Unveiling the Ancient in the Modern:

A historical examination of gender, nationalism, and Pharaonism

in selected works by Mahmoud Mohktar, in the 1920s,

and Muhammad Nagi, in 1922 and 1937.

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Egyptology, the formal study of Ancient Egypt, began with the invasion of Napoleon in 1798 and led to greater European interest in Egypt as the birthplace of civilization. Although images of the Great Pyramids and the Sphinx were heavily circulated on items such as postage stamps, few Egyptians were involved in Egyptology. The nationalist movement in Egypt of the late 19th century and early 20th century introduced the ancient past into Egyptian discourse through public displays of monumental sculpture and art. These works brought Pharaonic themes into contact with another major issue of the time, the “woman question” or early Egyptian feminism. The juxtaposition of Pharaonic themes and women, especially in the art of Mahmoud Mohktar and Muhammad Nagi, accentuated the ways in which new Egyptian art could combine feminist discourse with nationalist rhetoric relating to Ancient Egypt. By historicizing the Pharaonic and gendered art of Mahmoud Mokhtar and Muhammad Nagi, I will show that new Egyptian art was a forum in which gender could be negotiated. I do this by answering two important questions, namely how did this “first generation of Egyptian artists” explore portrayals of women and how did their art intersect with the feminist movement.

To answer these questions, I analyze Mahmoud Mokhtar’s “Nahdet Misr” (1920/1928), “Isis” (1929), and some of his works incorporating peasant women (1926~1929) as well as Muhammad Nagi’s paintings “Nahdet Misr” (1922) and “Tears of Isis” (1937). The choice to focus on these two artists presents a unique opportunity to study artists who, although working in similar contexts, produced different types of work. Mokhtar’s choice to work mostly with images of peasant women and Nagi’s focus on the Goddess Isis explores two different ways these artists approached feminist discourse. While the content of their works were different, their choice to challenge understandings of gender through Pharaonism suggests that their work was more than
a simple alteration in an enduring theme of Pharaonism, gender, and nationalism. Their works show a personal interest in the “woman question” and an evolution of nationalist rhetoric surrounding Pharaonism and feminism. In order to explore their work’s possible intersections with feminist discourse, I look at the memoirs of Huda Shaarawi and speeches by other feminists. Also, I use secondary source material such as Donald Reid’s *Whose Pharaohs?* and Beth Baron’s “Nationalist Iconography” to contextualize my arguments.

Although artists like Nagi and Mohktar are hailed as part of the first generation of Egyptian artists⁴, the theme of Pharaonism in public art did not begin with their works. The modern history of women and Pharaonic themes began with the building of the Egyptian Museum, which opened in 1902, when European architects and archaeologists transferred European Neophraraonism, which was the Westernize portrayal of Ancient Egyptian artistic styles, onto the façade of the museum. Following the interpretation of Donald Reid, the depictions of women on the museum were in opposition to most Egyptian artistic approaches⁵. Not only were they depictions of the human form, a style of art often avoided by Muslim artists, but large amounts of skin and the female body were clearly visible⁶. Egyptian artists, in advertisements or cartoons rather than in public art forms, did not popularize the use of the female body until after the World War I⁷. While there may be other public portrayals that relate Pharaonism to gender, the statue of Mustafa Kamil, an important figure in the rise of Egyptian nationalism, represents an important stepping-stone between European Art and Egyptian symbolism. Mourners for Kamil commissioned a French artist, Leopold Savine, to commemorate Kamil after his death. However, by the time it was finished, in 1914, his Nationalist Party had fallen out of favor, so, in 1921, it was displayed within the walls of the school he funded⁸.
The statue depicts Kamil with one hand on the head of a sphinx and the other pointing downwards. Below this is an image of a peasant woman removing her veil and “listening” to the words of Kamil. The relationship between the sphinx and Kamil shows how the nationalist movement of the early 20th century connected to the ancient Egyptian civilization. However, this symbolism is physically distinct from the subject of the Egyptian women below, who Baron identifies as the Egyptian nation trapped under British occupation. This distinction suggests that the ancient knowledge of civilization belongs to the male politicians of the nationalist movement and not necessarily to the public. While the nationalist movement evoked the symbols of Ancient Egypt and the idea of Ancient Egypt as a once great civilization, it rarely, if ever, actually utilized the burgeoning knowledge about the people from that time.

However, Kamil’s nationalism represented only one portion of the Egyptian nationalist movement. His Nationalist Party supported a Pan-Islamic Egypt and suggested a relinquishment of power by the British in order to return sovereignty to the Ottoman Empire. A group of intellectuals who rejected the idea of discrimination, and urged for an Egypt free of all foreign rule created the Umma Party, whose most famous affiliate was Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid. Formed by Sa’ad Zaghlul and others who had gone to London to demand independence in 1919, another political party called the Wafd would eventually lead the struggle for independence from the British. This struggle reached a peak in 1919 when, after the British denied them the right to discuss Egypt’s independence, Wafd leaders were deported to Seychelles after returning to Egypt. The following day Cairo was alive with demonstrations as many upper class women took to the streets in order to protest British Sovereignty. Many prominent feminists took part in these marches not only to show their affiliation with the Nationalists but also to promote their
own agendas\textsuperscript{17}. In 1922, an altered protectorate was established, granting Egypt semi-autonomy. However, this government was formed without the Wafd party, who were still in exile.

This new government did little to help or improve the status of women in Egypt\textsuperscript{18}. For many women who participated in the Nationalist marches this was a devastating blow and so they continued to organize and discuss the need for more rights for women\textsuperscript{19}. Foremost among these women was Huda Shaarawi. While curious about gender inequality from an early age,\textsuperscript{20} her involvement with an organized feminist movement began when she and two other women organized women’s lectures in 1909 in order to begin active discussion about the state of women’s rights in Egypt\textsuperscript{21}. Some of the main issues discussed included veiling, seclusion, education, unregulated polygamy, and divorce laws\textsuperscript{22}. Besides the 1919 women’s marches, another hallmark moment was in 1923 when Huda Shaarawi, Nabawiyya Musa, and Saiza Nabarawi returned from a feminist conference in Europe and removed their veil publically at a train station\textsuperscript{23}. Veiling, education, unregulated polygamy, divorce laws, and the perceived need for women to be in the home continued to be important issues for the feminist movement into the 1920s, especially, as women became symbols both for Egyptian identity in opposition to the West and for the modernization associated with the West\textsuperscript{24}.

Mahmoud Mokhtar grew up amongst these issues\textsuperscript{25}. He came from a middle class family and some have said he showed a taste for sculpture from an early age,\textsuperscript{26} sculpting small images made of mud from the banks of the Nile. Although he had little money, Mokhtar entered Prince Yusuf Kamal’s School of Fine Arts in its first year, 1909. He was taught by the French sculptor LaPlange who recommended him for further study in Paris, upon graduation in 1911, which the Egyptian royal family sponsored\textsuperscript{27}. It was in Paris that Mohktar, inspired by the women’s
marches in 1919 and, according to Gershoni and Jankowski, the neopharaonic traditions of Paris, that he sculpted his initial Nahdet Misr in 1920.

Upon winning a gold medal in Paris, Nahdet Misr was appropriated by Egyptians as a national symbol and a public fund set up in order to build the statue in Egypt. This image of an unveiling peasant woman with a hand on the head of a rising sphinx would, in its final state, incorporate in its image and production the monumental works of the ancient Pharaohs. Its construction also ended up costing far more than the projected amount, a problem associated at the time with the instability of the Waf’d government, which did not control the government consistently from its initial election in 1924. This caused the 1928 Egyptian version of Nahdet Misr to be seen as a project of the Waf’d party even though it was paid for by multiple administrations as well as by public donors.

Public reception to the unveiling of the statue was generally positive. These reviews of the piece reflected exactly what the Nationalist rhetoric surrounding the statue wished to portray. In the liberal Constitutionalist press editor Muhammad Husayn Haykal, who had supported Mohktar’s piece in the early 1920s, wrote about how Nahdet Misr evoked a “timeless symbol of Egypt…[and] that ancient Egypt was ‘the origin of knowledge and wisdom throughout eternity’”32. It was a combination of the ancient, the sphinx and the peasant woman or fellaha as a symbol for the enduring Egyptian identity, and the modern, the process of unveiling and looking towards the future33. However, by Nahdet Misr allowed those possibly opposed to the incorporation of women into politics to voice their opinions by suggesting that the woman was not useful in the piece, an opinion with which Mohktar disagreed.
Although an image of Mohktar’s 1921 sculpture had been on magazine covers for women’s periodicals before the unveiling of Shaarawi in 1923, the 1928 image could be seen as referencing that event. Interestingly, attendance of the unveiling of the monument was almost entirely restricted to males. Of all the issues surrounding women, Nahdet Misr most directly explores the veil, which in 1899 Qasim Amin, who is seen by some to be the first Egyptian feminist, identified the veil as a cultural construct that has little to do with explicitly moral practices. This practice was also limited to middle and upper class Egyptian women, who were a minority. Why then would Mohktar use the image of a peasant woman unveiling when most peasant or working class women at the time rarely veiled? The statue accented the fact that veiling was a cultural norm that not all women in Egypt followed and could suggest that upper class women follow suit. However, the peasant or fellaha was a common theme in much of Mohktar’s work.

A sample of his work from private spaces, as presented in Hamed Said’s Contemporary Art in Egypt and in Sobhy Sharouny’s Memory of the nation: sculptor Mahmoud Mukhtar & his museum, 1891-1934, shows other images of modern Egyptian peasant women doing daily tasks. These women are generally clad in modesty garments but with uncovered faces. This could symbolize Mohktar’s connection to nationalist rhetoric about the enduring Egyptian identity. However, unlike Nahdet Misr, there is no process or suggestion that the face of these peasant women be covered at all; they are just depicted as veil-less. This could be seen as the natural progression from the unveiling fellaha in Nahdet Misr to the unveiled peasant but it could also be Mohktar’s comment and agreement with feminist arguments. Bahithat al-Badiya, in 1909, suggested that modesty be preserved in the clothing of Egyptians but that strict veiling was
unnecessary\textsuperscript{42}. By sculpting a series of works with the same theme and housing them in a private space Mohktar suggested to his audience of probably upper-class male appreciators of art to examine the hypocrisy inherent to many assumptions about veiling. The unveiled peasant was a way to suggest an alteration of practice by using known and local customs identifiable to his audience as evidence for change.

Interestingly, these modest portrayals do not apply to all of Mohktar’s portrayals of women in the private gallery setting. In contrast, Mohktar’s “Isis” appears nude, as seen in \textit{Memories of Nation: Masterpieces of Mahmoud Moukhtar}\textsuperscript{43}. She and other women related to Ancient Egypt are distinctive because of their jewelry, their headdresses, with a snake like those seen on images of Pharaohs, and are often without modesty garments such as the hijab. His choice to display women as such connects his work to paintings from Ancient Egypt.

In a study of Ancient Egyptian portrayals of women in 1998, Lynn Meskell suggests that women more often than men were painted as nude because of a connection between women and the erotic\textsuperscript{44}. However, this depiction only applied to certain subjects\textsuperscript{45}. Ancient images portray women who are either musicians or dancers, rarely Goddesses, as nudes since they would have been associated with overtly sexual behavior and prostitution, an association also made in Egypt during the 1920s\textsuperscript{46}. The sexual nature of women was a contested item during the 1920s when Mohktar would have been sculpting these pieces. \textit{Hawadith} crime reports, which were growing in popularity and accessibility in the 1920s, often equated the increasing public presence of women to the degradation of the moral character of society by accentuating female participation in crimes\textsuperscript{47}. If there was a connection between immoral behavior and nude portrayals, why did
Mohktar choose to depict the Goddess Isis without modesty garments, in a style different from his contemporary Nagi as well as ancient depictions?

This choice harkens back to Mohktar’s attempts to explore the “woman question”. The ability to see a nude depiction of the female body may have been a chance once again for Mohktar to address individuals in private. In private settings, such as the home, closely related males and other women could see women without their modesty garments and Mohktar’s bare-chested “Isis” could be seen as the extreme of this. If a respected symbol for the nation, such as Isis, could be seen as a nude, then the removal of the veil and other much less radical alterations to female dress, such as following al-Badiya’s suggestion for “Turkish dress” could be seen as plausible. By using a symbol from Ancient Egypt, Mohktar was able to be extreme about his opinions on gender without being explicit as to whom they applied—upper-class veiled women.

Muhammad Nagi’s Nahdet Misr also makes strategic use of Pharaonic themes. Nagi’s family sent him to France to study law between 1906 to 1910 but from 1910 onwards, he studied painting in Florence. Like Mohktar, although some years earlier, Nagi’s artistic education came from European traditions rather than local Egyptian ones. However, Nagi’s use of Pharaonic themes came from a personal interest in Ancient Egypt and an interest in expanding women’s position. His Nahdet Misr shares the monumental scale of Mokhtar’s sculpture, and with pharaonic frescoes, but it does not hang in an explicitly public space, which gives it a different frame with which to interpret its message. The painting has hung in the National Assembly since 1922 and depicts a procession following the Goddess Isis, standing in a chariot. While the goddess Isis is the center of the painting, those in the crowd could be from any historical period, which would be emblematic of nationalist’s rhetoric in the 1920s surrounding the
enduring *fellaha* identity. Egyptian peasants of both genders, surround Isis and participate in the same political act.

This participation in politics by both genders in the painting references the 1919 demonstrations. However, in the years following this participation in politics the 1923 constitution only granted suffrage to males, an act by which some feminists felt betrayed. Although painted before the writing of the constitution, suggests that Nagi would have been unhappy with that outcome as well. Besides Isis, there are women in the painting who are depicted in a full spectrum of garb, from nearly nude to fully veiled, in solidarity with the range of women’s dress that occurred in Egypt. This range alludes to the variety seen in Egypt but focuses on the political act of the march rather than the issue of clothing. It explores the possibility that all women should be allowed to participate in political life and this message was aimed directly at the people in charge of creating legislation to do that. The National Assembly was the seat of the new government and was in charge of legislating Egypt for most internal matters, including the rights of women. Ironically, this support of feminist ideals would have gone unseen to feminists of the 1920s since women were not able to enter the national assembly for a long time.

Although the adults in the painting are all roughly the same size, the contrast in color and the positioning of Isis above the crowd draws the audiences’ eyes towards her. While examining her alone, it is interesting to see the contrast in styles between her and the rest of the people in the picture. She is portrayed in white, appears more two-dimensional, and the taper of Isis’s robe suggests that her feet are close together. All of these choices evoke the feeling of Ancient Egyptian paintings in a subtle way, allowing integration of ancient motifs into an image of
modern Egypt. One can also see the use of ancient style, in combination with its resting place, as a critique of the use of Pharaonic imagery by the nationalist cause. Although the idea of an Egyptian identity extending back to ancient times existed, the understanding of what that meant was limited. The nationalist connection to Ancient Egypt was merely two-dimensional because they used symbols of the past without understanding the culture of that period or seriously attempting to dislodge European control of Egyptology. Writers like ‘Abd al-Qadir Hamza only write of Ancient Egypt as a mythical place of “civilization and knowledge” rather than as a history that had the capability to guide and educate the legislation of the nationalist movement.

With this interpretation in mind, one could also explore the gendering of the painting through Nagi’s depiction of Isis. The choice to use Isis, as opposed to other Egyptian gods or goddesses, may be meaningful for a multiple reasons. Isis was originally a human who tricked the god Ra into turning her into a Goddess. While an association with trickery often dilutes the power of women, pharaohs and priests in Ancient Egypt used her visage as the basis for many ceremonies, thus making Isis one of a few Goddesses that were important to both men and women. This understanding of Isis, as a symbol important to both genders, may explain her use in Nagi’s works. However, Isis was also important as the wife of Osiris, a god whose brother, Seth, wrongfully killed him. This portrayal may be why Nagi chose her to be the centerpiece for a painting at the National Assembly. The “good wife,” as Isis is often portrayed, would have followed the popular conceptions of gender for Egyptian women in some women’s periodicals. In her discussion of “famous women biographies” Booth suggests that the authors intended to juxtapose strong females with their lives in the home in order to encourage domesticity. Even ancient Egyptian queens such as Cleopatra and Nefertari were subject to these ideas. I suggest
that Nagi’s employment of Isis in Nahdet Misr was similar because he used a symbol related to domestic qualities in order to change a belief about women. He, like the writers of women’s biographies, could appeal to popular beliefs about women in the domestic sphere but also posit that women be an active part of political life by placing Isis at the seat of government and in a political act.

Although some see Isis as only “the good wife”\(^64\), by exploring Nagi’s “Tears of Isis”\(^65\) we can see how that may not have been his interpretation. “Tears of Isis” was painted for the Paris International Exhibition in 1937\(^66\). Since it was created for an event outside of Egypt and at a different period, I will look at it only in relation to Nagi’s personal ideas about gender. This painting depicts the resurrection story of Osiris in which, after being murdered, dismembered, and disbursed by Seth, his loyal wife resurrects him\(^67\). Nagi placed Isis as the center and in the style of Ancient Egyptian paintings she is clad in white with feet bound close together. Interestingly, although she is supposed to be the supportive wife of Osiris, she is larger and physically above his sarcophagus. This painting also shows her visage in three dimensions connecting her with modern artistic styles. Ostle suggests that this portrayal of Isis is a contemporary woman\(^68\). This choice to depict a young, fair-skinned, and fashionable “modern girl” was common in Egyptian political cartoons during the 1920s and 1930s\(^69\). These women, who were portrayed in passive roles, were associated with the nation\(^70\). This stands in contrast to Isis, who is the actor in Nagi’s painting. This suggests that the choice to depict a contemporary woman refers, instead of to the Egyptian nation, to the idea supported by some feminists that the modernization of women in Egypt was what would “resurrect” the nation\(^71\).
Many different ideas about Egyptian identity emerged during the 1920s. Competing opinions about modernity and the role of women in an independent Egypt were often central to these debates. My analysis of two Egyptian artists who took part in these debates suggests that their works mobilized nationalist symbols, but also portrayed their personal opinions. Although both produced monumental works that used nationalist rhetoric about Ancient Egypt and women, both artists saw women in a progressive role than women had at the time. Their choice to include women in both Nahdet Misrs shows how women were central to the discussion of nationalism. The woman in Mohktar’s “Nahdet Misr”, although a symbol for the Egyptian nation, does not reflect the women who campaigned for independence in Egypt during 1919 because, in a public setting, it was more acceptable for Mohktar to portray the culturally acceptable idea of an unveiling peasant woman.

Nagi’s “Nahdet Misr” also analyzes nationalist rhetoric surrounding women through his use of Ancient Egypt. Although Nationalists did not grant suffrage to women in 1923, the Goddess Isis stands in the National Assembly with the peasant women in that painting depicting the multiplicity of cultural norms present for Egyptian women, who could be seen as lewd peasants in translucent robes or moral upper class women if heavily veiled. However, both women, regardless of their dress, participated in the public and political affair of the procession. In private settings, these artists continued to engage with Pharaonic themes in ways closer to Ancient Egyptian or feminist understandings rather than that of the nationalists. These smaller settings allowed them to be more explicit about their opinions and show the complexities of the “woman question” but they did so while utilizing images that their audiences could identify, such as the fellaha or Isis.
Figure 1. First detail of Nahdet Misr (Painting) with two women pg 116, Said, Hamed. *Contemporary Art in Egypt*. Jugoslavija, 1964.
Figure 2. Second detail of Nahdet Misr (Painting) 3 dimensions of peasants Said, 117.
Figure 3. Third detail of Nahdet Misr (Painting) Isis, Said 118.
Figure 4. Fourth detail of Nahdet Misr (Painting) 3 dimensions of peasants, Said, 119.
Figure 5. in Ostle, Robin “Modern Egyptian Renaissance Man” Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies 57, no. 1 (1994):
Figure 8. Towards the River (1926~1929) Mahmoud Mohktar from Sharouny.
Figure 9. A Peasant Woman, Mahmoud Mohktar 9, Said.
2 Reid, 17.
4 Moussa, 5.
5 Reid, 5.
6 Reid, 5.
7 Mona Russell, “Marketing the Modern Egyptian Girl: Whitewashing Soap and Clothes from the Late Nineteenth Century to 1936” in *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 6, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 19.
8 Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski *Commemorating the Nation: Collective Memory, Public Commemoration, and National Identity in Twentieth-Century Egypt* (Chicago: Studies on the Middle East, 2004), 158.
10 Baron, 112.
12 Moussa, 3.
13 Shaarawi, 112.
14 Shaarawi, 112.
15 Shaarawi, 113-115.
16 Shaarawi, 122.
17 Shaarawi, 127.
18 Shaarawi, 129.
19 Shaarawi, 36.
20 Shaarawi, 94.
21 Shaarawi, 129.
23 Shaarawi, 129.
24 Baron, 121.
27 Sharouny, 12.
29 Gershoni and Jankowski, 58.
31 Gershoni and Jankowski, 66.
32 Gershoni and Jankowski, 76.
33 Gershoni and Jankowski, 75.
34 Gershoni and Jankowski, 82.
35 Gershoni and Jankowski, 79.
36 Gershoni and Jankowski, 74 and Baron, 121.
39 394, Cole, 394.
Hamed Said, *Contemporary Art in Egypt* (Jugoslavija, 1964), 1-9, also see figure 9.

Sharouny, 71, see figure 8.

al-Badiya, 232-234.

Sharouny, 91, see figure 7.


Meskell, 177-178.


al-Badiya, 238.

Ostle, 187.

Ostle, 187.

Ostle, 187.

See figure 3.

See figures 1-4.

Shaarawi, 129.

See figure 1.


Wood, 195.

Gershoni and Jankowski, 77.


Shorter, 39.


Booth, 859 (Cleopatra) 871 (Nefertari).


See Figure 5.

Ostle, 187.

Ostle, 187.

Ostle, 187.

Baron, 106.

Baron, 118-119.

Shaarawi, 122.

Baron, 106.

Shaarawi, 122.
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