

# Experiencing Feminism as “De-Foreignizing”\*

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The following is a brief account on how feminism became a road in, or a common route, for a non-Arab woman - one not born an Arab nor claiming Arab ancestral links - who went to an Arab country to live as an “insider”.

As a young woman when I went to Egypt to settle after my marriage to an Egyptian I met with many different people who took it upon themselves to tell me how to act in ways that I found restrictive. While I was chaffing at ways people were trying to reshape me, I met some first-wave Egyptian feminists. I discovered that many things that I had been told were part of my Egyptian culture - things that I, the female foreigner, must accept - they called injustices perpetrated against women and they encouraged my resistance. Patriarchal controls imposed on women were not part of a sacrosanct culture, they insisted, and must not be given the gloss of indigenous culture or religious prescription to be preserved. Saiza Nabarawi, whom I met in 1967, and who became a mentor and elder friend, had, along with her mentor and elder, Huda Sha’rawi, removed the veil from her face thirty-four years earlier in an act that signaled their refusal to conform to patriarchal control cunningly imposed in the name of Islam and “indigenous culture”<sup>1</sup>

The unveiling was enacted on the eve of the feminist movement they would help lead for a quarter of a century. In telling me the story of her unveiling, Nabarawi was urging me to investigate and question restrictions and injustices imposed in the name of culture; she was teaching me that there was also a local tradition of dissent and resistance against injustices to women and that this was as much a part of the culture as the restrictions it opposed. She told me about the feminist movement of which she had been a part from the 1920s until the mid-1950s and how, after the dissolution of an independent feminist movement in 1956 by the state under President Nasser, she had kept a low profile at home and had become more visibly active in the international arena.<sup>2</sup> Had I not met Saiza Nabarawi, Hawa Idris (the niece of Huda Sha’rawi), Inji Aflatun (a communist and feminist writer, activist and artist), Duriyya Shafiq (leader of the Bint al-Nil feminist movement), and others in whose homes I visited, I would not have been aware of the continuation of a behind-the-scenes feminist discourse. I could point now to them and their activism as examples of a tradition of insider resistance: I could make their arguments mine - arguments framed in the discourses of culture, nation and religion. I did not have to be the dutiful pupil forced into remedial

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learning.

Early last century, when Egyptian feminists exposed and confronted patriarchal oppression, they were branded foreign. They and their feminism were discredited as Western despite the fact that these disturbing "aliens" were Egyptian women with impeccable nationalist credentials, who had been active in the nationalist movement against British colonial rule, and whose nationalist activism - inseparable from their feminism - was enthusiastically accepted. Thus, it was with Egyptian activist women castigated as foreigners that I began my journey through the minefields of the gendered "us-es" and "thems". From these women, I learned about ways of thinking and behaving that were alternative to the conventions that had been presented to me as obligatory in the discourses of nation, culture, and Islam. I learned from them how they had fought to construct a new identity for Egyptian women, initially simply as persons with the right to move in public space, to alter their dress and habits, and to be respected while exhibiting new forms of decent behavior; and I learned how they later demanded their rights to be fully participating citizens of a modern, independent state. These women, who had bridged colonial and postcolonial society, found that their own subject positions had changed from fully accepted participants in the militant nationalist struggle to second-class citizens in the new quasi-independent state in 1923.

From them, I learned how they experienced being foreign. This was first, by not being accorded in practice the full and equal rights of citizenship that the Egyptian constitution granted them and, second, by being labeled as "Western" and thereby delegitimized because they dared to object. I was reinforced in my own will not to succumb to the attempts of others to define and control me, not to bow indiscriminately to inherited modes of behavior. I saw firsthand that it was not simply one set of Egyptians - or only conservative Egyptians - who could admit one into society, nor one set of conventions, to which one must adhere to become "properly" Egyptian. I learned that the epithet "Western" used in a pejorative sense could be applied to anyone in an attempt to place her outside the borders of acceptability, to "foreignize". The last of the "first-wavers" accepted me as 'one of them', in Saiza Nabarawi's words. She, Hawa Idris, Amina al-Sa'id, Inji Aflatun, and others understood that I had not come to Egypt to perch on the fringes, enjoying the easy social

and economic benefits that accrued to expatriates, but to settle, to live the hard times with them, to become one of them. Intentions and actions mattered as they dissolved the borders between themselves and me. These feminists, who well understood the manipulative, delegitimizing, and stigmatizing uses of the foreign, gave me the chance to become an insider and to choose what to accept and reject, and the chance to shape my own identity.

My interactions with these Egyptian feminists drew together two projects: the personal project of becoming an insider in Egypt and a professional project of academic research on the history of the rise of feminism in Egypt. The two projects worked to reinforce and enhance each other. I felt that my research was a path to a deeper understanding of Egypt and a grasp of its culture - of both its plural realities and its possibilities for change. My relationships with my elder mentors, meanwhile, helped me live Egypt differently.

By the mid-1980s, Egypt had been my home for twenty years, although during these years I came and went frequently. Several years earlier I had finished my thesis on the first wave of Egyptian feminism for my doctorate at Oxford University. throughout the process I had continued to mesh personal and professional projects.<sup>3</sup> Twenty years was a long time and my sense of being foreign in Egypt had become muted. I had staged resistances and

had made accommodations. If I felt that people had given me more space to be myself, I also was a different person than I had been before. And it would not be long before I would lose my early feminist mentors and guides: Saiza Nabarawi, Hawa Idris, Inji Aflatun, and Amina al-Sa'id, all of whom died in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Egypt was a different place from the country I had first entered. In the afternoon of Nasser's death in

1970 and with the coming to power of Anwar Sadat, Arab socialism was dismantled "open door" capitalism was introduced, a multi-party system was permitted to surface, and formerly silenced voices and ideologies were once again allowed in public space. This period saw the rise of Islamism, or political Islam, and with it the dissemination of a reactionary discourse on women and gender. But feminism, too, found expression once again in this new, more open public space. If the first-wavers I met in Egypt lent me a hand in pulling me in and mentoring me, I participated alongside second-

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wavers in enacting our feminism. We came together as women and formed our own feminism from the base of shared experience and the common problems we faced living in Egypt.

Second-wave feminism inside Egypt was constructed around our shared experience and positionings as women. A major concern of the new second-wave feminism was the rise of a reactionary discourse about women articulated by political Islam. As participants in the construction of second-wave feminism, we articulated what we lived in Egypt, or witnessed at close hand in a place where we spent our daily lives; we were conceiving a new wave of feminism from within (although the perennial and ignorant allegations that feminism was Western could be heard in certain quarters). Ethnicity, race, and origins were not constitutive of the "us". The "us" of Egyptian feminism accommodated difference; it was pluralistic; it included foreigners; it included men. My participation in this second-wave feminism, which continued the fight against the patriarchal, social, and economic injustices women faced, brought me further inside.

In the 1980s, Nawal al-Saadawi, who combined socialism and feminism, encouraged me to join the Arab Women's solidarity association (AWSA) in Cairo, which she had recently founded. I attended the monthly *nadwas* (public seminars) held at the AWSA headquarters where women and men debated gender issues affecting

our lives in Egypt. As a historian, I gave papers at AWSA analyzing aspects of women's nationalist and feminist past in Egypt.<sup>4</sup> I published both scholarly papers and articles in the local Arabic and English press. In 1990, Sana' al-Bissi invited me to write an essay on the meaning of feminism for the mass circulation magazine she had founded called *Nisf al-Dunya* [Half the World].<sup>5</sup>

Through such projects, I participated in Egyptian intellectual and activist life, exploring and experiencing Egyptian feminism as pluralist rather than particularist.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, identity politics was rampant both in Egypt and in the West, though its reverberations and concepts of foreignness were markedly different in these two settings. In Egypt and other parts of the Middle East, identity politics pivoted around

secular and religious poles. Second-wave feminists were concerned with what we saw as the dangers of a spreading, gender-conservative Islamism. Feminists wanted to hold the ground and Islamist women activists wanted to change the ground as part of a larger movement intent upon establishing an Islamic state. In 1990, Valentine Moghadam organized a conference on Women and Identity Politics in which I participated along with many scholars from the Middle East.<sup>6</sup> At this conference, we discussed the dissatisfaction we detected on gender issues from women associated with Islamist movements, specifically the older Islamist movements in Egypt and Iran. We were seeing the seeds of what was later to be called Islamic feminism.

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## ENDNOTES

\*This text is taken from a chapter by the author entitled "Foreign Bodies: Engendering Them and Us" previously published in *The Concept of the Foreign: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue* edited by Rebecca Saunders and published by Lexington Books in 2002. (pp. 91 -114)

1. Saiza Nabarawi herself had had insider-outsider problems when, after having been raised ostensibly as a "French girl" in her early teens, she returned to live in Egypt in her country of birth. Her periodic recounting of this story told me that she never quite got over a sense of displacement, even though she felt intensely Egyptian and was a fervent nationalist. See my article "Alternative Visions of Gender", *Al Ahram Weekly* (Feb. 13-19, 1997), 11.

2. My book, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation* tells the story of the first-wave feminist movement.

3. My doctoral thesis is entitled, "Huda Sha'rawi and the Liberation of the Egyptian Woman," presented to Oxford University in 1977. The thesis, which is available at the Bodleian and certain other university libraries, contains materials not published in my book.

4. One of the papers I presented is "Al-Nisa'iyya ka quwwa fi al-'alam al-'arabi" ["Feminism as a Force in the Arab world"] which was published in *al-Fikra al-mu'asira al-'arabiyya wa al mar'a* [Contemporary Arab Thought and the Woman] (Cairo: Arab Women's Solidarity Association, 1989).

5. The article is called "Ma hiyya al-nisa'iyya?" ["What is Feminism?"] *Nisf al-dunya* 34, no.7 (Sept. 21, 1990), 85.

6. The conference was held in Helsinki in the fall of 1990; many of the papers were published in a volume edited by Valentine Moghadam called *Identity Politics and Women: Cultural Reassertions and Feminisms in International Perspective* (Denver: Westview Press, 1993). My chapter in this book is titled: "Gender Activism: Feminists and Islamists in Egypt", 202 -27.