thus *Cairo 678* portrays how sexual harassment delineates an urban geography of power that is embedded in hegemonic patriarchy and that reflects “the ingrained misogyny of patriarchal ideology” (9).¹⁶⁵

Venturing in public spaces is meted out with degrading punishment.

¹⁶¹ Bhattacharyya, 2014.

¹⁶² “Straddling the intersection of public space, gender, women and fear signals that public spaces of India are a male domain and suffer greatly from hegemonic patriarchy and power. Culturally, Indian women are expected to attend to the inner world (private space) – household chores and childcare – whereas the outer world (public space) of ‘material interests’ is constructed by and for men. Arguably, social constructions of gender, socially expected roles, identities, attributes and social structures that largely impose these roles drive women to a marginalised position” See Bhattacharyya, 2014.

¹⁶³ Bhattacharyya, 2014.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

The city ultimately reiterates the power imbalance and violating encounters between women and their corporeal vulnerability, between the harassed body and its position outside social nomenclature. Women do not belong in the frenzy of the urban landscape: the visual contrast is flagrant (Figures 2.21-22).



Figure 2.21



Figure 2.22

The women are expected to be, and are seen as, passive. Their visibility, instead of articulating their physical presence as subjects and citizens, it further highlights how women are subjects to the meanings conveyed upon them, and not subjects in a grammatical sense. They are the objects of a reductive gaze, the camera, and discourse. Confronted by their constant abjection, constricted in their mobility, women enter a masculinized public space, one that guarantees the male as the predominant subject, and that is antagonistic to female presence. Most importantly they step into this space, knowing that violating actions are directed toward them, and they are not owners of their bodies. Consequently, they are compelled to daily negotiate this entrance into forced passivity and erasure. The city “affects the subjects’ forms of corporeal exertion—and the kind of terrain it must negotiate day-by-day” (385).¹⁶⁶ In order for abnegation not to turn into a debilitating loss of identity, in order to reclaim their subjectivity, women explore new thresholds to exert their corporeality. A young Mernissi, cloistered in a harem, dreamed of trespass. She writes:

¹⁶⁶ Grosz, 1999.

When Allah created the earth, said Father, he separated men from women, and put a sea between Muslims and Christians for a reason. Harmony exists when each group respects the prescribed limits of the other; trespassing leads only to sorrow and unhappiness. But women dreamed of trespassing all the time. The world beyond the gate was their obsession. They fantasized all day long about parading in unfamiliar streets, while the Christians kept crossing the sea, bringing death and chaos. (2)¹⁶⁷

For Mernissi, women were dreaming of stepping out of the harem, from the private world into the public. In this sense, women thus trespass into public spaces, the dangers of which are only too certain. Knowing only too well the sorrow and unhappiness they risk, they wonder what lies beyond the gates of erasure, and the horizons of non-meaning. How can they make those “unfamiliar streets” more familiar? The film reveals a disturbing polemic: by making these streets more familiar—namely by becoming the offenders and protecting themselves—women run the risk of becoming unfamiliar to themselves, as we see happen with Seba and Fayza. Their choice is to either be estranged from society, or from themselves. When they do reach a level of reconciliation—one that is never complete, but always on the verge of precipice—they do so through a process of realization, understanding and acknowledgment. But the threat of harassment remains omnipresent.

Fayza, Seba, and Nelly represent women who are learning to “situate the geometric line organizing [their] powerlessness” (3).¹⁶⁸ They confront the foreigner within, because “The foreigner comes in when the consciousness of my difference arises, and he disappears when we

¹⁶⁷ Mernissi, 1994.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

acknowledge ourselves as foreigners, unamenable to bonds and communities” (104).¹⁶⁹ Their difference is reenacted in every encounter of their everyday life. It weighs so heavily that they unite in rejection the nation that has rejected them first. For Seba, the rejection is double. After the first game, when she gets attacked by a mob fan, Egypt had won the game. As Sherif and Seba scream each others’ names, the camera’s fast movement echoes the crowd’s loud fanfare. When the shot gets wider, the magnitude of the crowd is revealed. She had painted the Egyptian flag on her face to show her support, and later on, we witness how she smears it off her face, in a medium shot that contrast intimacy, individuality with the crowd shots (Figures 2.23-28).

The connection between the two incidents forever engraved in her memory, she has to wipe the smell, sound and touch of the nation’s victory off her violated body. When the three women attend the football game, they stand together, amidst a crowd of Egyptian fans, cheering for Zambia, united in their opposition (Figure 2.29). Egypt is no longer their nation, since they feel estranged from their existence in it. “If we do not find ways to deal with internal foreignness—if we do not come to be at home with ourselves—we will not be at home with those others in our midst, those with whom we are struggling to share political community. Community itself will be difficult to achieve” (104).¹⁷⁰ *Cairo 678* demonstrates how social fabric disintegrates under the unbearable weight of women’s experiences. Fayza turns against the other two women, women against men, the state against women. Until they all reunite in the courtroom. The detective and Seba share a complicit and understanding look. Nelly, Omar and her mother walk out of court, feeling they have conquered the first hurdle. Fayza and Nelly renew their acknowledgment of each other. Diab seems to offer some hopeful closure. Until the last shot,

¹⁶⁹ Kristeva qtd in McAfee, Noëlle. *Habermas, Kristeva, and Citizenship*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000.

¹⁷⁰ McAfee, 2000.



Figure 2.23



Figure 2.24



Figure 2.25



Figure 2.26



Figure 2.27



Figure 2.28



Figure 2.29



Figure 2.30

where we see Fayza standing on the streets, still surrounded by the urban frenzy, and looking dejected (Figure 2.30). Each narrative goes its way.

The hurdle that Nelly conquers was indeed a milestone. Nuha Rushdi, on whom the story of Nelly is based, was the first woman to legally pursue a sexual harassment case in Egypt in 2008. The offender received three years in jail, and a year later, new amendments were added to the penal code to better define, classify and punish sexual harassment. Amar notes:

Two divergent sets of responses stemmed from Nuha Rushdi's eventual legal victory. One, when her legal precedent was taken up by the UN sponsored NGOs, was to enhance the security and punishment powers of the state. However, another set of responses put those same powers into question. The Egyptian Center for Women's Rights followed the former trajectory by demanding the passage of new laws that mandated much higher sentences – up to ten years – and higher fines for sexual harassment. The conviction would also be a crime that would appear on the permanent record, even that of a youth/minor. (320)¹⁷¹

What he fails to acknowledge in this seemingly “feminist victory,” is that it *is* a victory, insofar as the state, by instituting laws against sexual harassment, it is in fact validating and recognizing women's experience of sexual violence, and recognizing the rights of women as a citizen body. Comopplaints filed are still too few, and since the 2011 revolution, sexual harassment has actually been on the rise, as women embody all shapes and forms of contestation and national struggle.

Moreover, Amar's critique of anti-sexual harassment campaigns does not address the fact that a woman's experience in public spaces is always laden with fear and insecurity. “Do not walk alone at night,” “Do not wear revealing clothes on the streets,” “Always be vigilant and aware of your surrounding,” are warnings that women heed, not only in the Egyptian context, but

¹⁷¹ Amar, 2011.

everywhere. He notably omits the socio-political and cultural implications of the changing roles of women in Egyptian society. While his assessment does bring into light a legitimate concern about providing the state's security apparatus with more policing power, he tends to flatten women's and men's urban experience of violence, the danger of which is to reproduce the urban body without gender differentiation. And yet, this differentiation is crucial in acknowledging the pervasiveness of violence against women in public spaces, safeguarding a woman's right to her own body, and foregrounding the status of woman as a citizen. Moreover, sexual harassment is an everyday practice against women in public spaces, not only directed toward female protestors. Yes, there is an authoritarian contention against women enforced by a politically repressive state, but there is also a social misogyny that oppresses women's mobility.

Cairo 678 does not provide a conclusive resolution to sexual harassment, on the contrary, we witness the complexity of the issue as causes and consequences are conflated. The failure of masculinity to live up to its own reflection, the struggle of femininity to assert its subjectivity collide in a

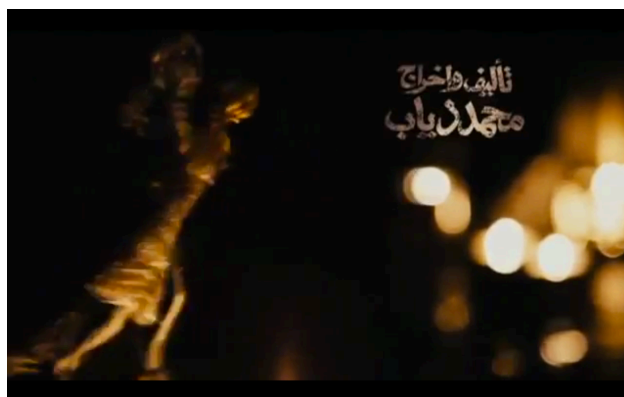


Figure 2.31

trail of broken ideals. That ideal is epitomized in the romantic self. At the beginning of the film, as the credits are rolling, two hands are shaping a small copper sculpture, until it finally shapes a man and a woman dancing in an intimate embrace (Figure 2.31). The dancing couple is Seba's signature statue. It appears floating from rearview mirrors, to eventually disappear, because she refuses to create them anymore after her assault. The film thereby articulates how sexual harassment results in the estrangement of lovers. Distance grows between them, one that is made

visual through the individual medium shots of Seba and Sherif. After the assault, when they are together, they are continuously separated. The *mise-en-scène* expresses this distance by putting each in individual frames, when in dialogue (Figures 2.32-35). The plot confirms it with Fayza's disaffection toward her husband. The void, the distance is replete with shame, anger, and frustration. The film demonstrates how this sexual offense is detrimental to relationship, especially as both gender are disillusioned with themselves and each other. Left unattended, it tears apart, and misrecognized, it is repeated.



Figure 2.32



Figure 2.33



Figure 2.34



Figure 2.35

There is an inevitable circularity that is repeated in *678*. At the beginning, Fayza's son is caught ogling a female in a video clip on TV, the same artist that Adel is caught, later on, masturbating to. As the plot unfolds, repetition develops as the predominant cinematic aesthetic. The non-linear narrative pieces together three parallel stories whose random point of convergence seems to be a square in downtown Cairo. There are three different timelines: signaled by words on the screen: A year ago, a month ago, and the present. The present unifies various pasts and distinctive paths. As the camera pans out, it retraces three movements in a discordant symphony that echoes the same melodic refrain. In the first closer shot, we see Fayza hurryingly getting off the bus in the middle of the square, and stepping in front of a Mercedes. From a higher shot, we realize that driving the Mercedes is Sherif, Seba's husband. The camera pans out gradually including more details, until the final bird eye shot taken from above Nelly's balcony, where we see her and her fiancé from behind, overlooking the frenzied square. The spectator is at first introduced to Fayza's story, and it seems like a jarring note in the soundtrack of the city. Each widening shot punctuates an interval that exposes more of the same narrative while revealing other ones (Figures 2-36-2.41).

The cyclic repetition of the timelines shows that the point of origin is in effect a point of arrival. The narratives are thus patterned to reveal how random characters and arbitrary wandering are all part of a cohesive whole where each body becomes more legible, each story comprehensible, in a connected network of coexistence. But coexistence does not imply understanding or awareness, as the film reveals. The trajectories traced and retraced form the diegetic world of the film. "In Greek, narration is called 'diegesis': it establishes an itinerary (it 'guides') and it passes through (it 'transgresses'). The space of operations it travels in is made of movements: it is topological, concerning the deformations of figures, rather than *topical*,

Visual rhetoric of circularity and repetition



Figure 2.36



Figure 2.37



Figure 2.38



Figure 2.39



Figure 2.40



Figure 2.41

defining places” (129).¹⁷² Diab does not define Cairo, but he visualizes and narrativizes the space of operations inherent in its landscape, the movements of its dwellers, and the processes that shape female corporeality. When our gaze is elevated, we are mere onlookers, voyeurs, seemingly distanced from the buzzing action, down below, in the square, crowded with cars, buses, and walkers. However, through the guided movements and the disclosure of this topology, the voyeur is eventually transformed into a witness, a silent accomplice, complicit in knowledge and inaction. We can no longer be blind to the pervasive behavior that shapes and hinders women’s mobility in the city, its seemingly hidden causes, and the concealed effects it has on society.

Countering the linguistic erasure of the female experience of sexual harassment, *Cairo 678* offers against this rhetoric of denial a poetics of revelation. While the repetition instills a sense of inescapability and inevitability, it also creates an imprint on the city, and our visual memory, so that the experience, continuously repeated, and yet always different, is not forgotten. Women’s experiences hence gain pertinence and significance, as Diab unveils an ethical imperative. His manipulation of time, the montage of the film, allows him to redirect our attention from one female character to the other, until the three narratives connect, interweave, to eventually form one continuous story. Even the numbers, six, seven, and eight, create a sense of continuity and sequence that is reflected in the plot and its arrangement. As the audience, we are witnesses, and complicit in piecing together various threads. The meanings that were denied are recognized, apprehended, and can no longer be relegated to ignorance: our moral understanding unfolds with the film. Thus, Diab offers a synthesis that merges the affective and the intelligible, at the heart of which is undeniably the interconnectedness between our social existence. The individual experiences create a collective understanding of the dangers of disavowing female

¹⁷² de Certeau, Michel. *Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

corporeality, of confining women's identities within a language of property and propriety that limits their subjectivity, and of safeguarding a hegemonic patriarchal system that foregrounds the dominance of (a disillusioned) masculinity and the subordination of (a rebellious) femininity. While "relational subjects' understanding will always be partial and fragmented. Together, they can fill in the blind spots, however provisionally" (135).¹⁷³ The film reveals the relationality between the subjects, by precisely threading the fragments to fill the void left by a vanishing individual narrative. Since "social identity is discursively constructed" (113),¹⁷⁴ and sexual harassment translates a discursive erasure that endangers the development of the personal. "If the 'personal' is left untended, it becomes political" (104).¹⁷⁵ Hence, when women struggle against a sense of imposed foreignness, and internalized alienation, they inherently lose their sense of belongingness.

However, Diab presents in his seminal film "violent transformations of the codes of representation" surrounding the vulnerability of the female body (122),¹⁷⁶ where he articulates a revolt against the normative and hegemonic behavior that is gradually eating away at the community. This is the revolt that Kristeva finds transformative. Revolt—"psychic revolt, analytic revolt, artistic revolt—refers to a state of permanent questioning, of transformation, change, an endless probing of appearances" (120).¹⁷⁷ It is a term she likes "because of its etymological associations with return, patience, distance, repetition, elaboration. Revolt is not simply about rejection and destruction; it is also about starting over. Unlike the word 'violence', 'revolt' foregrounds an element of renewal and regeneration" (123).¹⁷⁸ The inchoate sounds, the

¹⁷³ McAfee, 2000.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ Kristeva, Julia, and Petit, Philippe. *Revolt, She Said*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2002.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

inaudible gasps of pain, the impermanent sense of foreignness, the loss of a sense of belongingness, the city that is oblivious to the suffering and alienation of its wandering and wondering dwellers, delineate Diab's poetics of revelation that affirm the ethical imperative of intelligibility and understanding, and the need to mediate the world through alterity in order to create a viable community, because all narratives intersect at some time, at some place. *Cairo 678* represents a fugue, that flees erasure and that chases meaning, where the polyphonic composition of contrapuntal subjects rises against dissonance.

III

Symbolic Vulnerability: State of Aporia *This is Chaos and The Yacoubian Building*

Unma(s)king the Citizen: *(This Is) Chaos!*

Scheherazade Tell Me A Story and *Cairo 678* expose the vulnerabilities of women, as they disappear in discourse. The erasure of women as subjects of their own utterances, and the disavowal of female corporeal experience reveal the discrepancy between how women view themselves and how they are represented. The resulting alienation portrays a woman who is at odds with her own self, and one who is invariably disconnected from the image society is creating of her. Engulfed in the masculine plural, their bodies appropriated by a discourse of property and propriety, women struggle against the imposition of silence and learn to break free from the space in which they are invisible and unheard. And yet, despite this discursive and spatial marginality, society perpetuates this image of a woman who is the harbinger of national integrity and innocence. She is only visible as a fixed representation that now appears archaic, and out of place, but to which she nonetheless remains subordinated. If, as we see in *Cairo 678*, the soccer field delineates where national loyalties lie, and the women are cheering for the opposite team, we must ask ourselves, how has the nation failed its female citizens?

(This Is) Chaos, the last film directed by Youssef Chahine, and co-directed by Khaled Youssef (2007), portrays the rigid mold that constraints the development of female subjectivity. The vulnerability at stake here emerges as women come to symbolize an imaginary entity, the nation, that transcends them, from which they are excluded, and more emphatically, one to which they feel they do not belong. Chahine is renowned for metaphorically using female characters to

stand in for “Mother Egypt.”¹⁷⁹ What burden, epistemological and ontological, do women carry when they represent the nation? What are the (idealized) characteristics of the nation that women embody? What effect do these characteristics have on the construction of female subjectivity? These questions become all the more critical when the nation in question is in crisis, since Chahine intended his film to be a critique of the Mubarak regime. “This film sets out to expose human rights violations by Mubarak’s police apparatus, but it seems to carry much more strongly Khaled Youssef’s imprint, lacking the usual speedy dialogues and the typical Chahine Universe” (116).¹⁸⁰ Despite the authorial ambiguity of *Chaos*, this seemingly romantic drama and Manichean plot are embedded with the obvious message that the Mubarak regime is abusing its citizens and violating the principles of the nation. Moreover, it establishes an environment replete with socio-political dissent. In *The Arab National Project in Youssef Chahine's Cinema*, Malek Khouri notes that “while the powerful ending of *Chaos* seemed like an unrealistic and nostalgic yearning for a long forgotten period in Egyptian and Arab memory, it only confirmed the state of tension and the impending popular resistance manifested in the strikes and demonstrations that rocked Egypt in the first months of 2008” (213).¹⁸¹ And in retrospect, not just the unrest in 2008, the film presents a prescient vision of the 2011 uprising. However, *Chaos* ultimately exposes the vulnerabilities of making the personal political, since it transposes a political reality onto a (female) individual’s life, and the nation’s history and memory are written through women’s lives. In *Scheherazade Tell Me A Story*, we witness how the personal becomes political, especially when it is denied. Conversely, in *Chaos*, the political replaces the personal,

¹⁷⁹ Notably, in *The Sparrow*, a film that reflects his disillusionment with Egypt 1967 defeat and the Nasserist experiment. See Viola Shafik’s “Youssef Chahine” in *Ten Arab Filmmakers*, edited by Joseph Gugler (2011).

¹⁸⁰ Shafik, Viola. *Popular Egyptian Cinema: Gender, Class, and Nation*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2007.

¹⁸¹ Khouri, Malek. *The Arab National Project in Youssef Chahine's Cinema*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2010.

which in effect is a different type of erasure of the value of the personal, precisely because it loses its individual feature of belonging to a single entity—woman—, an entity that now symbolizes the collectivity.

Unlike the films discussed in the previous chapters, *Chaos* has a linear plot, and a more conventional filmic formula in line with Chahine's realist films. Hatem, a low-ranking police officer, rules Shubra, a Cairo neighborhood, with a corrupt iron fist. He is in love with his lifelong neighbor, Nour, a middle-school teacher, who is enamored with Sherif, a deputy prosecutor and the son of her principal, Wedad. Nour and her mother, Baheya, stand up to Hatem's obsessive advances, while Sherif is struggling with his engagement to Sylvia, and seems immune to Nour's love. Framed in realism, the narrative portrays Hatem's megalomaniac and pathological obsession and Nour's unrequited love, while in parallel, a political environment laden with dissent and youth demonstrations reveal police brutality. Hatem's greed and corruption are contrasted with the principled behavior of Sherif, who eventually accepts Nour's love. As the violence escalates, Hatem takes dire measures to finally possess Nour, and ends up kidnapping and raping her. The neighborhood then forcefully rebels against the corrupt officer, and attacks the police station, resulting in Hatem's demise. Chahine's (and Youssef's) insight into the usurped authority of Hatem over his neighborhood reveal a framework of social constructs that enforce female subjection, and trap female subjectivity within the rhetorical binaries of tradition/modernity, Egyptian/Westernized norms, and purity/corruption. These binaries gain political significance when a nation is portrayed, but, and precisely for that reason, they create a female heroine who is effaced, because Nour is positioned as the bearer of the violated nation. When her body is raped, it is Egypt that is raped. Her virgin blood trails down her legs, on her clothes, to disappear as collective outrage rises and a utopic order is restored.

Her violated body is abstracted and loses its corporeal presence, her experience dissipates as its echo resonates the cries of the multitude, and is replaced with a sense of collective solidarity and assertion. The physical and individual victim is forgotten, as she becomes an abstraction. Nour's figure is thus encoded with national sentimentality, to the detriment of her own subjectivity, and the development of her own identity. Her life articulates the experience of a nation, redefining the historical tensions between the idealized past, the unlivable present and the uncertain future.

The title of the film in Arabic is a question, "Is it chaos?" (*heya fawda?*), which is actually an expression that is used when one is asking, in the face of an unruly situation, if there are no rules. In this chaotic environment where injustice reigns, and disorder is imminent, archetypal characters are present: the young innocent virginal heroine, the corrupt and evil anti-hero, the principled and just hero, and the mothers who bear the weight of a nostalgic and idyllic past while being responsible for bringing up "good" citizens. The significance of these characters is embedded in their carefully chosen names. Nour is light, and her purity, innocence and idealism shine throughout. Hatem is the judge, but also the crow and the color black: the crow is an inauspicious bird in Arab culture, and Hatem's devious mind, greed and corruption reflect the blackness of his soul. Sherif derives from the Arabic words for honor and honesty, and his name translates his incorruptibility and his unwavering belief in justice. Wedad connotes affection, friendship and amicability. She embraces Nour and takes her under her wing, encouraging her devotion to her son, whom she hopes will eventually see the light. Finally, Baheya, is the glorious, the beautiful, and in Chahine's cinematic lexicon, notably in his film *The Sparrow* (1973), she stands for Egypt. In *Chaos*, as Nour's mother, she is in charge of protecting her, and is proud of how she raised her. She engenders the nation, a nation that is in distress and in constant danger of losing her purity and her radiance, threatened to be devoured by the darkness

(that Hatem embodies). From the onset, these naming choices provide a frame of reference that establishes the connections between the various characters. The plot is thus an unfolding of the characters and what they each represent.

While the characters run the risk of being one-dimensional stereotypes, something that Chahine may have done intentionally, since it is one of his cinematic recipes, according to Khouri (213),¹⁸² it is, ironically, Hatem who stands out as a multifaceted personage. He appoints himself the guardian of the system: “I am the government,” he says at the beginning of the film. Despite being a low-ranking officer, he uses his position as a middle-man and takes bribes to solve people’s legal problems, either by directing them to other people or telling them where to go and what to do. His “consultancy” side project is set in a food restaurant, where he

threateningly strong arms the owner, as he eats for free while collecting bribes (Figure 3.1). Inside the police station, he keeps order over the prisoners by humiliating and torturing the young men, and running a



Figure 3.1

prostitution ring in the women’s jail cell. His superiors count on him to hold the protestors imprisoned, therefore most reports are fabricated.

Hatem’s self-appointment, which he bestows on himself almost as a birthright, demarcates his territory within the corrupt system of the government. The implicit connotation is that he runs the Shubra neighborhood like the Mubarak regime runs Egypt. He reiterates throughout the film his famous by-line, loosely translated as: he who does not do well by Hatem,

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

does not do well by Egypt.¹⁸³ This sentence is a play on an Arabic proverb that originally states: he who does not do well by his parents, does not do well by others. This aphorism is meant as a warning judgment that those who do not treat their parents well will not treat other people well either (including ones that are beyond their filial connections). This adage attached to Hatem reveals how he in fact sees himself: he is the parent, the father figure in his district. He symbolizes the nation, insofar as he parallels people's actions toward him with how they act toward their country. As a matter of fact, his maxim even places his stature above that of the nation, since, first and foremost, one is supposed to treat one's parents better than anyone else, therefore one must treat Hatem in the best way possible. His character is almost always wearing his black police uniform: he carries his insignia as a sign of honor, and power. It communicates his authority, but most of all, it becomes inextricably linked with his identity. This warped self-esteem fuels his hunger for power, and his megalomaniac delusions. After all, he is but a low-ranking police officer in a middle-class neighborhood. Hatem's self-assigned importance is contrasted with his ignorance, and he is eventually portrayed as a tragic anti-hero, at times a fool in love, perverted, and comically infantilized.

In the face of Hatem's constant and aggressive advances, Nour is immovable. He eventually has recourse to superstition in an attempt to capture Nour's heart. He goes to a sheikh to ask him for a spell, but the religious man refuses, telling him to cleanse his heart. He even tries going to a church, something he had never done before, and the priest repeats the sheikh's thoughts. Finally, he learns of an old lady who could help him. She prepares some "magical water" that Hatem must sprinkle on Nour's doorstep, and once she steps over it, she will miraculously fall in love with him. We discover that this water is nothing more than the water the old lady's ducks swim in. To Hatem's consternation, it is not Nour who steps over the threshold,

¹⁸³ Khouri translates it as "whoever is ungrateful to Hatem, is ungrateful to Egypt" (210).

but her mother. During this scene, Hatem hides behind his door, in darkness, like a child (Figure 3.2). Once more, Hatem's ignorance is revealed, as it is propelled by his need and propensity to believe in anything that will bring Nour closer to him. Another scene associates his ignorance with his greed, when he gets involved in an art heist. He is approached by a young man who wants to replace the painting in the office of the head of the police station, with a fake one that he painted. He promises Hatem a share of five thousand Egyptian pounds. While the con man is trying to figure out how to separate the canvas from the frame, Hatem slashes the painting down the middle, tearing it from the frame, and rolls it up, asking for his money (Figures 3.3-3.5). The man is appalled and screams at Hatem for his actions. "Do you realize how ignorant you are?" He just destroyed a 130-year-old painting, worth over half a million pounds. As Hatem finds out the monetary value of the painting compared to his fee, he responds: "No, I realize that you are a thief." He then throws the con man in jail. His disregard for the artistic value of the painting reveals that he is an obtuse philistine, and the scene highlights his selfishness and greed. His ignorance is always offset with a show of authority. When Sherif, after witnessing how Hatem stalks Nour, summons him to his office and forces him to sign an order of protection against himself, the following scene portrays an enraged Hatem in jail cell, torturing prisoners. The male prisoners are blindfolded and hanging from the ceiling, and Hatem is blindly waving a whip around: his screams and those of the men intermingle, as non-diegetic music drowns both (Figures 3.6-3.7). Hatem is made to feel his inferior status at the hand of Sherif, a superior in the police hierarchy: this inferiority is for him an emasculation that he needs to disavow by proving his superiority over the unjustly imprisoned youths. Thus, throughout the film, Hatem is constantly attempting to counterbalance his sense of inferiority by an assertion of power and superiority. Nothing gives him a sense of power and authority like his obsession with Nour.

Ignorance, greed, power



Figure 3.2



Figure 3.3



Figure 3.4



Figure 3.5



Figure 3.6



Figure 3.7

While on the surface the heroine seems to belong to a narrative that places her at the center, she is in fact not the subject of that narrative. Things happen to her, she is the object of the action, never the active subject. Nour is first and foremost the object of Hatem's deviant obsession. He never acknowledges her subjectivity, her wishes, and her desires. On the contrary, he systematically denies them, treating her not as a self-determining subject, but as an object of his desire. Nour's objectification culminates in how Hatem literally views her. The police officer spies on his neighbor. He ogles her from the small bathroom window when she showers (Figure 3.8), he goes into her room, sits on her bed, smells her clothes, hugs her pillow, and ends up taking her bra and nightgown. In parallel, we also witness Nour doing the same with Sherif's clothes when she visits Wedad. However, she asks for permission from his mother, who thinks it is romantic. Hatem's invasion of Nour's privacy is contrasted with Nour's invasion of Sherif's privacy. The clear gender distinction between both actions make the latter a romantic one, while the former is depicted as the behavior of a stalker. This distinction is effected through the camera shots: Hatem's actions are represented through a combination of subjective shots and point of view shots, whereas Nour's only include the latter (Figures 3.9-3.11). The choice of camera angles positions us as voyeurs alongside Hatem, while the objective angle maintains a distance between us and the scene. This distance seems to indicate that Nour somehow still respects Sherif's privacy. Nour's gaze, while it does idealize Sherif's masculinity, does not pervert it.

On the other hand, Hatem's voyeuristic gaze not only transmits his deviance and perversion, but it also exhibits a falsely constructed image of Nour, a product of his obsessive imagination. Hatem is an intimacy-seeking stalker whose manic delusions lead him to believe that Nour can and will fall in love with him. His mind has composited an illusion of Nour. He takes a photograph and goes to a shop to print a full size poster of her. He asks the male shop

assistant to use the photograph of her face and the body of a woman in a bikini. If the bikini is a Western image, and the face represents Egyptian ideals, Hatem thus creates a Frankensteinian amalgamation out of his delusional visions of Nour and his fantasies about her body. He puts the poster in his room, and looks at it lasciviously while holding and smelling her clothes. This hybrid chimera over which Hatem obsesses and which he worships is in effect unreal, and only exists in his perverted imagination. The reality of Nour eludes him, and in association, so does the reality of the Egyptian society. This poster fuels his sense of entitlement, his narcissism, and his jealousy, especially when Nour and Sherif start their romance.

Nour thereby becomes a spectacle, only present for the performance of Hatem's fantasies and delusions. The objectification of the female body is confirmed within this scopophilic world, because it is not only Nour's body that is objectified. In the underbelly of the police station, we enter an underworld of illicit looks and desires. Between the men's and the women's cells, there is a hole in the wall, through which, for a fee, men peek at women's bodies, women stripping, and dancing (Figures 3.12-3.15). The film editing is very significant here, insofar as after the scene in Hatem's bedroom, where he is lewdly ogling Nour's poster and smelling her clothes, comes the scene with the prostitutes in jail. For five Egyptian pounds, a woman belly dances and strips while a male in the adjacent cell, looks at her through a peephole. Again, the close-ups of the looking male eye, and the subjective shots of women's body position the audience as the voyeur, similarly to the scene where Hatem is spying on Nour showering. The film thus parallels both voyeuristic behavior, and highlights the visibility and viewing of the female body. While one is a violation, performed unknowingly and unsuspectingly by the women and in a clandestine manner by the man, the other is solicited. Both however bear the imprint of the taboo of female sexuality. The jailed women are all prostitutes, women of loose morals who already

Invaded privacy and perverted looks



Figure 3.8



Figure 3.9



Figure 3.10



Figure 3.11



Figure 3.12



Figure 3.13



Figure 3.14



Figure 3.15

sell their bodies. Hatem's spying circumvents the moral and social restriction surrounding the female body. Both behaviors are in fact illicit, indicative of a tainted look, a deviant gaze, that confirms the sexualization of the female body and its ensuing objectification.



Figure 3.16



Figure 3.17

In parallel, Hatem profits from this prostitution ring in jail, financially and emotionally. He spends time with the women there, particularly with Sumaya (Figure 3.16). After Hatem follows Nour and Sherif on their date at the cinema and by the Nile, and witnesses their romance blossoming, with a quick kiss here, or a smile, he is crying in his bedroom. His flashbacks to those intimate moments that the two lovers shared are punctuated by an escalating non-diegetic music, until Hatem grabs his gun and points it at his head (Figure 3.17). But

then, with an evil laugh, he points the gun at his poster of Nour and shoots her in each eye. The camera lingers on the poster, as her eyes start crying tears of blood (Figure 3.18-3-19). After this

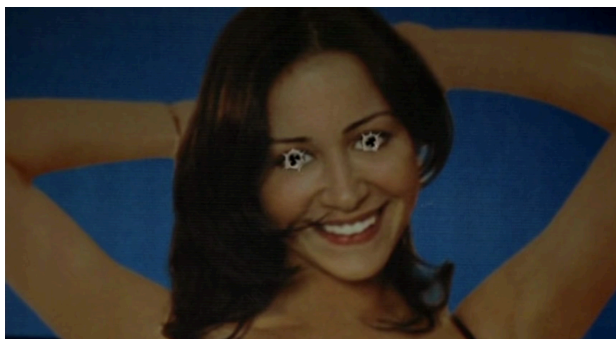


Figure 3.18

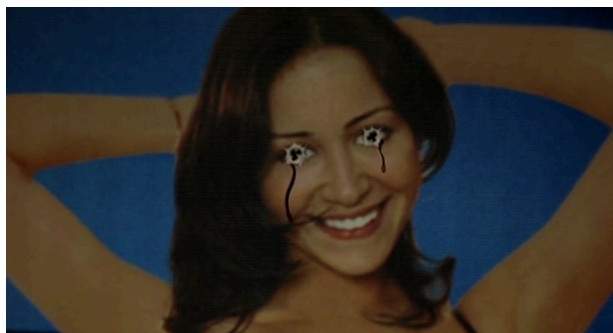


Figure 3.19

episode, he is in the women's cell, seeking affirmation that he is handsome from Sumaya. From close-ups to wider shots, the camera zooms out from framing him and Sumaya to the whole cell,

where women are lying. This image is particularly reminiscent of Orientalist representations of women in the harem (Figure 3.16). She hands him a mirror to prove to him that he is good-looking. After looking at it briefly, he doesn't believe her. Sumaya manipulates Hatem's insecurities to get out of jail, to which he eventually concedes.

However, her plan backfires, as Hatem's moment of vulnerability is replaced by his usual cruelty (fueled here by a sense of betrayal). Surprisingly, Sumaya takes him to a hairdresser. "I'm bald, Sumaya." "She'll give you hair!" While Hatem tries on different wigs, Sumaya leaves him for five minutes and meets her drug dealer in an adjacent room to have sex with him. When Hatem walks in on them, grabbing Sumaya by the hair, he exclaims: "Even you? Isn't Nour enough? You're all dirty."¹⁸⁴ While he is done with the prostitute, he will give Nour another chance, after which he will make an example of her. Hatem thus associates deceit and betrayal with women: Sumaya uses her sexuality to manipulate him, while Nour's resistance and display of affection for Sherif incite his jealousy and magnify his sense of rejection.

We discover Hatem's life story, which sheds light on the development of his character, and explains why his feelings of rejection are always heightened, for which he overcompensates by showing his cruel authority. The time is *sham el nessim*, the Egyptian celebration for Spring (which generally follows Coptic Easter). Baheya and Nour are happily preparing for Wedad and Sherif's visit. Sally, a friend of Nour's, intercepts her errands: Hatem has arrested Sally's father and will only release him if Nour meets Hatem at a seafood restaurant on the Nile. A naïve and noble Nour goes to meet him, and he blackmails her into having lunch with him for the sake of her friend's father. The moment is lightened with a comedic interlude, as we see Hatem with a ridiculous wig, that falls off his head, and Nour laughing at him (Figure 3.20). He wants her

¹⁸⁴ In Arabic, the adjective "clean" is used to denote morality and purity (including sexual purity), and dirty the opposite.

opinion on his new look, but she offers none, and instead tells him to ask someone else. But he has no one; he then recounts his tragic childhood. His mother left him when he was two, after his



Figure 3.20

father passed away, and she remarried. His uncle (his father's brother) was a dog and a thief who stole his land. He then moved from one home to another: at his aunt's (his mother's sister), meals were on a schedule; at his father's sister, going to the bathroom required

permission; and at his other uncle's, beatings were gratuitous. He was forbidden from crying, and lived all his life hungry: he was never satiated. He was "a two-year old kid who didn't know how to play." He lived in an orphanage from first grade. And when he left, he inherited his father's uniform and became a police officer like him. "But a good one. Anyone who has a problem, I solve it for them." Throughout his confession, the air of sadness is intensified by a non-diegetic melancholic music. However, Nour is not swayed, because she accuses him of compensating himself for these favors with bribes and money. She knows the type of character he is, and refuses to have anything to do with him.

Hatem is oblivious to her words, and tells her that she is lucky because once they are married he will spoil her. Despite her continuous warning and antipathy, Hatem is so delusional, he ignores her anger, and persists in sweet talking her. When she eventually leaves, after he brings her a birthday cake (he remembers her birthday because he had issued her identity card), she realizes the extent of his stalking behavior and its possible danger. Stood up, Hatem confronts a group of young men at a nearby table who make fun of him: Hatem is bald and lacks the "touch" to be a player. His usual behavior resurface: he pulls his gun and points it at them,

and they run. Hatem then catches up with Nour and lures her to the pier under the pretense that it is where he is keeping Sally's father, after which he drugs her and puts her in a *felouka*, a small sail boat.

When Nour wakes up in the boat in the middle of the Nile, she is unable to convince the men steering the boat to even acknowledge her presence. She jumps off the boat, and Hatem follows her and brings her back on the boat. He promises to take her back to shore, but it is another shore, deserted, with a brick house filled with goats and hay. We are no longer in the city, but in the rural peripheries (Figure 3.21). Hatem corners Nour in the house.

- HATEM: We have to finish this today.

- NOUR: Finish what? Are you mad?

- HATEM: Yes, mad about you. If I could kill you, so I could live, I would have.

But I can't live without you. The only thing left for me to do is to quench my fire inside you. So I'd have a child beautiful like you. I'll make him a minister, a *pacha*.

While he's trying to rape her he has future visions of her going into labor, delivering a baby boy, and of them as a happy family (Figures 3.22-3.25). He ends up knocking her out when she struggles against him. After the rape, hovering over her unconscious body, he is bereft and crying, imploring her not be upset with him (Figure 3.26). Once she gets a son from him, she will understand his feelings, he tells her as he pulls her dress down her thighs. Nour wakes up, and clutching her bloody dress manages to return to shore and to her home (Figures 3.27-29). As she enters, she faces Sherif, her mother, Wedad, and Sally, who had all been looking for her.

Hatem and Nour's climatic scene is not a continuous one. There is a sense of escalating urgency especially since Sally goes to Baheya and tells her what she has done. From Hatem and

Nour, we intermittently go to Baheya, Wedad, Sherif and Sally who retrace Nour's steps. The pauses in the flow of Hatem's actions disrupt his narrative. Pausing "upsets the male protagonist's control over the action, and allows the spectator to "possess" the star image, to hold it for contemplation and erotic enjoyment. But the moment of pause in the flow of film also allows the spectator to pause for thought" (30).¹⁸⁵ Hatem's resort to rape to possess Nour is horrific: it tarnishes the image the narrative has so far constructed of Nour. The frames and zooms operated by the camera amplify this horror: Sherif is the first to see her, and his gaze, in a subjective shot, takes her in slowly, traveling down her body, as Nour clutches her breasts, and the tear in her lower dress, conscious of the blood stain and the mud on her body (Figures 3.30-3.32). Then the camera shifts to the women, zooming in on Baheya, who starts crying, to return to Nour's face, drenched in tears (Figures 3.33-3.35). This scene is contrasted with the previous one, where Hatem is seen driving his motorbike and the camera zooms in on his face and pans out to show him on the road.

While the concerned and anguished looks Nour gets when she returns home do in fact emphasize the violation of her purity, they also highlight the corporeal trauma she has suffered: she is flesh and bone, bruised and bloodied. On the other hand, Hatem's act is one of violence, a negation of her subjectivity and her desires. His voracious need to conquer Nour's love becomes a need to possess her body: by raping her, he uses her sexuality to subvert her, and his sexuality to appropriate her. Nour represented to Baheya, Sherif and Wedad abstract qualities; they only realize her sexuality once she is raped. In contrast, Hatem only visualized her as a sexual object, and by raping her, he denied her corporeality. The camera highlights how the female body is

¹⁸⁵ Mulvey, Laura. "Unmasking the Gaze: Feminist Film Theory, History, and Film Studies." *Reclaiming the Archive: Feminism and Film History*. Callahan, Vicki, ed. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010.

Visual rhetoric of rape



Figure 3.21



Figure 3.22



Figure 3.23



Figure 3.24



Figure 3.25



Figure 3.26



Figure 3.27



Figure 3.28

Visual rhetoric of rape



Figure 3.29



Figure 3.30



Figure 3.31



Figure 3.32



Figure 3.33



Figure 3.34



Figure 3.35

rigidly controlled and circumscribed within a framework of social and moral constructs that ultimately leave no space for female subjectivity, insofar as Nour's return home is an attempt to find a sanctuary to recompose herself, and yet, she is met with a group of witnesses whose silent inspection reminds her (and us) of the social stigma attached to rape, especially in traditional societies where virginity is tantamount to purity. Her private space transforms yet again into a spectacle. What is rendered visible is the female body, and what is invisible is the female consciousness of trauma and her personal experience. The ensuing pursuit of Hatem by Sherif and Nour, which morphs into a public hunt for the corrupt officer clearly affirms how Nour's rape and the violation of the citizens are one.

Hatem's behavior towards Nour is thus equated with the actions of the police officer—the system, or authority, as he reminds us—against the nation and its citizens. The visions Hatem sees as he is raping Nour reveal how his delusion of power and his sexual fantasies morph: he envisions her giving birth to his son, and images of Hatem and Nour clutching the baby in the hospital flash on the screen. The jarring discrepancy of his present action and the future he imagines portray in a metaphorical way the delusion of the ruling system, who, as it rapes the nation, invents a bright and happy future. These images and dreams do not, and cannot, align with the present conditions. As the end of the films demonstrates, Hatem's demise becomes inevitable: trapped by a mob seeking retribution, he sees Nour and Sherif heading the crowd, in each other's embrace, he shoots Sherif and then shoots himself (Figure 3.36). And while he is crying admittedly because he will never see Nour again, the last shot in the film is of the Central Security trucks surrounding the station, as more sirens can be heard in the distance (Figure 3.37). Retribution is achieved, and justice restored, as the wrongfully jailed youths are let out of jail and rejoin their mothers. But the same old system is just beyond the gates.



Figure 3.36



Figure 3.37

Throughout the film, Hatem and Nour's interactions parallel the relationship between the state and the nation. Hatem embodies authoritarianism, ignorance, and greed, and Nour, idealism, purity, and the search for a viable future. This tainted relationship is complemented by another that articulates a different failure in modern Egyptian society: that of Sherif and his fiancée Sylvia. Sylvia's Westernized female figure represents the threatening Other that has for decades haunted Egyptian national culture. Sylvia is from an affluent upper-class family. Wedad disapproves of her son's union from the beginning; she had not attended her own son's engagement and maintains that she would not attend the wedding either (if there was a wedding, she says) and we quickly realize why. Sylvia does drugs, dances suggestively in clubs with other men, and is overall depicted as a corruption of the traditional Egyptian values attached to femininity: namely chastity, obedience, consideration, devotion and selflessness. At the beginning of the film, the jarring difference between Nour and Sylvia is the focus of the *mise-en-scène* when the latter comes to the school. We first only see her legs as she gets off the car: she is wearing a short skirt and heels. The camera follows her steps, and slowly moves up her back until we see her from behind, and that is when she and Nour cross paths. The camera shifts and we see Sylvia from the front, and Nour slowly turning to look at her, as the camera slowly zooms on Nour's face. This sequence not only reveals Nour's emotions from the beginning, but as

Sylvia moves through the conservative school, she seems out of place (Figure 3.38). Sylvia here reflects the adoption of sartorial choices from the West, choices that are at odds within Egypt's



Figure 3.38

discreet and traditional norms, as embodied in Nour. It is also worth noting that Chahine's commentary omits the veil as representative of Egyptian values, since Nour's hair is not covered, neither are any of the other female characters. Sylvia's behavior is depicted as

extremely destructive. As she is driving with Sherif, she is smoking a hashish joint, and we discover from his reaction that she is pregnant. He worries about the health of the baby, whereas she is concerned with having a child while her mother-in-law hates her. Moreover she is worried about losing her figure, especially after she saw a friend of hers who had a baby and now looks like she has aged ten years. Sherif finds Sylvia's anxiety about her appearance superfluous, and tells her that a woman only feels like a woman when she has a child, rhetorically asking "Where else did those seventy million people come from?" Sylvia rejects his idealism of womanhood and motherhood.

In an another scene, when Sherif goes to pick her up for their night out, he has a talk with her father, who informs him that he should get Sylvia from her bedroom or else she will never leave, since Gigi is giving her a tattoo. Sherif is surprised, and even appalled, "What's a tattoo? And who's Gigi?" Her father assures him that Gigi is the best tattoo artist in Egypt, and that Sherif will eventually get used to their ways, because he is a smart man. Sherif is however livid, and when he walks in on Sylvia in her bedroom, he throws the young man out. Sylvia's dissonant presence in Sherif's life resonates when she informs him that she is very different from

him, and that if he loves her, he will accept her the way she is. The *mise-en-scène* speaks volumes of Sherif's position and Sylvia's behavior. Facing the camera, her newly tattooed back with a scorpion is reflected in the mirror next to Sherif, who is facing us and Gigi. The scene's composition reveals Sherif's imminent confrontation with Gigi, and displays the woman's dismissive attitude of her fiancé (Figure 3.39). In the following scene, they are in a dance club, where Sylvia decides to dance salsa, an intimate dance, with a friend of hers. Sherif gets jealous and drags her off the dance floor. "Did you forget you are pregnant?," he screams at her. She then informs him, almost with defiance and gloat, that she had an abortion. He leaves, and after his fight with his mother, when he arrives at his friend's and finds her there, all apologetic, announcing that she is now willing to



Figure 3.39

give him a child if that is what he really wants, he breaks off their engagement, refusing to forgive her for the abortion. Even after she threatens to kill herself, he refuses to be swayed and tells her he does not care any more. Every interaction between Sylvia and Sherif affirms their incompatibility: The principled young Egyptian man and the Westernized immoral Egyptian woman cannot procreate. Their union is doomed to be fruitless and cannot lead to progeny. Sylvia represents the bastardization of Egyptian values as they become transposed with Westernized attitudes: she is not deserving of Sherif's idealism and character.¹⁸⁶ Thus, this abortive female figure cannot engender the nation.

¹⁸⁶ While I have previously chosen to comment on the meanings of the names attributed to various characters, in the case of Sylvia, I suspect that, although it is a name that is generally not used for Muslim girls, I do not think that Chahine is commenting on Christianity in Egypt. The name could simply be seen as Western.

Sherif's ultimate rejection of Sylvia, Nour's refusal to submit to Hatem, and the final union between Sherif and Nour delineate a framework of representations at the service of a nationalist project that seeks to define the ideals of the nation. The female body is exclusively coded as embodied sexuality in order to, on the one hand, reject particularly destructive attributes and attitudes (such as promiscuity, deceit, western, abortive, etc.), and on the other hand, to "define and shape the contours of national identity and national futures" (xiii).¹⁸⁷ Ultimately, the narrative of the nation becomes the narrative of Nour, and the narrative of Nour becomes that of the nation: to the detriment of Nour, for she is engulfed in a matrix of representations and controlled by affects and instincts that are beyond her subjectivity and her own control. Her experience of being pursued, harassed, raped, is equated with that of a whole community: her individuality is cannibalized by the collective. The woman here *is* a nationalist project, and articulates the need for the masses to mobilize. She is a sexed body, imaged and imagined in male fantasies, under constant inspection by the male gaze, and circumscribed within a masculine system of values, that only recognizes her femininity as engendering the nation. She is thus reduced to weak, nurturing, and subservient characteristics. The film thus only expresses the physical, corporeal, characteristics of femininity, one that can be overpowered and dominated, controlled and saved. A woman's mind is here inconsequential. While Hatem transformed her into a one-dimensional cutout for his perverse fantasies, the film represents Nour as a one-dimensional character for the liberating fantasies of a community. In both cases, Nour the self-determining individual and citizen is disavowed. Woman is thus confined within one conceptualized role in the service of masculine fantasy, be it a sexual or a national one. Admittedly, the film delineates a clear distinction between the two, positing the corruption and

¹⁸⁷ Elsadda, Hoda. *Gender, Nation, and the Arabic Novel: Egypt, 1892-2008*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012.

depravity of one, and the virtue and honor of the other; the former belonging to an individual, the latter to the collective, albeit one led by an honorable male savior. Ultimately, this fixed iconography of the female as nation is a type of essentialism that reduces woman to a singular prototype. This prototype is invested by the particular desire to reproduce the nation, and denies the socio-political and historical realities of women.

In “Power, Bodies and Difference,” Moira Gatens relies on “an account of the body image which posits that a body is not properly a human body, that is, a human subject or individual, unless it has an image of itself as a discrete entity, or as a *gestalt*” (229).¹⁸⁸ Nour, however revolves in a world under the constant threat of Hatem’s gaze and desire, while she is constantly seeking the acknowledgment of Sherif. In addition, Gatens notes that “the political body was conceived historically as the organization of many bodies into one which would itself enhance and intensify the powers and capacities of specifically male bodies” (230).¹⁸⁹ Therefore, while the political body asserts the plurality of male bodies, it denies women this precise plurality and instead erects a monolithic image, an icon, at times an effigy, for woman seems to be at a constant disadvantage, systematically differentiated as the other of this political body.

The female body is thus the site of contestation between the state and the nation. By positioning himself as a national authority, Hatem creates the association between the nation and his violence and corruption, an association that in effect taints the relationship between the citizens and their nation, as the latter is conceptualized by the state, and forcibly so. As personal retribution becomes collective justice, the people’s rebellion instills a feeling of solidarity and

¹⁸⁸ Namely the works of Jacques Lacan, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Paul Schilder. And it is worth remembering that feminist scholarship has been critical of these works because their subject was predominantly male. I do, however, find that it is appropriate to use in the context of the development of subjectivity. See Gatens, Moira. “Power, Bodies and Difference.” *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*. Price, Janet, and Margrit Shildrick, eds. New York: Routledge, 1999.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

community. The police officer and the rapist represent the epidemic that has polluted the imaginary of the people. In the end, *Chaos* denounces the corruption of a certain type of national narrative, one that is dramatized by an environment of scopophilia, voyeurism and inspection, where purity, sexual promiscuity and obsession compete for the spectacle of the female body. In this failed national narrative, desire and power are perverted. The end masks under the restoration of order and the victory (and survival) of the collective, the effacement of the individual, especially the female, and the failure of the nation to safeguard the female citizen. This is the failure of Chahine's narrative, that articulates the fragmentation of the nation. By offering two competing representations of masculinity, Hatem and Sherif, and of femininity, Sylvia and Nour, *Chaos* privileges a particular national narrative, where oscillating between two fantasies, the female body is either violently or romantically appropriated. But it is always appropriated.

The Nation, or An Anatomy of Fragments: *The Yacoubian Building*

The fragmentation of the social fabric of Egyptian life is the dispelled image that *The Yacoubian Building* (2006) reflects of society. Capturing the falling grandeur of a downtown building housing various social strata, the film, directed by Marwan Hamed, and adapted from Alaa' El Aswany's novel of the same name,¹⁹⁰ depicts the transition of a society into modernity emphasizing the palimpsestic contradictions that have come to define Egypt. Cairo is the backdrop for a plot where social injustices bring into play the confrontation of opposites: tradition and modernity, values and corruption, dreams and disillusionment, piety and religious hypocrisy and terrorism. Punctuated with Western songs, an echo of colonial remnants, the film

¹⁹⁰ The novel was published in Arabic in 2002, and in English, by The American University in Cairo Press, in 2004.

portrays varying survival mechanisms in an environment where hypocrisy and corruption have tainted every form of established relationship, from politics and religion, to family, sex, and love. The rigid social stratification in this transitioning society creates characters who have a hard time finding their place, which results in the unavoidable alienation of most. There is a constant sense of oppression and suppression, and these oppressed dreams and suppressed desires feed those contradictions. Through a visual medley and the intermingling stories unfold this alienation of a people from a society where they thought they belonged, and their desperate efforts to be accepted. Ending with a phantasmagoric image of Cairo bathing in the tunes of Edith Piaf's "La vie en rose," the film closes on a hopeful image of love, but the audience is left wondering how long that would last, for what utopic future can these dystopic present realities engender?, particularly after we witness on screen how a society has commodified every aspect of daily life. The characters in *The Yacoubian Building* feel their life is completely worthless, and as they suffer this humiliating dematerialization, everything around them seems to have a price—a price that inflates exponentially. They lose their sense of belonging in a society that has become an abominable chimera, devouring all their hopes, aspirations and dreams. Resigned, and their breaths suspended, they confront their powerlessness in between every step, every breath.

In this alienating universe, the body is the cheapest commodity. Exploited, abused, humiliated, raped, murdered, these bodies cannot restore a sense of dignity, of hope, to citizens who constantly face their subjugation to extrinsic forces and tensions sometimes beyond their comprehension. While the multi-layered narrative exposes the complexity of relationships inherent in society, and the fragmentation of the body politic, the unfolding of particular characters' story lines reveals the disintegration of the nation and the erasure of the politics of the body. These characters are namely, Buthayna, Taha, So'ad, and Hatim. The (sexed) bodies here

carry the contestation of masculine as well as feminine corporeality and translates a hierarchy of gendered and political power relations. Carrying the imprint of everyday violence, corruption and terrorism, these bodies are caught in the unbridled subjection of their beings. As abstractions, their represented existences perpetuate the utopia of a cohesive and homogenous national entity. However, as articulations of their physical experiences, bodies are a threat. For they reveal the illusion cast on the body politic and its resistance to the affirmation of individual self-determining bodies. The docile body cannot conform to the dissenting mind that challenges the limits of political reality, and the boundaries of authority, but most importantly, the inadequacies of social regulations.

Buthayna and her modest family live on the roof of the building. She works to assist her family financially. Her mother is furious because Buthayna just quit her job. But her boss had unzipped his pants, and defending her actions, she asks: "Should I let go of my honor?" Her mother tells her a smart girl knows how to preserve her honor without upsetting anyone. "Each person is free with their clothes, the important thing is that you keep yours." She advises her to be more flexible and responsive to what is basically sexual harassment, as long as she is dressed. So in her new job, Buthayna does what all the other female sales assistants do: she goes to the storage warehouse, lets her boss unzip his pants, and rub against her until he climaxes. He gives her ten Egyptian pounds. Once satisfied, he tells her to wait until her clothes dry, and make sure she locks the door. As she washes her shirt, Buthayna cries (Figures 3.40-3.42). Her clothes are the surface that bear the mark of her inferiority, and on which is inscribed her violation. These sexual favors, upon which her job is contingent, denigrate her: she has no dignity. Her survival is predicated on the sexual differentiation of her body. Her daily life becomes a humiliating negotiation that reminds her unequivocally of her position, as a poor woman in need.

Buthayna's harassment



Figure 3.40



Figure 3.41



Figure 3.42

Buthayna is engaged to Taha, a young man who also lives on the roof with his family, and whom she has known since they were children. After her first day at work, she tells Taha, “this country is not ours anymore. People like us are foreigners.” He should finish his studies and go work in the Gulf, she says. When she seems reluctant to come with him if he does travel, he accuses her of having changed toward him. “I haven’t changed. The world around me has.”

Buthayna is fearful of adapting to these changes, for they reduce her being to a sexual object, and deny her wishes and subjectivity. She cannot face this daily humiliation of her being and her body. Eventually, she gets a job working as Zaki’s office manager. Zaki is another tenant of the building, where he has an architecture office. When Zaki first sees her, the camera travels up her body. We become keenly aware that the masculine gaze is inescapable. We first encounter Zaki, an upper class elderly gentleman, who has squandered his inheritance, in a bar, picking up a prostitute. Women and alcohol are Zaki’s vices. While Buthayna had lost any illusion about realizing her dreams, Zaki had wasted his. He watched time consume his dreams, Buthayna watches the city’s cruelty and injustice consume hers. The marriage of these characters, both figurative, and by the end of the film, literal, allows for a glimpse of hope in this harsh cityscape.

Zaki and Buthayna change each other’s worlds. He starts by giving her a new hairstyle, and her reflection surprises her. This fashionable, albeit superficial, transformation provides her with a new image, offering the possibility of re-imagining herself. He teaches her how to dance to the sound of Edith Piaf’s “La foule” (the crowd), the lyrics of which tell the story of a woman and a man brought together by the crowd in a romantic and sensual moment, only to be separated by that same crowd. After dancing, they embrace in front of the bedroom door, a visual intimation at a more intimate relationship (Figure 3.43). The following scene reveals a Cairene crowd, out of focus, and slowly, the camera focuses (Figures 3.44.3.45). The change of focus

suggests that Buthayna is gradually gaining focus, she becomes more grounded, since the editing puts one scene after the other and thus creates an inevitable association. She is one of those people who are lost daily in the urban landscape, amidst the unforgiving crowd that consumes identity and values anonymity. Until



Figure 3.43

Zaki's stories and his experience allow her to dream, to revel in a space and time that she thought were unattainable: the future. His stories about France, where he studied, fill her with wanderlust, and he opens her eyes to a different world. She tells him that she wants to find someone like him, but younger. Zaki replies that someone younger like him does not exist. "I am the last of the respectable ones."

Indeed, Zaki belongs to a dying breed. He is the son of an aristocratic *pasha*, and lived in Egypt during its golden era. He regrets returning to Cairo after his studies in Paris, but times were different, and as he tells Buthayna, Cairo then seemed more promising than the French city. It was a fashion and cultural capital, whereas now, as a failed architect, he says "the country needs thugs and thieves, not architects." The disillusioned 63-year old curmudgeon spends his time sleeping with prostitutes and drowning his reality in bottles of alcohol. However, as he asserts, he has never harmed anyone, except himself. His sister Dawlat, is a matriarch who is accusing him of tainting his father's reputation. When a prostitute steals from Zaki things that include his sister's diamond ring, Dawlat takes the opportunity to throw him out of their family apartment. That is when he starts living in the Yacoubian building. Dawlat is viciously greedy, and wants to get her hand on Zaki's inheritance, so she sues him for incompetence, stating that

he is demented and insane. Although Zaki believes that siblings should not fight in this manner, he discovers the extents to which Dawlat is willing to go to secure his inheritance, namely the two apartments. Zaki and Buthayna eventually start a romantic affair. Malak, the man who got Buthayna the job, had done so in the hope that she, one night when Zaki is drunk, would get him to sign over ownership of the Yacoubian apartment. However, after getting the signature, Buthayna recants, and tears up the document. She cannot betray Zaki. Malak betrays both of them by informing Dawlat of Zaki and Buthayna's illicit affair. One night, after Buthayna confesses that she is a virgin, and as they both lay in Zaki's bed, his home is invaded by the police. Dawlat had complained to the morality police that her brother was committing adultery in his house. As the policemen and Dawlat stand at the bedroom door, Zaki is furious, and screams that this is an invasion of privacy (Figure 3.46-3.47). "An invasion of privacy, or the invasion of the whore next to you?" replies Dawlat. The police officer declares that his sister had let them in. Zaki and Buthayna are caught in the act, and sexual relations outside of the bonds of marriage are a punishable crime under the law. Zaki maintains his sense of dignity by proclaiming that he and Buthayna will not leave this house naked, over his dead body. At the police station, the camera travels from Buthayna, to Zaki and finally to Dawlat, as they sit on the bench awaiting charges. Buthayna is crying, distraught by the scandal that this situation has created. An enraged Zaki has difficulty grasping how much hatred and resentment his sister has for him. Dawlat is implacable, resigned in her vicious quest, haughtily smoking, and ignoring her brother's outrage and Buthayna's cries (Figures 3.48-3.49). Meanwhile, the officers are making fun of Zaki and ridiculing him, reiterating words that Dawlat had thrown at her brother, about his romantic affairs. His attorney arrives, and repeats that this arrest constitutes an invasion of privacy, a violation of personal freedom. Once out, sitting in a coffee shop, Zaki tells Buthayna that they



Figure 3.44



Figure 3.45



Figure 3.46



Figure 3.47



Figure 3.48



Figure 3.49

must forget this humiliation, or they will die of frustration. Zaki, who is used to an antiquated sense of privilege, has learned to walk away from humiliating situation with his head held high. The scene that follows depicts Zaki and Buthayna's marriage, the hopeful note on which the film closes.

The climatic scene where Dawlat and the police invade Zaki and Buthayna's private space demonstrates how bodies, precisely because they are sexualized, lose their sanctity, and their ability to delineate personal from public space. It is noteworthy that this scene contains no nudity. Zaki faces the invasive mob wearing his boxer shorts, and Buthayna promptly hides her face under the covers. The body politic, the honor of the nation (connoted by Buthayna's virginity), overtakes and annuls the politics of the body that seeks autonomy and self-determination. Bodies are made to conform to the authoritarian control of the regulatory discourse of society, a discourse upheld by both patriarchy, through the image of the police, and matriarchy, through the image of Zaki's sister. Buthayna finds herself yet again trapped in the sexist articulation of her corporeality, only this time, it is not through a male individual who subjugates her femininity, her wishes and her subjectivity, but through a controlling institution that asserts its power even over her intimate moments of desire. Whether willing or unwilling, her body is thus appropriated: she is always at risk of being violated.

An image of a different violation of the body appears through the story of Taha. The young man, who has just finished school, aspires to take the exam to enter the police academy. The day of the exam, he wakes up early and performs his daily morning prayer. A pious young man, he believes in justice and fairness, and his dream of becoming a police officer is reflected in the mirror, as he finishes getting ready, and with his suit on, gives a salute (Figure 3.50). Despite his high scores, which would allow him to enter any college of his choice, he is asked

why he chooses the academy. Facing the admission committee, he explains that if everyone serves their country in a field they love, their service will be better (Figure 3.51). Taha receives acquiescing nods, and appears as an ideal candidate, especially when asked what qualities are necessary in a police officer: Discipline, an understanding of the spirit of justice, firmness, honor, and above all, true humanity. And yet, the committee instantly dismisses him, to his own consternation, when they find out that his father is a mere building custodian (Figure 3.52). Taha realizes that he cannot escape his social background, which seems to marginalize him, even when he goes to another college. His dream shattered, Taha searches for a community where he can be accepted for who he is, and one where he can belong. He finds this sense of belonging once he starts frequenting the mosque on campus, where he is recruited by an Islamist group. As he becomes more and more religious, he starts growing his beard and wearing the Islamic white garb. One day, he even buys Buthayna a present: a book on the veil. She instantly breaks off their engagement, realizing they are traveling down divergent paths. Taha's involvement with the Islamist movement on campus grows, and he starts participating in

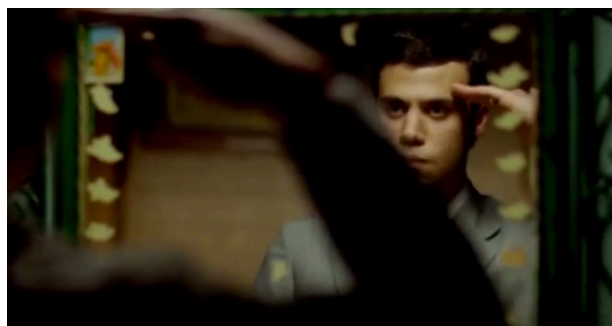


Figure 3.50



Figure 3.51



Figure 3.52

demonstrations on campus against the regime. The demonstrations call for an Islamic and not a secular society. He gets arrested and jailed during a demonstration that he is leading and where he is holding the megaphone.

In jail, he refuses to denounce and inform on his religious group. As a punishment, he is sodomized. He is thus robbed of his honor, and his masculinity is debased. When he once sought to become a police officer to serve his country, he now finds himself violated by that same dream. Blindfolded and



Figure 3.53

hands tied behind his back, Taha is pushed against the wall, as the camera slowly zooms out, and the screen fades to black. The diegetic sound of his screams as he is being raped (off screen), followed by the image of his naked body curled in ball in a dark cell, screaming and crying, (a shot that significantly lasts on screen) emphasize the vulnerability of the body (Figure 3.53). Unseen, yet heard, this violated body echoes the silent injustices and abusive punishments that many prisoners face in police stations. The dream for recognition that Taha was after, becomes a nightmare of disavowal. He was a young man who wanted to serve his country, he is now a man abused by the institution that serves his country, the same one he wanted to belong too. This is the tragic irony of Taha's fate: he is betrayed by the country that he wanted to serve.

It is interesting that when Taha indignantly confesses to his sheikh that he was raped, he expresses it in terms of a violation of honor (*hatk al-‘ird*). Sodomy is a taboo in religion and society, and the rape of a man takes a different undertone that the rape of a woman, as we see in *Chaos*, insofar as a raped man feels that his whole masculinity is challenged. His wounded

masculinity thereon guides his actions. The confessional scene between Taha and the Sheikh is shot in the same coffee shop where Zaki and Buthayna are later on. However, while Zaki advocates forgetting this humiliation and moving on, Taha seeks revenge, and asks that the sheikh and the Islamic group help him in his quest, especially since he did not inform on them. The sheikh takes him to a training camp in the desert (Figure 3.54), where he



Figure 3.54

undergoes military training. This camp is invisible to the authority, and exists nowhere on the map. Excluded from the city, Taha deflects toward the margin, the periphery, where he finds the means to put his plan into

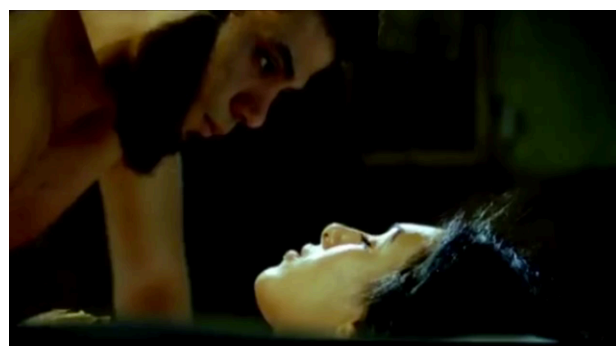


Figure 3.55

action: revenge on the police officer who ordered his rape. As an emasculated man, one who has seemingly lost his masculinity because he was raped, Taha is further marginalized from the ideal masculinity that the nation propagates. This double marginalization, the first being the one of the disillusioned youth, leads him to thrive in the peripheries of the urban space that has denied and rejected him. Hence, outside the borders of the cruel city, he reasserts his masculinity: two different scenes portray him making love to the woman he eventually marries there (Figure 3.55). These images contrast with the former image of his naked and abused body. Here, his sexuality is reaffirmed, the socio-economic hurdles that impeded his social ascension are cast aside, and his objective is set in motion. While the city articulates his powerlessness, in its margins Taha

finds the resources to assert his power, and affirm control over his life: it is the only space where he finds a sense of individual agency.

Taha eventually exacts revenge on the police officer. He recognizes him only by the sound of the zippo lighter he uses to light his cigarettes, since in jail Taha was blindfolded. After a shoot out scene in front of the police station, both of them die. The film criticizes



Figure 3.56

society and the government for creating and being responsible for the circumstances that beget terrorists. The rampant police brutality, portrayed in *Chaos* and *The Yacoubian Building*, was a catalyst of the 2011 uprising, which, let us recall took place on January 25, the national day to commemorate police forces, and during which more than 90 police stations were burned by protestors. Violence begets violence, and Taha's decision to resolve the conflict of his existence by resorting to murder unavoidably led to his demise, because, instead of overcoming his humiliation, as Zaki urges Buthayna to do, he chose to let it control his frustration, his anger, and his actions. Thereby, his death is inescapable, because, despite thriving in the margins, he does not escape the imprint the city left on his body. Thus, the victim becomes the perpetrator, and the perpetrator, the victim. Taha and the police officer are depicted lying in the street, side by side, their bodies riddled by bullet holes and drenched in blood (Figure 3.56). The juxtaposition of these two bodies places the oppressor and oppressed on a leveling plane where mutual destruction is an inevitable guarantee.

While the government's mistreatment and abuse of its citizens are foregrounded as the driving force behind this extremist case, the film also emphasizes the dangers of piety

transforming into religious extremism. There is another case where religion is used and corrupted to serve the desires of another character: Hajj ‘Azzam, who also lives in the building. Now a successful and pious business man, ‘Azzam is from modest origins, and used to be a shoeshiner. A married man with two adult sons, the Hajj starts having wet dreams. We see him attempting to wash this sin in the shower, and praying for forgiveness as he prays. Since his wife is unaccommodating, claiming that they are now too old to engage in such activities, he confesses to his sheikh his dilemma. The sheikh assures him that this is a sign of virility and health, and, most importantly, a blessing from God, considering his age. He further tells him that it is his right to get remarried. ‘Azzam however is worried about his sons’ objections (not his wife’s), and the sheikh alleviates his worries by stating that this is God’s word and law, and it is above any human’s objection. Therefore, ‘Azzam, on a business trips to Alexandria, finds a beautiful young widow, who is veiled. So‘ad is a poor woman with a child, and her family sees this as a great opportunity since she is unlikely to find a better suitor. In a prenuptial agreement, he stipulates that this marriage is to be kept secret, especially from his wife, and that there be no children. Seeing as ‘Azzam appears to be a man of God, and that her family is also religious, So‘ad accepts to move to Cairo, and leave her son behind. My primary focus in this plotline is So‘ad’s character, for reasons that will quickly become apparent.

So‘ad finds herself trapped between the four walls of the lavish apartment her new husband set up for her. While the first couple of times we see her she is veiled, because she is seen in public, once married, we enter her private space, and we see her without it. She quickly discovers that ‘Azzam only married her to satisfy his sexual desires. She is not allowed to leave the apartment, or to travel alone to Alexandria to see her son and family. She is literally a prisoner of her husband’s desires. The golden cage where she is imprisoned quickly loses its

luster. In a significant scene, after making love, and as ‘Azzam is getting out of bed, the camera zooms in on So‘ad’s expression, which is one of utter devastation and dejection (Figure 3.57). While marriage might offer her



Figure 3.57

comforts she did not have, she discovers that her husband is not interested in companionship.

‘Azzam never spends the night, and she feels that this home that has now become her primary residence, is nothing but a bed stop for him. It is a fake home, a copy of his original home the one he shares with his first wife. This marriage is nothing more than a material marriage, one of sexual pleasure, not one that reflects her true desires, which are sorely eclipsed by ‘Azzam’s words and desires.

Her misunderstanding of her husband’s motives are revealed when she happily announces that she is pregnant. ‘Azzam is furious, and tells her that she must have an abortion, that she thus disregarded their initial deal. So‘ad maintains



Figure 3.58

that she will not, considering abortion is against God’s law and will. One night, while she is sleeping, alone, some women enter her home. She wakes up screaming, but they drug and kidnap her. The camera pans out to a shot from above, and on the bed we see So‘ad’s body, surrounded by women in black, her white skin contrasting with the darkness of their clothing (Figure 3.58).

This contrast suggests her purity, her righteousness against the treachery and sinful betrayal of her husband. She wakes up in a hospital, and in the embrace of her brother, is informed that she had severe bleeding and lost the baby. ‘Azzam’s son is also there, and nonchalantly, tells her that she has breached their prenuptial agreement. ‘Azzam has divorced her. Her hospital bills are paid in full, and everything in the house here will be sent to her in Alexandria. So‘ad and her brother are appalled at ‘Azzam’s actions, not only had he betrayed her, he violated God’s law. That is the last we see of So‘ad.

The development of So‘ad’s subplot exposes another invasion of the body, one that further blurs the limits between the personal and the public. The female body is thus invaded in a very intimate way, one that she will not even remember, and yet one whose scars her body will forever carry. Unlike the abortions discussed earlier, namely those of Sylvia in *Chaos* and Nahed in *Scheherazade Tell Me a Story*, So‘ad’s forced abortion represents a violation against her body, and her wishes, wishes that were from the beginning of her interaction with ‘Azzam discarded. The sanctity of the body dissipates once more. This feticide that ‘Azzam is guilty of not only exposes his hypocrisy, but also reveals how So‘ad does not have any proprietary rights over her own body, similarly to Buthayna. The female body is thus deprived of its ownership and is engulfed by the regulatory control of female desire. In the hierarchy of power, it is forcefully and violently made to conform to male desire and subjugation. So‘ad’s abuse reflects the domestication and production of the docile female; it echoes the expressive look on her face in bed mentioned above. The deplorable state of existence of a woman, who has adorned her cage in gold, is an existence that ultimately spells her subjection and oppression. Abortion in this case reiterates the vulnerability of femininity. So‘ad is merely a sexual object, deprived even of her natural right to reap the benefit of her sexual desire. Her bondage to the prevailing sexist control

of feminine (sexual) desire exposes the tyranny of the commodification of the female body. Unlike the linguistic and social erasure that *Scheherazade* and *678* reveal, So‘ad’s erasure cements the objectification of the female body, and its commodified position in an economy of exchange between men (her brother and ‘Azzam). Even within the bonds of marriage, bonds that are supposedly sacred, So‘ad’s body is exploited, consumed and discarded by her husband’s sexual desires.

While female sexuality is made illicit and invalid, and male sexuality somehow predominates,¹⁹¹ the mechanisms and functions of both the masculine and feminine bodies are clandestine, perpetually cast in shadows and darkness. Hatim Rachid’s character transgresses against the heteronormative and hegemonic male sexuality of Egyptian society. Another resident of the decaying building, Hatim, the editor of a French newspaper, roams the street at night in search of poor men. He is portrayed as a predatory homosexual, albeit an effeminate one with westernized men. When the police officer threatens Taha in jail with rape, he expresses it in terms of doing to him what is done to Hatim. Everyone knows about the man’s lewd proclivities, lewd because homosexuality is taboo in Egyptian society, and the majority of Arab and Muslim countries. Hatim seduces his targets with wine and offers them commodities that they otherwise cannot afford. He accommodates his main lover, ‘Abd Rabbuh, his wife and baby son on the rooftop of the building, for instance, so he can maintain his relationship with him. Even though ‘Abd Rabbuh, a poor soldier in the security forces, feels that he is committing a sin, which Hatim of course denies, their affair continues, until, one night, his ill son is taken to the hospital where he dies. After that ‘Abd Rabbuh and his wife return to their home in Upper Egypt. Through flashback scenes, we discover that Hatim blames his mother’s promiscuity for his depraved fate: while she was sleeping with men in her bedroom, their servant would molest and abuse Hatim

¹⁹¹ Buthayna overcomes her humiliation only through Zaki’s efforts and decision to marry her.

the child. Homosexuality is thus explained, if not justified, through a traumatic history of childhood sexual abuse.

In the end the deviant nocturnal *flâneur* picks a young man up from the streets and brings him home, as usual. However, when Hatim lays on the bed on his stomach, preparing for sexual relations, this man strangles him. He is a thief who, after taking his watch, spits on Hatim's corpse. During the strangling scene, we only see Hatim's foregrounded figure



Figure 3.59

struggling, his face cut off (Figures 3.59-3.60), after which his body falls on the bed, his face half-hidden by the sheet. While in his essay “Queer Couplings: Formations of Religion and Sexuality in ‘Ala’ Al-Aswani’s *‘Imarat*



Figure 3.60

Ya ‘qubyan,”¹⁹² Michael Allan writes that “the book resists the simple localization of queer politics within a discourse of representation that would focus on good or bad depictions of homosexuality” (257), the same cannot be said of the film. The explanation of his homosexual orientation, the manner in which he dies, and the use of his name to forewarn Taha of torture, all point to the depiction of his aberrant sexuality. The deviance of homosexuality can also be seen as an interpretation of ‘Abd Rabbuh’s son’s death: it is divine punishment, in a manner of speaking. Moreover, the fact that the thief spits on Hatim’s corpse is also indicative of the denigration of the homosexual and queer body. It is noteworthy that in the novel, it is ‘Abd

¹⁹² Allan, Michael. “Queer Couplings: Formations of Religion and Sexuality in ‘Ala’ Al-Aswani’s *‘Imarat Ya ‘qubyan*.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 45 (2013): 253-269.

Rabbuh who kills Hatim in a passionate struggle, by beating his head against the wall until he bleeds. In the film, the fact that it is a stranger, and not a man who Hatim loves, and the absence of blood, suggest the depersonalization of the crime, and dehumanization of the body. It is a body that does not bleed. Hatim is also a passive gay, a fact that is stereotypically portrayed through his effeminate mannerism and fashion style. For example, ‘Abd Rabbuh’s wife is surprised to find her husband wearing stylish boxers one night, and he tells her that Hatim Bey bought them for him. This effeminate masculine body transgresses against the normative macho masculinity prevalent in Egyptian society.

Allan considers the juxtaposition of Hatim’s and Taha’s characters. “The parallelism invites a set of associations that complicate the conventional binarism the two characters might appear to occupy” (265),¹⁹³ namely by creating a structural analogy in identity formation: the terrorist (or fanatic) and the homosexual. Both characters are connected through the image of sodomy and narratives that intertwines apparent opposites, ultimately staging them as martyrs (267).¹⁹⁴ It is true that Taha’s tragic fate can be interpreted this way, and in the novel, maybe even Hatim’s. The film, on the other hand, represents queerness as a transgressive sexuality that is made intelligible through the revelation of child sexual abuse. Hatim’s character is a stereotypical character whose existence is justifiable through a psychological fallacy and his death, portrayed as a punishment for his libidinous and predatory meanderings in the nights. Hatim’s tragic fate results from circumstances brought on by bad parenting, while Taha’s is the consequence of social injustice. The homosexual body here carries the stigma of a social marginalization and persecution that is different than Taha’s sodomized body. This thread undeniably connects Taha and Hatim, creating, in Allan’s words, a “queer coupling,” it does not

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

however unveil a binarism between the two characters. The erasure of the body, on the other hand, is a thread that weaves the various images of abused, appropriated, and ultimately denied bodies.

The positions of the sexualized body, the traumatized body, the terrorist body, and the queer body delineate the collapse of private and public spaces, insofar as bodies are deprived of their sanctity and self-determination. Subjectivities in the corrupt and decaying world of *The Yacoubian Building* are precarious at best, and regulated by norms and discourses extrinsic to individuals. And, as secrecy and marginalization cloak various relationships, desire is perverted, and unfolds as a subjugating tool in a society that highlights difference by “marking” the body. These marked bodies, although they have the potential to be subversive and may find a path to resistance, ultimately express the subordination of subjects to a system of dominance. Ironically, despite the darkness, the shadows, and the marginalization, these bodies, while they disappear as the marker of individuality, the property of subjects, they are all the more visible to society’s disciplining eye: as the police officer tells Taha during his interrogation, “we know everything.” Knowing and seeing are thus inextricably linked (and it is all the more befitting that Taha was blindfolded during this episode, and that his Sheikh declares that the training camp is unknown (and thus invisible) to the government—hence it can exist and persist). This visible corporeal erasure reproduces the powerlessness of subjectivity, individuality and agency. In parallel, the invisibility of citizens’ bodies challenges the production of the body politic: if no *body* is there, whose *body* can the nation appropriate to reflect its image? For a fragmented citizenry, *The Yacoubian Building* demonstrates, dissipates, leaving behind memories of bodies that *were*.

State of Aporia: whose country is it anyway?

The nation in *Chaos* and *The Yacoubian Building* is a nation in crisis where citizens are torn between a glorified past and a contingent present.

The conciliatory endings of both films attest to this compulsive need to look toward a hopeful future, unlike the circular endings of

Scheherazade and *678*. The nation is thus romanticized in the former two films, where nostalgic characters constantly evoke images and memories of a by-gone era that has ultimately led to the present situation, which is a dire one. This

contradiction is in reality a blindness to the historical continuity of a society that has impeded the autonomous development of its subjects, for fear of dissent. The past is haunting, and so the city is haunted, trailing along its roads remnants of a period of national pride and victory. The city victorious is now a cruel and unjust city, as

Buthayna reminds us.

In *The Yacoubian Building*, this nostalgic past is presented from the beginning, alongside the credits. The camera offers us a historical background of the building, through archival images and constructed scenes (Figures 3.61-3.63) that reveal how the once grandiose apartment



Figure 3.61



Figure 3.62



Figure 3.63

building, along with the city, have, over the years, lost their splendor, to become what they now are, decaying and depraved. Zaki embodies this national nostalgia, for he regrets having returned to what he thought was a promising country. He maintains this longing through his relationship with Christine, a former lover, a foreigner who remained in Egypt and whose speech is punctuated with French sentences. She is now a singer in an upscale restaurant downtown Cairo, singing international songs, that include Edith Piaf’s “La Vie en Rose” and “Dream a Little Dream,” the first from 1931, the second from 1947. This foreign soundtrack to which Hamed adds Piaf’s “La Foule” recall the era of Egypt with its colonial powers, an era that aristocrats like Zaki remember and praise. Christine and Zaki’s love affair developed into a lifelong friendship, one they both value. On the other hand, when Buthayna first meets Christine, she is suspicious of their former relationship, which suggests her



Figure 3.64

traditional and conventional inability to fathom how love can turn into friendship. Eventually, Christine sings at Zaki and Buthayna’s wedding, and Zaki, through his stories and gallantry, which she cannot find in young men, has ensnared Buthayna into dreaming about a melancholic past that may seemingly lead the way to a hopeful future. The closing scene of the film, as they both walk down the street basking in the sound of Piaf’s “La Vie en Rose” attests to that (Figure 3.64). The assimilation of a foreign history, namely European, suggests a privilege that can overcome the daily humiliation and harsh realities of the present.

On the other hand, the westernization of Hatim who is also an heir of aristocrats and speaks French, is used to highlight his “foreignness.” His assimilation of a lifestyle, namely his

homosexuality, that estranges him from the rest of society is depicted as a deviance from Egyptian and Muslim values. He is humiliated when he dies, and his sexual practice, sodomy, is used to subordinate and dishonor Taha. During the interrogation, the police officer keeps asking Taha what Hatim is, until he answers “*shaadh*,” the word used to refer to homosexual in Arabic. Etymologically, the word means originally isolated, and secondarily, aberrant. Hence his sexuality at once marginalizes him, as previously mentioned, and marks him as different, in a pejorative way. The association between his “foreignness” and his sexuality is thereby inevitable. And despite Zaki’s promiscuity, his heterosexuality is articulated within a normative discourse of sexual desires, unlike Hatim’s perversion. Hence, their assimilation of these western ideals lead to opposing fates.

In *Chaos*, Chahine imbues his film with a similar sense of nostalgia, embodied in the character of Wedad, the school principal. Wedad is the political heir of the Nasserist era. Her house is decorated with portraits of the former president and she holds on to the memories of her late husband. She is disapproving of the current political climate, as evidenced in a scene where she refuses to have the posters of the National Democratic Party—the party of then president Mubarak—plastered on the school’s walls. Her principles and political ideals reject a party that has for twenty four years suffocated the citizens. In parallel, she recounts her love story with Hafez to Nour, and we discover they had met during a demonstration, and they had lived through the gloriously nationalistic days of Nasser. She never remarried after her husband’s death and brought up Sherif on her own. Her yearning for the assertive and charismatic leader combined with her loving memories of her dead husband create in her mind an image of the ideal man, one that she constantly seeks to recreate and idealizes in her son, Sherif. This idealization becomes apparent when Sherif and Wedad have a fight during which her son accuses her of cruelty when

she brought him up as his father, thus transferring her love for her husband to her son. Wedad admits that she loves him like she loved Hafez.

It is worth noting that in Arabic, the word *hafez* means the one who preserves, looks after, maintains: he is the custodian. Again, the choice of name is revelatory. Wedad has preserved memories of her personal history confounded with that of an Egypt fighting for independence during the 50s and 60s. Hafez thus embodies this preservation of historical memory, one that is notably marked with the figure of president Nasser. This historical memory is one that she not only wants to pass along to her son, but one that she wants to translate, as a personal memory, in the life of her son, as much as she had in her own. However, here, the mother has failed her son, because she wanted to bring him up as the man she had married and lost. The image of the father takes over that of the son, who in turn is lost, oscillating between this ideal image that all his life he has aspired to, and his personal goals and ambitions. This dialogue may even express Sherif's resentment for his mother and the memory of his father, for it restricted his own personal aspirations, and most importantly, because it provided only one mold for him to grow into, one that did not necessarily fit. Therefore he leaves the house.

Eventually they reconcile, and during this scene, for dramatic and romantic effect, non-diegetic music primarily played with the *oud*, adds a sense of sadness and nostalgia. After his



Figure 3.65

short rebellion, the prodigal son returns to his mother (and to his senses). In the following scene, while Wedad and Nour are preparing dinner in the kitchen, Sherif puts a record on the gramophone, the singer is an old and famous Egyptian star, Farid

el-Atrash, and it's his mother's favorite song (Figure 3.65). This is notably the pivotal moment

when Sherif starts noticing Nour, and when they start their romance. The son's principled idealism and the mother's nostalgic idealism merge into the realization of this romance, something the mother had wished for from the beginning of the film. While Chahine resolves the conflict between the old and the new, as embodied through the mother and the son, he also highlights an inherent component of this same conflict namely that of tradition and modernity.

The return to tradition is evident in Hatem's recourse to superstition to cast a love spell on Nour, as he reaches out to a sheikh, a priest, and an old woman. The sheikh tells him to forget such absurdities, and to instead go participate in a *moulid*, a feast to celebrate sacred religious figures. "Go cleanse your heart and forget about this nonsense." While Hatem does indeed join the entrancing dance, he is unable and incapable of reaching the higher state of consciousness that such festivities generally offer. At the church, the priest tells him to clear his mind, that they do not engage in such things, and that he will pray for him. Hatem is angry, and threatens and blackmails the priest, saying that there will no celebrations this year, no congregation, because the state is under emergency law. The father replies: "Shame on you, you're in a church, the church of Saint Therese." "Isn't this the church of miracles? Tell her there are no festivities this year until Nour loves Hatem, Naaima's son." His voice echoes in the colorful church, which contrasts with his black uniform. In a panning out shot, Hatem's stature is showcased (Figure 3.66): his grandiosity knows no boundaries. While his hubris did not transgress against the Muslim sheikh, he felt no qualms about his threats to the Coptic Christian priest. Finally, he believes in the magical water that he receives from the old woman, which is supposedly collected from a well where a *djinn*¹⁹⁵ lives. The audience however knows that this is a hoax.

¹⁹⁵ A *djinn* is a supernatural creature mentioned in the Qur'an.

Hatem's naïveté and eagerness to believe in anything to insure Nour's love, and his childish excitement when he thinks he has, not only infantilize him, but reveal a mentality that is often described as backward in Egyptian popular



Figure 3.66

culture. The “magical” water exposes how superstition is a scheme and its practices are perpetuated on the illiterate and ignorant. Even religion, both Islam and Christianity, do not condone it, and decry its absurdity. Hatem's manic attachment to the superstitious belief that Nour can fall under a love spell decry an archaic belief that has no place in today's modern world. While earlier Egyptian writings of nationalist modernist discourse “reprimanded women for partaking of traditional customs or rituals that are deemed irrational and superstitious or not an integral part of ‘true’ religion,”¹⁹⁶ as Elsadda writes in her book *Gender, Nation, and the Arabic Novel: Egypt, 1892-2008*, especially in light of the modernity/tradition debate during the colonial and anti-colonial periods (15),¹⁹⁷ it is Hatem here who engages in these irrational customs, ones that are fraudulent, and hence not part of religion. Chahine's criticism regarding superstition is not altogether negative, for both Baheya and Nour also have recourse during the film to superstition.

¹⁹⁶ Elsadda, Hoda. *Gender, Nation, and the Arabic Novel Egypt, 1892-2008*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012.

¹⁹⁷ Elsadda notably mentions how Qasim Amin, the author of *The Liberation of Woman* and *The New Woman* (originally published in 1899 and 1900, respectively), “blamed women for the backwardness of the nation and believed that their bad habits, their useless pursuits, and their belief in superstitions were detrimental to all members of the family. Education was a necessity for the improvement of the lot of women and the future of the nation” (22-3).

At one point Baheya uses *bokhoor*, or incense, to bless her daughter. She then picks a paper doll with a needle as she chases the evil eye away, especially Hatem's. Nour on the other hand keeps telling her that this is all nonsense, that the smoke is killing her. In another scene where Sherif and Nour are sitting by the Nile, Nour asks him if he wants her to read his palm. "You know how?" "Of course." She starts by saying he has a journey ahead, he laughs, and says "That's an old one." She admits that she has never traveled. Sherif then takes her hand and repeats her words, that she has a journey ahead of her. She gets excited, and he smilingly says that they will spend their honeymoon in Aswan. While this scene gives palm reading a playful dimension, Sherif's answer to Nour's brief reading demonstrates how in fact this practice does not offer "new" revelations. In addition, considering the fate that befalls Nour, it is clear that the blessing *bokhoor* and the pricking paper doll Baheya uses to protect her daughter fail. However, while Hatem's use of superstition and intentions are deemed ridiculous, deceitful and ignorant, Baheya's and Nour's beliefs are grounded in good intentions, and used to highlight how these old customs and rituals, even if propagated by religious authorities, are antiquated and useless.

While *The Yacoubian Building* discloses through the stories of 'Azzam, and Taha the deterioration and corruption of religion, on a personal as well as a political level. On the other hand, in response to 'Abd Rabbuh's religious objection to sodomy, especially after he hears a sheikh at the mosque relating the punishment of the people of Lut, and that sodomy shakes the throne of heaven, Hatim simply asks him if what is the problem with one man loving another. God is great and merciful. He brings us what he considers real sins, such as adultery and abortion. But two men in love should not be an issue (and he adds that men do not get pregnant). 'Abd Rabbuh is referred to as a simple man from Upper Egypt, who does not understand the world. Religion is thus framed as the discourse of the uneducated and unsophisticated, and Hatim

justifies what ‘Abd Rabbuh considers a pervert act, through the notion of love, and modernity. Of course, the manner in which Hatim “secures” ‘Abd Rabbuh’s love is itself questionable, since it includes seducing him with material goods, and inebriating him with wine. And, considering Hatim’s tragic fate, his explanation is nonetheless condemned in the narrative, and homosexuality is indeed framed as not part of “true religion.”

In parallel, *Chaos* also offers a reflection on the obsolescence of religion in modern life. In a significant scene, after Nour expresses her fear and worry to her mother about Hatem and his stalking behavior, mother and daughter head out to the street, which, since it is the season for parliamentary elections in Cairo, is filled with banners for the various candidates and political parties. As they are walking, the scene is punctuated with close-ups of the different hanging banners, on which we can also read slogans (Figures 3.67-3.70). Baheya and Nour reach their destination: the office of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) party, whose slogan is “Islam is the solution” (Figure 3.70). The representative they meet informs them in a formal voice: “Your vote for us is your path to heaven.” The man was speaking in classical Arabic,¹⁹⁸ and Baheya and Nour could barely understand him. Baheya was hoping to find some guidance, or a solution to their problem. However, he was incomprehensible to them, and they left without finding any comfort in the archaic offerings of the religious party. In fact, they were laughing at how he sounded. The scene exposes how the MB uses religion for political gain, and as a commodity for the exchange of heavenly promises. In this commerce between divinity and politics, the MB is represented as a party that not only corrupts religion, but one that is incapable even of speaking a language citizens understand. It is antiquated and offers no real social value to citizens in need.

¹⁹⁸ It is worthy mentioning that in *The Yacoubian Building*, when Taha interacts with the various members of the Islamist group, they are always speaking in classical Arabic, while Taha speaks in colloquial Egyptian. This linguistic difference suggests that the young man, although he seeks a place to belong and uses the group’s political agenda to his own personal ends, he is never fully integrated.

Political solutions



Figure 3.67



Figure 3.68



Figure 3.69



Figure 3.70

As religion is integrated and manipulated in the political sphere, the film emphasizes how its worldview is not compatible with social realities. All these moments in the film contrast Hatem's ignorant belief in superstition and his evil intentions with Baheya and Nour's (relative) pragmatism and their good motives. Ultimately, Hatem's misunderstanding of tradition and cultural norms, combined with his authority, are indicative of the failure of the system to adapt to difference, modernity, and the changing needs of the citizens. Throughout the film, past, present and a sense of foretold future collide. The heist scene mentioned earlier does not only reveal Hatem's philistinism, but also his lack of understanding of history and tradition, and his hubris in negating them and believing himself superior to them. He does not value the old, century-long traditions, and expresses no doubt or fear about replacing them with new and fake ones. The police station where Hatem works used to be a prince's palace. The government is therefore the new system that has replaced the monarchy, and colonialism. An old man works there serving coffee and tea, and he has throughout his life witnessed the changes that this place has undergone. In one scene, Hatem asks him: "Who's the prince now?" The old man, looking at a portrait of the prince, replies: "He is. But you're the king." Thus, the police, and by association the ruling system, are the heirs of the monarchy. However, Chahine exposes their position as ignorant, corrupt, and out of time and place. The real traditions and ideals that are to be guarded and valued are the ones that the mothers and traditional women¹⁹⁹ in the film embody, namely Wedad, Baheya and Nour.

Both films thus exemplify the confrontation between the old idealism anchored in nostalgia and melancholia for a previous time, and a new form of idealism that finds no counterpart in the westernization, i.e. a bastardization and corruption, of traditional values. In

¹⁹⁹ By traditional women, I specifically mean in contrast to Sylvia, who embodies the bastardization and corruption of traditional Egyptian values and ideals.

Politics of Nostalgia in the Arab Novel, Ouyang uses Svetlana Boym's description of nostalgia in *The Future of Nostalgia*, to emphasize that "nostalgia is a 'historical emotion', coeval with modernity, and the result of a new understanding of time and space. It is simultaneously 'a sentiment of loss and displacement' and 'romance with one's own fantasy', and 'affective yearning for a community with a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world'" (17).²⁰⁰ This 'affective yearning' is according to Ouyang, a "defensive mechanism not only to the 'accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals' that is modernity but also to the overwhelming presence of the cultural other in Arab modernity" (51).²⁰¹ On the one hand, we witness in *Chaos*, Wedad's nostalgia through her memories and her idealization of her son. Her role as a headmistress of a school for girls further emphasizes her yearning to participate in bringing up future generations who would ideally be active participants (like herself) in their communities. Unlike Hatem, Sherif and Wedad gain this "new understanding of time and space," and this is why it is crucial that Nour, who embodies Wedad's own fantasy, becomes romantically involved with Sherif. On the other hand, *The Yacoubian Building* clearly portrays the characters' sentiment of loss and displacement. Their fragmented worlds are products of socio-economic and political issues that stifle and impede their personal growths. And while the cultural other is much easier to spot when it appears cloaked in western norms, such as Sylvia in *Chaos* or Hatim in *The Yacoubian Building*, the task is much more difficult and, indeed, overwhelming, when this "other" is embedded in one's own community, and even controls it, such as the police.²⁰²

²⁰⁰ Ouyang, Wen-chin. *Politics of Nostalgia in the Arabic Novel: Nation-State, Modernity and Tradition*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

²⁰² It is relevant to ask if, when a ruling system has succeeded in the estrangement of the majority of its citizens, if it is not in fact the system that is strange or foreign to its own people.

Ultimately, both *Chaos* and *The Yacoubian Building* engage with a poetics of nostalgia, that simultaneously exposes the plaguing struggle between modernity and tradition, and Western and Egyptian, and emphatically reveals how this struggle is gendered. Elsadda writes that “the modernity vs. tradition conflict also manifested itself as a conflict between different paradigms of masculinity and femininity” (5).²⁰³ In *Chaos*, Chahine presents this conflict through the characters of Sherif and Sylvia, and Nour and Hatem. Nour encapsulates the appropriate blend of tradition and modernity, in search of a masculine counterpart, namely Sherif. Her idealization of and naïve affection for Sherif reflect the nation’s desire to escape the pervasive corruption inherent in society. However, we discover that some of her qualities are superficial, a façade that actually hides debilitating problems in society. For instance, during an inspection at school, the inspector discovers that students in her class cannot answer simple questions in English, her subject. In the office of the headmistress, Nour then bemoans the failure of the education system, and explains how, while she was in college, supposedly studying English, she never learned the language. The inspector tells Wedad that “The virus of chaos has reached every aspect of the country.” The problem is deep-rooted into a system that has corrupted even education. In the “School of Morality and Manners for Girls,”²⁰⁴ what are the students learning, if their teachers lack the knowledge? Chahine is thus criticizing a ruling system that has failed to develop an educational framework that provides adequate knowledge for future professionals, because, even as more and more women have access to education, it is in fact an unsuccessful education. Educating the nation thus becomes a feminine responsibility, one that woman is not equipped to do because the nation has failed to provide her with the appropriate means.

²⁰³ Elsadda, 2012.

²⁰⁴ In Arabic the word for morality and manners is the same, *tarbiyya*, which is the name of the school.

The treatment of the female bodies and sexuality in the *The Yacoubian Building* attests to the production of a sexist, patriarchal, if not misogynist economy that revolves around the commodification of women, and the regulation of their sexuality. The image of Taha in the desert training camp, getting married appears revelatory. He never sees her face until after the ceremony—and she is never named—and while his socio-economic problems prolonged his engagement to Buthayna and he eventually had nothing to offer her, the promise of a bride seems like a reward for his participation in the camp. Taha's scenes of lovemaking reassert his masculinity, that was dishonored by rape. We can also recall 'Azzam's treatment of So'ad, and the denunciation of Zaki and Buthayna's affair. All these characters struggle to find and cement their places in a society that effectively uses them to propagate a discourse of subordination and obedience. Ultimately, it is the system that prevails, above everyone else, and it applies the regulations and norms it deems necessary to maintain its dominance over citizens.

Both men and women are thus confined within this hegemonic formation of identity.

Elsadda explains that

Representations of ideal gendered roles and characteristics not only define and shape the contours of national identity and national futures, they are also cultural interventions in ideological contestations over the image of the nation. . . .

[C]onflicting representations of gendered roles shape and correspond to conflicting political allegiances as well as to conflicting ideologies regarding the modernity vs. tradition paradigm for explicating the modern history of the Arab world, and regarding the place of the national in the context of globalization. (xiii-xiv)²⁰⁵

In *Chaos*, Hatem, the corrupt police officer, and Sylvia, the abortive Westernized woman cannot

²⁰⁵ Elsadda, 2012.

reflect national ideals. Neither can Taha the Islamist terrorist, or Hatim the predatory Westernized homosexual in *The Yacoubian Building*. On the contrary, they are the corrupted narratives. However, the embodied qualities of Sherif and Nour on the one hand, and Buthayna and Zaki's ability to hope for a better future, on the other, offer a glimpse of a national future that may survive the conflicting ideologies and debilitating contestations that have fragmented the nation. And while *The Yacoubian Building* does offer an ending that looks toward a pink-colored life, *Chaos* ends by reinstating the state's engulfing position and its imminent dominance, as seen through the image of the Central Security trucks arriving to the scene of the police station and the loudening sound of sirens. The closing scene of *Yacoubian* depicts Zaki and Buthayna heading toward the utopic vision of Tahrir Square. *Chaos*, after a hopeful heartbeat, bleakly returns to the paralyzing status quo.

The tensions between the linearity of the narratives in *Chaos* and *The Yacoubian Building* and the nostalgia that Chahine and Hamed respectively infuse within those narratives portray a schism between the past of the nation, and the present of its citizens. In "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation," Homi Bhabha writes that

the people are the historical 'objects' of a nationalist pedagogy, giving the discourse an authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin in the past; the people are also the 'subjects' of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation-people to demonstrate the prodigious, living principles of the people as contemporaneity: as that sign of the present through which national life is redeemed and iterated as a reproductive process. The scraps, patches and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a coherent national culture, while the very act of the

narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects. In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative. It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of writing the nation.

(145-6)²⁰⁶

Writing the nation here traces the fragmentary threads that weave “the scraps, patches and rags of daily life.” The fragment becomes the anatomy of the nation precisely because it exposes the fragmentation of citizens as subjects, and the reproduction of citizens as objects. The fragmentation is so extensive, it does not even spare the sibling relationship exemplified through Zaki and Dawlat’s interactions. Family, the nucleus of the nation disintegrates. Finally, the object/subject dichotomy is nowhere as obvious as through the treatment of female bodies. Women do not engender the nation (at least not willingly!); their raped, abused and violated bodies reproduce the ambivalence of modern society and belie the cohesion of national culture. Chahine and Hamed reify a cinematic realism that may reveal more than it intended. “The present of the people’s history, then, is a practice that destroys the constant principle of the national culture that attempts to hark back to a ‘true’ national past, which is often represented in the reified forms of realism and stereotypes” (152).²⁰⁷ Nour lays in the arms of Sherif and Buthaina holds Zaki’s hand: Egypt finds its male savior. Their relationships are so contrived, resting on the woman’s need to complement her ideals, her powerlessness, and her lack of autonomy and self-determination. The romance in both films is a last attempt to reconcile both a past and a present that do not seamlessly align. And if they do, it is through threaded patches

²⁰⁶ Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

with gaping holes. In the end, the narratives of the nation are suspended over a state of aporia that reflects more the tragedy of its citizens than a romance.

CONCLUSION

Fantasies of a Nation or A Nation of Fantasies?

Narratives of Vulnerabilities

On March 22, 2015, a day after Mother's Day, Egyptian president Abdel Fattah el Sisi presented Sisa Abu Daooh with "Best Mother" award, an unprecedented move in Egyptian history.²⁰⁸ For forty years, Abu Daooh has been living as a man since her husband's death to support herself and her daughter. The ironic discrepancy inherent in this narrative is jarring, as the best model for motherhood becomes a woman pretending to be a man. While I am not denying the dire circumstances that led her to adopt such a role and the fact that she is indeed a story of resilience and perseverance, she is a prime example of how oppressing and self-effacing society is. Motherhood here is celebrated as the privation of femininity and the embrace of masculinity. Instead of condemning, or at least criticizing, the social conditions and reality that forced her to hide her womanhood, this award applauds patriarchy, sexism and misogyny, with an underlying note of somatophobia, in particular that of the female body in public space. It was no secret that she was a woman, since she never hid it, she explains.²⁰⁹ Hence the acceptance of her pretense is inherently a disavowal of her femininity, and more dangerously, the title of "Best Mom" implies that masculinity is appropriating even motherhood, since this particular mother is a man, albeit a pretend one.

Abu Daooh negotiated with her own social environment to persevere and exist, in order to be able to afford her daughter (and herself) a life. However, she was thereby denied, at least in

²⁰⁸ Kingsley, Patrick. "Egyptian woman who has lived as man for 40 years voted 'best mom'." *The Guardian*. March 22, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/22/egyptian-woman-award-lived-as-man>

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

public, the right to *be* a woman. This sacrificial self-effacement is particularly problematic, because the nation has turned her narrative into one of celebrated victory, when it could suggest a tragedy in the development of female identity. It corrupts the identification process: pretend-man is sublimated, and woman subverted. This subversion of femininity, womanhood, and motherhood articulates the nation's failure to acknowledge, understand, and reflect on the roles of women in society, women who have struggled—and continue to struggle—to validate their personal choices and to express their own identities, *as women*. This national failure emphasizes a blindness to women's vulnerabilities, and constructs a threatening representation of women.

I situate my research at the crux of this debate, as I question the representations of vulnerabilities, and the vulnerabilities of representations. Framing my research with the conceptual framework of *noon el neswa*, or the feminine “n,” does delineate a linguistic void emblematic of women's erasure in public, but it is by no means a holistic concept. This grammatical omission is only visible in colloquial Egyptian, and hence, my observation and the connections I create to, and within, the various narratives I critique are applicable to Egypt, and their relation to the rest of the Arab world, the Middle East, or formerly colonized regions is tenuous at best. Despite the theoretical threads I weave between different voices from Morocco to India, and even the West, my aim is to interrogate and challenge representations of women in Egypt. My national frame provides moments of reflection and reflexivity in narratives that reveal innovative matrices of representability of women, and critical explorations of conventional representations of women.

Scheherazade Tell Me a Story provides interstices between women's voices, especially as storytellers, and their images, particularly the ones constructed and maintained by society. The narratives of the four main protagonists contest the image of a monolith that disavows the female

subject. They highlight the undeniable political dimension of women's lives. Each narrative deconstructs the notions of love and marriage, notions that are socially reinforced and that expect female compromise and submission. However, the power of these narratives reaches further by questioning the extent of female complicity in creating an idealized and self-serving image of love that is inherently incompatible with the women's self-images. By cloistering herself in a mental asylum after she gives up on finding a husband who would love and respect her as his equal, Amani embraces the social stigma of madness, associated with her failure to get married. Her narratives connects with Safaa, insofar as she and her two sisters, after the death of their father, project their social insecurities of being orphaned women, onto an idealized masculine version that was nothing but an illusion. Because this man pretended to give each woman what she wanted and thereby betrayed all three. Safaa saw no other solution to rectify this betrayal than to kill the lover. Safaa's narrative of betrayal and murder connects with Nahed, who is also betrayed by her husband when he denies paternity to her unborn child. She chooses to have an abortion, rejecting his extortion scheme, and, while she does succumb to a self-destructive stupor, she eventually comes out of it to demonstrate against the corruption of politics when her ex-husband becomes minister. Finally Heba, who invited the three women to narrate their stories on her show, appears on stage to tell her own story after being beaten by her husband who blamed her and her show for his professional failure. Her narrative develops alongside the women who are remembering theirs on stage. While Heba chooses the theme of women on her show to be less controversial (to please her husband), she ends up creating more controversy than when she interviewed political figures. These narratives question the constructs of masculinity and its implied reliance on female compliance to impose its frail dominance, but they also challenge women's own constructs of love, marriage and motherhood.

The recognition of the storyteller in the title allows director Yousry Nasrallah to create a poetics of proliferation that emphasizes the possibility of the constant and endless renewal of women's voices and stories. Drawing on the public's cultural associations with *A Thousand and One Nights*, the filmmakers evidently affirms a *rapprochement* between the eloquent queen and the female protagonists. What does this iconic figure suggest to the audience? Her name is accompanied with a set of intertextual assumptions, images, and intentions. While she remains a controversial figure even for feminists—is she merely another representation of the submissive woman, or does she succeed in circumventing the patriarchal restraint on gender roles?—the film transposes her to a new setting. The imaginative value of Scheherazade has always been reduced by many Western representations to her ability to relate endless stories to thwart of her execution, until one day she finally did it. Mernissi remarks that

I was amazed to realize that for many Westerners, Scheherazade was considered a lovely but simple-minded entertainer, someone who narrates innocuous tales and dresses fabulously. In our part of the world, Scheherazade is perceived as a courageous heroine and is one of our rare female mythical figures. Scheherazade is a strategist and a powerful thinker, who uses her psychological knowledge of human beings to get them to walk faster and leap higher. Like Saladin and Sindbad, she makes us bolder and more sure of ourselves and of our capacity to transform the world and its people. (15)²¹⁰

Indeed, Nasrallah's Scheherazade, not only has many voices, but she does not narrate innocuous tales. She embodies El Saadawi's "dangerous woman," the one who speaks the dangerous truth. Nasrallah significantly remembers that the seemingly innocent queen narrates her stories first to her sister. Thereby the film weaves narratives thread between women who learn to talk to one

²¹⁰ Mernissi, 1994.

another. Ultimately, Scheherazade's power lies in her creation of a framework that can transform not only the storyteller herself, but her world and the people around her. She tells her story, out of context, not to a king, nor to escape execution: Scheherazade is here a twenty-first century woman whose symbolic power informs the text, and demands the audience's attention and awareness to what lies behind the polymorphic appearances of women.

In *Cairo 678*, the apparent vulnerability of women is physical, as the main theme of the film is sexual harassment. Fayza suffers daily violation in public transportation. Nelly is dragged by her shirt by a man driving in front of her building. Finally Seba is assaulted by a mob after a football game she attends with her husband. All three women are from different social backgrounds: Fayza is a veiled mother of two from a modest class, Nelly is a middle-class telemarketer who aspires to be a stand-up comedian, and Seba is jewelry designer from a privileged background. Their narratives intersect to eventually meet and confront this pervasive violation against the female body. Nelly chooses to pursue her case through the judiciary, but it is only when Fayza starts stabbing men in the groin with a pin from her veil that the police begin paying attention to their issue. Because their experiences are rendered invisible and silent by a social discourse of property and propriety, that ultimately negates the existence of sexual harassment and the threat to female corporeality. The film reveals the state's ineptitude at legally handling such violations, and society's complicity in perpetuating it. However, it also exposes women's internal struggles against the social disavowal of their experience, and the inevitable confrontation between women about this subjective denial, as they each internalize society's constructs of their own images. These narratives offer a scathing criticism of a masculinity that imposes its dominance and ownership of the female body.

Director Mohamed Diab develops a poetics of revelation in *Cairo 678* that delineates a

moral intelligibility of women's experiences of sexual harassment. As the women negotiate their urban mobility in order not to succumb to shameful victimhood, they learn to understand the relationality between other women, in their attempt to articulate a sense of belonging in a city that constantly moves, oblivious to their suffering. Diab creates patterns of repetition and circularity that demonstrate at once the inevitability of female sexual harassment, and also the significance and pertinence of women's experience in weaving the social fabric of our existence. Moreover, Nelly's story is based on the true story of Nuha Roushdy, the first woman to pursue a sexual harassment case in Egypt, in 2008. The offender was fined and sentenced to prison, and since then new legislation has been enacted, although official complaints are still too few. The film was highly criticized for potentially encouraging women to stab men in the groin and for defaming Egypt. This challenge of national loyalty is echoed in the film, as Nelly is also accused of slandering Egypt's reputation when she admits on air that she was sexually harassed. This is precisely the reason the film is significant in representing transgressive narratives of women who confront social regulatory discourse on gender roles and constructs.

I chose to combine *This Is Chaos* and *The Yacoubian Building* because both films employ traditional realist filmic formula to portray the disintegration of the nation, a disintegration that is inevitable especially if women are subordinated to the fantasy of a nation that they embody, as in *This Is Chaos*, or forced into submission because of gender difference. The survival of the whole here takes precedence over the sum of its alienated subjects.

This Is Chaos depicts Hatem, a corrupt police officer, who rules over his Cairo neighborhood and is obsessed with Nour, his neighbor. Nour loves Sherif, the son of the principal of the school where she is a teacher. Sherif eventually leaves his fiancée Syliva and starts courting Nour, which precipitates Hatem to take dire measures to possess Nour: he kidnaps

and rapes her. By the end of the film, Sherif and Nour lead a witch hunt where they are joined by the frustrated people in the neighborhood to arrest Hatem for all the injustices he has caused, including detaining and torturing young protestors without legal charges. Directors Youssef Chahine and Khaled Youssef provide an obvious criticism of the corrupt Mubarak regime that has instilled a ubiquitous sense of injustice in society, and the film was understandably viewed as prophetic of the 2011 revolution against the regime.

However, this critical rhetoric where Nour symbolizes Egypt conceals a problematic representation of femininity, that traces the detrimental dichotomies used to define the nation, namely purity/corruption, tradition/modernity, and Egyptian/Western. Nour's rape comes to represent the rape of the nation by the state, and between the fissures of these two representations Nour, the female subject is effaced, for the benefit of the community. The abstraction of Nour exposes how female corporeality is used to incite feelings of collectivity and solidarity, to the detriment of Nour's personal development and subjectivity. The female victim of the rape is forgotten, to be replaced by the wounded nation, an entity that resides outside of herself and to which she belongs only as an appropriated body. In addition, the roles of Sherif's and Nour's mothers reinforce the dichotomies that are used to essentialize the nation. These binaries create a schism in society, one that *The Yacoubian Building* uses and attempts to subvert.

Based on the best-selling novel of the same name, *The Yacoubian Building* traces the transformation of Cairo (and thereby Egypt) through the fall from grandeur of a downtown building, symbolized by the changing hierarchy of its inhabitants. The narratives of the film are more complex and interweave patterns of connections that ultimately emphasize the disintegration of society through the systematic alienation of its citizens. In my analysis, I chose to focus on four characters (all connected to the building): Buthayna, Taha, So'ad, and Hatim.

Buthayna is a poor young woman who is forced to endure sexual harassment by her boss to keep a job. She eventually meets, works for, and falls in love with Zaki, a disillusioned aristocratic sexagenarian who chooses to drown his sorrow in alcohol and with prostitutes. Taha is a young man, unofficially engaged to Buthayna, who dreamed of joining the police academy to serve his country. However, his dream is shattered when he is rejected because of his poor socio-economic background. Taha and Buthayna part ways when he ends up joining an Islamist group, an association that gets him arrested and raped. He then focuses all his effort on exacting revenge on the man responsible for his violation. He eventually kills him and is killed in the process. So'ad, a young widow with a son, becomes the second wife of 'Azzam, a pious and rich business man who keeps having wet dreams (which he uses to justify his need to remarry). He stipulates that So'ad does not get pregnant. The young woman left her son and family basically to satisfy 'Azzam's sexual appetites. Therefore when she becomes pregnant, he arranges to have her drugged, kidnaped and undergo an abortion against her will. Finally, there is Hatim, a homosexual who roams the nightly streets in search of a lover. He seduces a poor security officer, despite the latter's religious reservation about sodomy. His lover leaves him when his baby son dies. Hatim picks up another young man who ends up killing him and spitting on his body.

These four narratives reveal a regulatory discourse, enforced by the state, that forces citizens' bodies to conform, in order to perpetuate a utopic sense of cohesion and homogeneity that excludes difference and alienates subjects. Director Marwan Hamed creates a visual rhetoric that retraces the commodification of female bodies, and the dematerialization of masculine bodies, and that exposes how dissent is fraudulently transformed into submission. However, the film, imbued with nostalgia, emphasizes similar binaries as *Chaos*, and despite its representation of a society in crisis, the film heavily relies on these divisions to instill national sentiment.

Vulnerable Times

The past always seems so ordered, so logical, relying on a process of conscious amnesia that articulates a contrived teleological arrangement to all the contingencies that have come to create the present. In the cracks and the crevices of this neat alignment, relegated to the abyss of forgetfulness, are individual histories. History, with a capital H, eliminates vulnerabilities, because it emphasizes utilitarian modes of discourse that privilege the collective over the personal, the big picture over the small vignettes. It portends to a seamless homogeneity that resents its own weaknesses. Because weakness implies vulnerability. The fictive teleological continuum of History—the nation’s history—does not account for subjective experiences of the same history. Individual stories are woven, chaotic, with detours, winding roads, and the possibilities of getting lost in order to find oneself.

It is not a coincidence that *Scheherazade Tell Me a Story* and *Cairo 678* do not follow a linear plot, while *This Is Chaos* and *The Yacoubian Building* do, even if the latter provides parallels. As if, the particular transgressive narratives of the first two films escape the temporality that otherwise delineates the development of the other two. Female subjectivity develops in a different time than the one where the history of the nation subsumes, subverts and engulfs the woman it wants to appropriate for its reimagining. Chahine and Hamed reproduce a woman that is amenable to the history of the nation, one that can look at the future, albeit a utopic one, and hope. She can hope, because she is in the embrace of a man, who can hold her hand and guide her. However, as the lyrics from Umm Kalthoum’s song repeat, “Give me my freedom, let go of my hand,” no man is holding the hands of the women in *Scheherazade* and *678*. Nasrallah and Diab produce women at the margin of social and historical discourse, ones who transgress against the confines imposed by a society whose history has systematically

cannibalized their images, reproduced them only to reproduce itself. The temporality in these two films allow women, through memories and repetitions, to engage with different modalities to be, to become, to escape regulatory temporalities, because, as Kristeva writes, “female subjectivity as it gives itself up to intuition becomes a problem with respect to a certain conception of time: time as project, teleology, linear and prospective unfolding: time as departure, progression and arrival—in other words, the time of history” (64).²¹¹ Women’s time is punctuated by cycles: menstruation, pregnancy; “cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm” (16). While I am not reducing women’s particular existence to biological time, which would reinforce the natural essentialism of women, opening up, at the extreme, the world of Atwood’s handmaids, I find it thought-provoking to incorporate this biological time into the constructs of social temporalities that in fact emphasize female subjectivity. The temporal patterns in *Scheherazade* and *678*, rely on repetitions without sameness, and on cycles that are contingent. The time may indeed be out of joint, but no *one* person carries the burden of setting it right.

While Kristeva’s analysis is embedded within a Eurocentric, and very French, tradition of philosophic and psychoanalytic thought, and the historical context she refers to in particular is after the French demonstrations in May 1968, how she locates the psychic within the social raises stimulating questions regarding feminism and time. In *Scheherazade* and *678*, past and present are manipulated so that fragmented narratives are stitched together to provide a complete picture, one that is by no means exhaustive or finished. Significantly, in *Scheherazade*, the past is evoked through each storyteller’s recollections in the present. Thereby, the past represents the protagonist, while the present is that of the narrator. Ouyang, in *Politics of Nostalgia in the Arab Novel*, writes that

²¹¹ Kristeva, Julia. “Women's Time.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 7.1 (1981): 13-35.

The transformation of the past from experience lived through the senses into a vision comprehended by the heart is the mechanism through which the break with the past is mended; ignorance is educated knowledge, loss turned into gain, and skepticism moulded into certainty. . . . The split between the past—the protagonist—and the present—the narrator— serves as the premise of the story, and propels a narrative that takes the protagonist from ignorance, the source of trouble, to knowledge, the self-assured narrator. The past, the protagonist is reconciled with and integrated into the present, the narrator. However, the integration could not have taken place without the split between the past and present, protagonist and narrator. As the protagonist is instrumental to the emergence of the narrator, so is the past in shaping the present. (35-6)²¹²

The female protagonists turn their objectification into subjectivity, their victimhood into agency, their understanding of their past into their integration in an imaginable present. While in *678*, there is no process of narration through which the protagonist becomes the narrator, the three different timelines trace the development of each protagonist from victim of sexual harassment to criminal, until the women are able to reconcile with their own self-perception and reject society's imposed constructs on their identities and experiences. This development is crucial insofar as it demonstrates how each past shapes the present of each woman. Women's time for Kristeva provides attempts "to break the code, to shatter language, to find a specific discourse closer to the body and emotions, to the unnameable repressed by the social contract" (24-5).²¹³ And while the films were not written or directed by women, the narratives in these two films are owned by women.

²¹² Ouyang, 2013.

²¹³ Kristeva, 1981.

Ultimately, there is no closure to the films. Each film opens up more questions, challenges, and possibilities. Nasrallah transforms the narrative closure of *A Thousand and One Nights*, where Scheherazade lives as a mother of three boys, happily—and silently—ever after with Shahrayar, into an endless proliferation of the storyteller’s voices. His discerning transformation acknowledges the polyphony of women’s experience and the undeniable visibility and aurality of female speaking subjects. Diab puts his protagonist back on the street, inevitably expecting another violation of her body. The look of utter resigned desolation on Fayza’s face translates the threatening repetition of narratives. Visions of a dystopic future and the realities of the tragic present belie the reconciliatory endings of *Chaos* and *The Yacoubian Building*. The sound of the regulating system hails at the doorstep of the police station after the climatic ending of *Chaos* when justice against the corrupt officer has been exacted. The path that newlyweds Zaki and Buthayna walk hand in hand at the end of *The Yacoubian Building*, leads to Tahrir Square, which for many, after four years of socio-political upheavals, seems like a distant nostalgic dream. Closure implies resolution and none of our films offer the audience that comfort. There is however awareness, understanding and a potential for recognizing oneself and/in each other.

Vulnerable Subjects

In parallel, the other Time, or even Other Time, resolutely and steadily conjures up its own narratives to validate its authority over subjects, and its political rationality. However, as Bhabha writes, “The language of national belonging comes laden with atavistic apologues” as “The language of culture and community is poised in the fissures of the present becoming the

rhetorical figures of a national past” (203).²¹⁴ In this sense, the four films “articulate [the] archaic ambivalence that informs the *time* of modernity,” in contrast to the nationalist discourse (especially since the 2011 revolution) that has immortalized the “archaic body of the despotic or totalitarian mass” (204).²¹⁵ This articulation proves to be transgressive as well as treacherous.

If indeed the story of national emancipation is one of betrayal as Chatterjee claims,²¹⁶ it is also one of sacrifice. The sacrificial relationship of women to the nation perpetuates positions, roles, and stereotypes of women in the service of the nation and its men, as wives who are mindful of their husbands’ needs, as mothers who engender good and well-adapted citizens, as daughters who maintain their honor and purity of tradition. This is the woman *as* the nation, *for* the nation. Not dissident women who question the production of their images, the meanings of their existence and subjectivity deeply embedded in confining and archaic social discourses. Their narratives are accused of betraying the nation, as overtly portrayed in *Scheherazade* and *678*. Women are inevitably facing the terror of being outside the time of History, on the margins of the nation’s time. Is the story then inevitably one where we are either betrayed, or one where we betray?

The relationship between nationalist discourse and the socio-political positions of women has been fraught with tensions. As Mervat Hatem writes in “Toward the Development of Post-Islamist and Post-Nationalist Feminist Discourses in the Middle East:”

The modernist-nationalist approach represents the oldest discourse used for the

²¹⁴ Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

²¹⁶ “The story of nationalist emancipation is necessarily a story of betrayal. Because it could confer freedom only by imposing at the same time a whole set of new controls, it could define a cultural identity for the nation only by excluding many from its folds; and it could grant the dignity of citizenship to some only because the others always needed to be represented and could not be allowed to speak for themselves” (154). See Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

discussion of women's position in Arab society. It was developed largely as a response by key Arab intellectuals to the colonial challenge. Given the attack on Islam by the European orientalist scholars and colonial administrators, who identified it as the cause of the oppression of Arab women, this discourse offered a nationalist defense of the religion along with the adoption of western definitions of new rights for women in modern societies. Modernist critics who simultaneously defended and criticized Islam. . . . exonerated Islam from the charge of oppressing women and placed the blame on the failure of Islamic society to live up to its religious ideals. They then proceeded to support new interpretations of the religion which accommodated some western assumptions about the modern roles of women. In this way, the orientalist attack from without was generally internalized by Middle Eastern intellectuals in these defensive modernist discourses on women. (38)²¹⁷

Whether secularist or Islamist, discourses on women have been appropriated for political empowerment rather than to advance the rights of women in society. Elsadda finds this particular argument insightful because it “challenges the core of modernist histories of the Arab world, based on a binary opposition between old and new, the modern and the traditional, the secular, and the religious, and always assuming that the modern, the secular, and the new are inevitably more supportive of women’s rights and are better for women” (xxv).²¹⁸ I find it revealing because it demonstrates how women are always sidelined in the political sphere, and they are not readily integrated as political actors in decisions that concerns their lives. This position is

²¹⁷ Hatem, Mervat. “Toward the Development of Post-Islamist and Post-Nationalist Feminist Discourses in the Middle East.” *Arab Women: Old Boundaries, New Frontiers*. Tucker, Judith E., ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993. 29-48.

²¹⁸ Elsadda, 2012.

problematic because women are made to feel that they belong, while in fact their demands are generally overwhelmed by the need to cope with more pressing national issues.²¹⁹

This political marginalization is accompanied by a longstanding tradition in Egyptian nationalist discourse of the use of female iconography. In *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics*, Beth Baron retraces female iconography in Egyptian nationalist discourse from the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century; these depictions drew on pharaonic and roman myth, and delineated particular feminine attributes and characteristics, from the honorable and pure peasant and the nurturing mother to the modern and assertive woman. The qualities often associated with Egypt as a woman were invariably “passive, prone, and weak” (73).²²⁰ She meaningfully notes that

The artists who produced nationalist iconography probably imagined their audience as mostly male. Representing the nation as a woman was meant to tap notions of honor and instill into male viewers the sense that they had a duty to support, protect, and defend it. Yet honor was not the only sentiment at stake. These images were also intended to generate a romantic attachment to the nation and encourage a fusion with it. By depicting Egypt as a woman, nationalists hoped to stimulate love for the nation and draw male youth to the cause. The man

²¹⁹ “The discourse produced by the modernist nationalists was problematic in more than one way. First, it presented itself as having completely liberated women. As a result, a whole generation of modernist women were persuaded that they were clients of these states. Meanwhile, these states continued to be silent on changing the remaining forms of gender inequality in the family and the new forms of inequality that emerged in the work place and the political system. In other words, the modernist-liberal discourse which stressed the public liberty of women coexisted with personal forms of subordination in the family and/or new public forms that developed in the socio/economic arenas where women were located. It adopted concepts legitimizing male leadership in the family, the work place, and the political system. This gave new reinforcement to the old belief in women's diminished mental, emotional, and religious faculties” (40). See Hatem, 1993.

²²⁰ Baron, Beth. *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics*. Berkeley: University of California, 2005.

was the actor, the speaker, the lover; the woman was the acted upon, the listener, the beloved.” (78)

Women were thus used to evoke feelings of belonging and rouse sentiments of support and protection. However, as women “were favored as symbols rather than as political actors,” the political reality confirms that “the more women appeared in visual culture as representations of the nation, the less they appeared in the public arena” (215).²²¹

In this particular nationalist narrative, women find themselves confined to an abstracted conceptualization of their subjectivity. In her examination of popular Egyptian cinema, namely of the 1959 film *I am Free (Ana hurra)*, Shafik notes that “The conflict between female subjectivity and the needs of the community, and more importantly the ‘nation’, are once again resolved in favor of the latter” (131).²²² This resolution however finds no echo in the four films analyzed here. The first two chapters examine how *Scheherazade* and *678* allow for new possibilities to reimagine identities: the female narratives subvert and rearticulate the confining and normative discourse that ascribes female identities to a set of antiquated images, that no longer reflect their realities. These archaic representations are depicted in *Chaos* and *The Yacoubian Building*, and it is precisely the failures of the images of femininity and masculinity within those that make these transgressive articulations possible. It is important to note that nationalist discourse, while it articulates appropriate female characteristics, it also defines a set of complementary masculine attributes that benefit the promulgation of the same discourse (which include the image of the honorable and principled man as savior). The transgressive narratives of the first two films allow for a reinscription of female identities as a site of resistance to the hypostatized images of women. The last two films expose the threatening disintegration of

²²¹ Baron, 2005.

²²² Shafik, 2007.

a nation that relies on constructs of masculinity and femininity in service of the nation.

“Representations of ideal gendered roles and characteristics not only define and shape the contours of national identity and national futures, they are also cultural interventions in ideological contestations over the image of the nation” (xiii).²²³ Conversely, contestations of these images in cinema provide cultural interventions to redefine and shape gender roles and identities, and national futures.

The exploitation of woman as the iconography of the nation engenders a monolithic female unity that is discursively constructed, socially regulated, politically ignored, and personally effaced. Unavoidably, stories of female emancipation are transgressive, because they betray the hypostasized mythical monolith and idealized gender roles, in order to expose the diversity and complexity of subjective experience. That is why the romantic plot fails: personal histories are tragedies. In *Conscripts of Modernity*, David Scott writes that “tragedy both constitutes and enables a distinctive reflection upon subjectivity in moments of historical crisis” (12).²²⁴ Scott ominously states that

The acute paralysis of will and sheer vacancy of imagination, the rampant corruption and vicious authoritarianism, the instrumental self-interest and showy self-congratulation are all themselves symptoms of a more profound predicament that has, at least in part, to do with the anxiety of exhaustion. The New Nations project has run out of vital sources of energy for creativity, and what we are left with is an exercise of power bereft of any pretense of the exercise of vision. And

²²³ Elsadda, 2012.

²²⁴ Scott, David. *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.

consequently, almost everywhere, the anticolonial utopias have gradually withered into postcolonial nightmares. (2)²²⁵

This predicament appears dystopian because “many studies of revolutionary discontent have failed to adequately understand the role of new concepts in *generating* social discontent. This is because they have mistakenly focused on the way these concepts define *alternatives* to the present social limitations *rather* than on the way they shape our understanding of these limitations themselves” (3). Therefore, for Scott, there is an urgent necessity of reconceiving alternatives, which “depends in significant part on reconceiving the object of discontent and thus the longing that stimulates the desire for an alternative” (6).²²⁶

The films presented here provide frameworks of legibility of female corporeality, and of divergent patterns of the constructs of female (as well as masculine) identities: they emphatically articulate “the longing that stimulates the desire for an alternative.” The films reveal complex social constellations between the self and different subjects. This relational subjectivity thus emphasizes McAfee’s concept of the subject as “an open system, a subject-in-process,” where “as relational subjectivities we are always ‘under construction’, always producing ourselves and each other. Relational subjects are always deeply indebted to each other” (129).²²⁷ She notes the importance of narratives insofar as they “construct self-identity and the meaning of a life; our selves are always constructed or at least modeled through our stories,” which raises two questions: “if there is no ‘self’ in advance of narration, then *who* narrates?” and “without a storyteller, how could there ever be a story?” (140-1).²²⁸ Herein lies the moral imperative of intelligibility and understanding that the films ultimately divulge. Because while the narrator

²²⁵ *Ibid.*

²²⁶ *Ibid.*

²²⁷ McAfee, 2000.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*

could be the protagonist of her own story, she also has to rely on another outside of herself to construct her own narrative. “A good narrative is faithful to experience. One shouldn’t tell just any story, one should tell a story that keeps faith with lived experience” (144).²²⁹ The representations of vulnerabilities deconstruct through lived experience the discursive and social constructs of ideals, as they are not faithful to the self or to the other. Their political powers lie in their enlightening threat to themselves, because the representations of vulnerabilities articulate their inherent vulnerabilities to representations.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*

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