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ABSTRACT

Mariam Naoum’s literary adaptations to television in the aftermath of the 2011 Egyptian uprising have carried wide cultural, political and literary implications, especially where the “woman question” is concerned. With Islamism and militarism both threatening to exclude a wide sector of women from the historical narrative of the uprising and the subsequent nation-building process, and with a male-dominated literary establishment that systematically relegates women to secondary roles, Naoum’s writing re-affirmed gendered agency both on the level of social engagement and authorship. Chapter one of the thesis provides the theoretical framework and historical backdrop necessary for understanding how female writing can contest various male-sanctioned boundaries so as to define gender, cultural and national identities on its own terms. Chapters two, three and four examine the various applications of these ideas. Chapter two focuses on how the female writer turns the stagnant political moment of Osama Anwar Okasha’s novel, *Munkhafad al-Hind al-Mawsimyy* into a hopeful narrative empowered by women that are responsible for bringing about change to the nation. Chapter three looks at how a completely disenfranchised female protagonist in Sonallah Ibrahim’s *Dhat* is freed in the adaptation to represent a nation that is in full possession of itself and its future. Finally, chapter four is a critical reading of how Naoum reinterprets gendered agency in Fathiyya al-Assal’s *Sign al-Nisa’* through a process of meaning construction, which breaks down many of the static and disabling labels attached to gender. By capitalizing on the power of adaptation, of television drama, and of Ramadan’s high access to audiences of all stripes, Mariam Naoum writes gendered agency into the nation at a critical time in groundbreaking ways.
NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

This thesis uses the IJMES transliteration system as its guide for Arabic names, places, titles and expressions. However, since colloquial Egyptian Arabic in its variations is used in Egyptian television dramas, it will be applied when referencing these works and their characters. In this respect, it is important to note that Osama Anwar Okasha’s novel, *Munkhafad al-Hind al-Mawsimyy* is transliterated into colloquial Egyptian Arabic as *Muga Harra* instead of *Muja Harra*. There is also the distinction between *Dhat*, the novel and *Bint Ismaha Dhat*, the television drama, as well as the play, *Sign al-Nisa’* and the adaptation, *Sign al-Nisa*. To reflect the simplicity and ease of this dialect, I have opted to exclude diacritic marks with the exception of the *hamza* and *‘ain*, since they are essential for readability. While names of authors are transliterated with the first mention, their English equivalent follows throughout the thesis, seeing that these names are already coined and recognized as such in various publications. For example, I use Usama Anwar ‘Ukasha, Sun ‘allah Ibrahim, Fathiyya al-‘Assal and Mariam Na‘um with the first time mention then opt for the spelling most commonly used in widely circulating English newspapers.

The thesis uses the Chicago Manual of Style as its guide.
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Introduction
This thesis will take as its case study Egyptian screenwriter Mariam Naoum (Mariam Na‘um) and the three literary works she adapted into television dramas on the heels of the 2011 Egyptian uprising. The works are *Munkhafad al-Hind al-Mawsimyy*, (*Monsoon*, 2000), a novel by Osama Anwar Okasha (Usama Anwar Ḩokasha), *Dhat* (1992), a novel by Sonallah Ibrahim (Ṣun‘alālah Ibrahim), and *Sign al-Nisa’* (*Women’s Prison*, 1982) a play by Fathiyya al-Assal (Fathiyayya al-Ṣ-Assal), adapted to television respectively as *Muga Harra* (*Heat Wave*), *Bint Ismaha Dhat*, (*A Girl Called Dhat*), and *Sign al-Nisa*. Mariam Naoum adapted the novels *Munkhafad al-Hind al-Mawsimyy* and *Dhat* to television in the year 2013, and followed them with an adaptation of the play *Sign al-Nisa’* in the year 2014. These were the tumultuous transition years following Egypt’s 2011 uprising. As defining times, their outcome would determine where the nation stood vis-à-vis gender, cultural and political paradigms for many years to come.

This thesis will reflect on adaptation as an activity that engages with cultural and political movements and becomes fully invested in the production of national identities. In doing so, it will examine the impact of Egypt’s 2011 uprising on Mariam Naoum’s three adaptations and how it has enabled her to re-inscribe new meanings to gendered agency, redefine Egypt’s cultural and national identities, and disrupt dominant patriarchal discourses to establish her own authorial power within a male-dominated literary establishment in the process.

**WRITING WOMEN INTO THE HISTORICAL NARRATIVE**

Much of the literature published after 2011 spun out of an urgent need to write women back into the historical narrative of revolution and insist on gender-inclusive state
building practices. “Gender Paradoxes of the Arab Spring” for example, is a special journal edition that features contributors from all over the Arab world. Its goal was to theorize, track and measure women’s involvement and sustain debates on gender equity and citizenship. In doing so, it covered various critical issues, from the repression of female artists, to gender-based violence, to the underlying patriarchy of post-revolutionary regimes, and much more.\(^1\) Other literature focused on the legislative aspect of the transitional period as it pertained to women’s rights. Maya Morsi’s “Egyptian Women and the 25th of January Revolution” for example, argued that the legislative process under the government of the Muslim Brotherhood was in direct violation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women to which Egypt is a signatory. The goal of these legislations, according to Morsi, was to thwart women’s advancement within public and political arenas altogether so as to preserve the power and dominance of the patriarchal state.\(^2\) In “The Revolution Shall Not Pass Through Our Bodies,” on the other hand, Sherine Hafez writes about women’s bodies and their centrality in the political transformations taking place during and after the uprising. Citing the examples of Samira Ibrahim’s ‘virginity tests’ court case against the military regime\(^3\), “the girl in the blue bra,”\(^4\) and Alyaa’ al-Mahdy’s nude activism\(^5\), Hafez


\(^3\) On March 9, 2011, Samira Ibrahim was detained by the military regime for participating in a sit-in in Tahrir Square, and was subjected to virginity tests in detention. Ibrahim took the case to court and won, effectively banning virginity tests for detainees.
argues that “women’s bodies are spaces of contestation over which battles over authenticity, cultural dominance and political control are fought.”

Through these three examples, Hafez reflects on the ways in which these women came to constitute themselves by re-inscribing new understandings of sexuality against patriarchy, Islamism and militarism.

WHY ADAPTATION?

Before we ask why, we need to start by asking, what is adaptation? In Adaptation Revisited, Sarah Cardwell explains that a literary adaptation “is a version of the standard whole text of which it announces itself to be a version.”

She elaborates, “every adaptation is an authored, conscious response to or interpretation of a source text, one that may or may not be concerned with fidelity, but is necessarily concerned with the creation of an independent film or television text.”

In Adaptation and Appropriation, Julie Sanders takes this definition one step further by declaring adaptation’s interest in “how art creates art, or how literature is made by literature.”

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4 In December, 2011, a woman stripped down to her jeans and bright blue bra was seen being dragged and viciously kicked in the abdomen by a soldier’s heavy boot. The shocking video sparked worldwide rage, becoming a symbol of the military state’s abuse of power especially with regards to women.

5 On December 20, 2012, activist Alyaa’ al-Mahdy bared all outside Egypt’s embassy in Stockholm to protest the application of shari’ a law to the constitution under the government of the Muslim Brotherhood.


8 Ibid., 21.

9 Julie Sanders, Adaptation and Appropriation (New York: Routledge, 2015), 1.
These two definitions attest to the power inherent in adaptation. To say that an adaptation is a version of the standard whole text is to admit to its interpretative nature, and therefore to its ability to re-think and rewrite the original text. A film or a television text is independent because it makes decisions based on different cultural determinants, political realities, and biographies than the Source Text, and as such could challenge old understandings and produce new ones. This urge to produce new meanings often stems from “a political or ethical commitment (that) shapes a writer’s decision to reinterpret a source text.”\textsuperscript{10} To state, however, that adaptation ‘creates art’ or ‘makes literature’ immediately promotes the female screenwriter to the rank of an author, one whose creativity is legitimated, and who is able to be on par with male authors in the literary field.

By breaking away from fidelity to the ‘original’ texts, Naoum becomes part of a revolution against a notion that for so long had controlled the power dynamics between the “original text” and its adaptation. In \textit{Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate}, Kamilla Elliott explains, “Under most literary lenses, literary cinema represents a falling off from the book, an inferior production of a superior original, a failed translation.”\textsuperscript{11} The literary camp by and large views adaptation as translation and believe that for a film to be a successful adaptation, it needs to be faithful to the original.\textsuperscript{12} Despite this overriding view, the field has taken revolutionary steps to reinstate its own position of mastery.

\textsuperscript{10}Ibid., 3.

\textsuperscript{11}Kamilla Elliott, \textit{Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 128.

\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., 125.
George Bluestone’s seminal *Novels into Film* was written in part as a declaration of independence for film from literature. In it he declared adaptation to be a mutational process in which changes become inevitable since the linguistic medium is abandoned for a visual one. By the mid 1970s, Morris Beja’s *Film and Literature* carried out an in-depth search that resulted in attesting to the impossibility and unreasonableness of fidelity as an imperative. In the 1980s, J. Dudley Andrew, the most widely reprinted scholar of literary film adaptation, argued for a balanced translation model in which infidelity to the novel and to film convention is honored equally. By the 1990s and into the 2000s, the fidelity imperative had become “the arch villain of Adaptation Studies,” with scholars like Peter Reynolds arguing that adaptation must express dialectic rather than deference. These developments in thought demonstrate just how political the enterprise of culture production really is. To take control of cultural production is to seize power. As such, this enterprise is indeed jealously guarded by the established systems that control it.

**HISTORICIZING LITERARY ADAPTATION IN EGYPT**


14Ibid., 5.


17Elliott, 129.

By using adaptation as a vessel to contest and construct different versions of national identity, Mariam Naoum walks in the footsteps of the founding fathers of modern Egypt’s cultural history. In “Othello in the Egyptian Vernacular,” Sameh Hannah explains that language was the contested site for this national battle over cultural production. “While Classical Arabic *fusha* (sic) was widely recognized by many as the legitimate expression of an Arabic-Islamic identity,” he explains, “there have been attempts by Egyptian intellectuals to forge and promote a unique Egyptian identity distinct from the Arabic-Islamic geo-political and socio-cultural sphere.”19 These attempts deployed Egyptian vernacular Arabic (*‘ammiyya*) as a distinctive Egyptian mark of identity. The divide over the language of representation stirred the pot of debate over matters of authority, democracy, the distribution of power amongst classes, access to literary production, and of course what exactly comprises national identity. According to Ferial Ghazoul in “The Arabization of Othello,” the assimilation of Shakespeare’s play into the Arab literary consciousness widely contributed to these polemics and revealed a great deal about the power struggle characterizing the debates.20 Othello, a moor, and therefore an Arab, living in Europe, she explains, not only raised the question of how the Self was to be constructed by a more powerful Other, but it also called into question what constituted this national identity within its Arab and Egyptian context. Khalil Mutran, for example chose to translate the play in 1912 into *fusha*, rationalizing his strategic use of the dialect on political grounds and arguing that *fusha* is the only worthy model for translation, since


“ammiyya (was) incapable of complex ideas and elevated emotions.”

In taking this stance, Mutran aligned himself with a small sector of consumer elites, who found in foreign cultural products a mark of social distinction that set them apart from other social classes. Almost a century later, Mustafa Safwan translated the same play into Cairiene ‘ammiyya, challenging Mutran’s iconic translation. In his introduction to the translation, published in 1998, Safwan rationalized his choice on political grounds once again. The use of ‘ammiyya, he argued, was a tool for liberating Egyptians from a pre-fabricated unity amongst Arab nations and canonical gatekeepers, one “that suppressed difference and downgraded diversity.”

He proceeded to dedicate his translation to “no man and every man, standing for the majority of Egyptians who due to their education, or lack of, have no mastery of classical Arabic and hence are denied access to literary masterpieces, both authored and translated.”

Other examples of how adaptation has long served as a tool to challenge political power, cultural prestige and discursive authority are discussed in Samah Selim’s “The Nahdah, Popular Fiction and the Politics of Translation.” Here, Selim explains that the Egyptian novel, or ‘bourgeois’ novel, was born during the Nahdah, to imagine and give expression to this nascent nation as it constructed and imagined its national and cultural identity and transitioned into independence. She explains that just as this national project was taking

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21 Hanna, 168.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., 170.

shape, another literary phenomenon was thriving underground. The popular novel relied on translating, adapting, Arabizing and plagiarizing European novels.\textsuperscript{25} Despite the fact that it ignored matters of origin, authorship or copyright, they enjoyed higher circulation and sold in higher volumes. Naturally, this posed a threat to the literary establishment, connected as it was to the various state machinery and power apparatuses that controlled how the nation was to be produced and consumed. Priding themselves on values such as originality and purity, Selim explains, the creators of the national novelistic canon suppressed this popular phenomenon, with ‘cultural illegitimacy’ being the strategic charge;\textsuperscript{26} cultural illegitimacy here meaning infidelity to the state-controlled literary establishment and its national project.

These early examples are proof that translation and adaptation should not hold a secondary position in a literary tradition since they do play a pivotal role in challenging and producing national and cultural identities. In the introduction to \textit{Translation and Transformation}, Carol Bardenstein points out that the translation practices during the turn of the century are credited with no less than “charting the unfolding development of what would become “Modern Arabic Literature.”\textsuperscript{27} Not only have these early assertions of indigenous identity through translation “undercut what is often presumed to be the privileged position and authority of the original or source text,”\textsuperscript{28} but by re-inscribing


\textsuperscript{26}\textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{27}Carol Bardenstein, introduction to \textit{Translation and Transformation in Modern Arabic Literature: The indigenous assertions of Muhammad ‘Uthmān Jalāl}. Vol. 5. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005), 1.

\textsuperscript{28}\textit{Ibid.}
new meanings to the nation, they have also influenced major processes and models within the literary tradition and actively engaged in the production of culture.

“THE VISIBILITY OF DIFFERENCE”

Similarly, in her adaptation of these three literary texts, Mariam Naoum contests various patriarchal discourses that have long denied women the right to create their own images. To understand the struggles informing this project, it is important to first root Naoum within a distinctly female literary writing tradition that has worked to subvert the patriarchal standards imposed on women writers in the literary field, both in the West and locally.

In the West, an important work in this regard is Toril Moi’s Sexual Textual Politics. Here, Moi pits various widely influential masculine ideologies against feminist critical theories that examine the limitations of the patriarchal discourse and reveal the political implications of female creativity. One pertinent example is Sigmund Freud’s three lectures, entitled, “On Femininity” which are put to task in French feminist and cultural theorist, Luce Irigrary’s dissertation entitled, “Speculum of the Other Woman.”

The Freudian theory of sexual difference, Moi explains, is based on the visibility of difference. “It is the eye that decides what is clearly true and what is not. The basic fact of sexual difference for Freud is that the male has an obvious sex organ, the penis, and the female has not. When he looks at the woman, Freud apparently sees nothing. The female difference is perceived as an absence.” This absence has cemented its place

within all forms of patriarchal discourse. Over and over again, women are depicted through a male lens, which either neutralizes their power or eliminates them altogether.

In deconstructing Freud, Irigaray argues that his is a narcissistic theory driven by the need to control and dominate. “As long as the master’s scopophilia (i.e. love of looking) remains satisfied,” she argues, “his domination remains secure.”31 This male gaze is incapable of seeing anything in any form other than its own image, she argues. As a result, female sexuality has remained a ‘dark continent,’ within all forms of patriarchal discourse. Unfathomable and unapproachable, it can only be misunderstood by those who continue to regard women in masculine terms. Moi then reminds us that Freud’s stance is rooted in a long-standing tradition of masculine ideology. The Greek *theoria* comes from *theoros,* she explains, ‘spectator,’ from *thea,* ‘viewing.’32 In *The Madwoman in the Attic,* Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar provide models for understanding the dynamics of female literary response to what they brand “male literary assertion and coercion.”33 Images of women are torn between the passive and selfless, and the monster who refuses to be selfless, who has a story to tell. The female author’s task thus consists in “assaulting and revising, deconstructing or reconstructing those images inherited from male literature.”34

31Ibid., 134.

32Ibid.


34Moi, 76.
Egyptian women’s writing around the turn of the twentieth century is a great example of how “the visibility of difference” could be reinterpreted to actually produce women’s agency. *Remaking Women* is an important collective volume in this respect. Edited by Lila Abu-Lughod, the volume explores the relationship of Europe to Middle Eastern projects of remaking women and the ways in which these local projects came to acknowledge the specificities of local feminisms through a deep respect for historical, political and social contexts. In Egypt, Abu-Lughod explains, “the turn of the century was a moment of intense preoccupation with women and family- not to mention nation and society- in part because of the encounter with Europe” and the tendency of this encounter to universalize discourses about modernization and the “woman question.”

One of the main problems of universalization is that it intentionally undermined the specificity of local culture, pitting tradition against progress, domesticity against emancipation, and Islam against the West. In *Women and Gender in Islam*, Leila Ahmed surveys the history of women in Middle Eastern societies in order to articulate a revisionist feminist view of women and gender in Islam. In it, she argues that what these Western sanctioned binaries essentially sought was to undermine local culture. One way of getting around these boundaries was to translate and hybridize Western narratives so as to produce visibly different images of women. Marilyn Booth, one of the

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36 Ibid., 3.


38 Abu-Lughod, 18.
contributors to *Remaking Women*, credits the genre of “Women’s Biography” for achieving just that. In her chapter entitled, “The Many Lives of Jeanne D’Arc,” Booth reviews over 450 biographical sketches in periodicals, as well as biographical compendia.\(^{39}\) Those were featured in Egyptian women’s magazines, which were incredibly popular between 1892-1939. So much so that by 1914, more than twenty magazines were published by and for women, and fourteen more in 1935.\(^{40}\) Balsam \(^{c}\) Abd al-Malik’s *Majallat al-Mar’a al-Misriyya* (*The Egyptian Woman’s Magazine*, 1920-39), for example had this revealing declaration on its first page: “We have launched this department to publish items about women famed for their refinement and knowledge. We entreat women to turn their attention to this subject, for they might find benefit therein.”\(^{41}\)

Although these magazines covered countless biographies about Egyptian women, it was really the continuous re-reading and re-writings of Jeanne of Arc’s biography that reveals the most about how the encounter with the modern project was appropriated to “acknowledge the specificities of local feminisms.”\(^{42}\) According to Booth, “Jeanne was above all the model of a publicly active woman who could transgress gender boundaries.”\(^{43}\) In historicizing the multiple re-readings of this biography, Booth shows

\(^{39}\)Ibid., 202.

\(^{40}\)Ibid., 178.


\(^{42}\)Abu-Lughod, vii.

how Egyptian women writers came to re-define themselves time and again through this Western narrative. The pre-1919 Egyptianized biographies of Jeanne, for example, were inclined to a dispassionate description of her political context. By 1920, a point of popular resistance to Britain’s imperial presence, Jeanne appeared in full national garb. In the magazine, *Sahwat al-Mar’ah* (*Women’s Awakening*) for example, it is the British army that Jeanne faces. As a nationalist figure, Jeanne’s multiple representations broke the boundaries that pitted Islam against progress and emancipation. On the one hand, she was highlighted as a religious icon, “with religion providing an unassailable sanction and source of energy for nationalist action,” on the other, liberal nationalist thinkers incorporated yet downplayed this religious streak, preferring to subordinate it to the greater national cause. Yet, the most striking representation of Jeanne was the one that stressed on her village origins. Booth explains that one of the most attractive aspects of adapting Jeanne’s biography was “the urgency of representing the peasant as well as the female in such a way as to foster the formation of an ethos of national “classless” unity.” Then there was the domesticity of Jeanne through the 1930s, which was intentionally inserted so as to reconcile women’s active role in the public sphere to their home duties. As such, not only did Jeanne come to particularize Egyptian women’s experiences in more ways than one, but she also highlighted many competing discourses and ideologies about women’s place in the nation-building process.

44 Ibid., 202.

45 Ibid., 186.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid., 187.
GENDERING TRANSLATION

As Naoum assaults, revises, deconstructs and reconstructs images of women through her adaptation today, she again emulates these pioneering women writers. The fact that her adaptations have earned her the title ‘author,’ subverts a long-standing discourse within the Translation Studies field, which associates women with translation given their shared ‘inferior’ status. In “Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation,” Lori Chamberlain decodes a metaphoric system that has served to regulate power relations within the literary field:

The opposition between productive and reproductive work organizes the way a culture values work. This paradigm depicts originality and creativity in terms of paternity and authority, relegating the female figure to a variety of secondary roles.

While the author is seen as the ‘father’ of the text and the sole origin of its meaning, translation is figured in female terms to highlight the discursive inferiority of the translator’s task. “The reason why translation is so over-coded, so over-regulated,”

48Moi, 76.

49In her television drama, Taht al-Saytara, (Under Control, 2015), Mariam Naoum was indeed credited with the title, ‘author,’ an unprecedented feat for someone who is neither a novelist nor a playwright.

Chamberlain argues, “is that it threatens to erase the difference between production and reproduction which is essential for the establishment of power.”\textsuperscript{51} This power manifests itself in areas such as publishing, royalties, curriculum and academic tenure, while obscuring the translator’s efforts and therefore access to the same privileges.\textsuperscript{52} To re-write the text then is to dethrone the father author(ity), with all the privileges attached to this title. In that vein, Mariam Naoum frees herself from this double bind. As these adaptations become recognized as original pieces of work, she also is recognized as author of these works.

In doing so, Naoum this time walks in the footsteps of pioneering feminist translators. In \textit{Gender in Translation}, Sherry Simon takes on the task of historicizing how feminist scholars within the field of translation studies wrote their own subjective agency by subverting the process by which translation complies with these gender constructs:

Translation studies have been impelled by many of the concerns central to feminism: the distrust of traditional hierarchies and gendered roles, deep suspicion of the rules defining fidelity, and the questioning of universal standards of meaning and value. Both feminism and translation are concerned by the way ‘secondariness’ comes to be defined and canonized. Both are tools for the critical understanding of differences as represented in language. The most compelling questions for both fields remain: how are social, sexual, and historical differences expressed in language and how can these differences be transferred.\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{51}Ibid, 462.

\textsuperscript{52}Ibid, 454.

Indeed, with language viewed as a means of perpetuating patriarchal power structures, universal standards of meaning and gendered roles, scholars argued that women’s liberation must first be a liberation of/from language.\textsuperscript{54} These revolutionary debates around the common grounds between translation and women’s agency were only made possible in the 1980s, through what came to be known as translation’s ‘cultural turn.’ Instead of asking the traditional question—“how should we translate and what is a correct translation?” the emphasis shifted to, “what do translators do, how do they circulate in the world and elicit response?”\textsuperscript{55} This ‘turn’ is what pushed the female translator into the spotlight, making her visible through her active engagement in the process of cultural production. “The feminist translator, affirming her critical difference, her delight in interminable re-reading and re-writing, flaunts the signs of her manipulation of the text. ‘Womanhandling’ the text in translation would involve the replacement of the modest self-effacing translator.”\textsuperscript{56} But there were other global phenomena that significantly contributed to this new thrust. According to Susan Bassnett, globalization and the electronic media explosion of the 1990s highlighted issues of intercultural communication and cultural identity even further. These major changes, Bassnett explains, necessitated the intervention of translation if we were to access more of the world and understand our own point of departure within it.\textsuperscript{57} Again here, with feminism being one of the most pronounced forms of cultural identity, the grounds were ripe to

\textsuperscript{54}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{55}Ibid., 7.

\textsuperscript{56}Ibid., 13.

\textsuperscript{57}Susan Bassnett, Translation Studies (New York: Routledge, 2013), 3.
seize this revolutionary moment. A significant statement in this vein comes from Gayatri Spivak in “The Politics of Translation.” Here, the feminist critic contends that translation is an important platform for pursuing the larger feminist agenda of achieving women’s ‘solidarity’. “One of the ways to get around the confines of one’s identity,” she points out, “is to work on someone else’s title”58 In doing so, it is inevitable, and even crucial, for the feminist translator to steer away from the text and to consider language as a process of meaning construction.59 one that produces gendered agency. Finally, in “Translating Gender,” Samia Mehrez brings these debates home. Focusing specifically on Egypt, Mehrez argues that the local terms of engagement are informed by a different cultural context, and therefore must disseminate local translations of gender issues in Arabic and within the Egyptian context.60 Within this local context, the female translator must partake in the process of meaning construction if she is to produce gendered agency. Mehrez explains:

If we fail to understand translating gender as part of meaning construction, we may find ourselves re-dehistorizing the essentialist and essentializing categories of men and women. This will deny us an understanding of ourselves as socially constructed identities, with all the liberating and empowering possibilities such awareness entails. The challenge is enormous, especially as we compete for space, voice, visibility and impact.61


59Ibid.


THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF WRITING & THE TRANSLATOR’S VISIBILITY

Rolande Barthes’ widely influential piece, “The Death of the Author,” gave further impetus to the feminist translator’s project. The most significant outcome of the death of the author in Barthes essay was the much-celebrated birth of the reader. Here, Barthes describes the book as an intertextual space, a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousands of sources of culture, and the reader as the space “in which are inscribed, without anything being lost; all the citations a writing consists of.”63 These conceptual revisions freed the narrative from the stronghold of one author and democratized the writing process, allowing every reader to become a writer with the power to activate his/her own set of unique associations that produce the text differently every time it is read.

What more, they also helped thrust the translator/reader into the spotlight where the fruits of her labor became visible. In The Translator’s Invisibility, Lawrence Venuti provides a critical examination of the history of translation in order to show how ‘fluency’ prevailed over other translation strategies in the Western world. “Fluency” here meaning the illusion that the translation is in fact the “original.” According to Venuti, this

62 Ibid., 144.
63 Ibid., 146.
translation strategy conceals wider political implications, since it allows the smooth transition of cultural values from the Western world and into recipient cultures.\textsuperscript{64} Venuti describes fluency as a form of ‘self-annihilation’\textsuperscript{65} that is in urgent need for demystification. In arguing the importance of the task of the translator, Venuti offers the following definition by Roman Jackobson: “Translation is a process by which one message is decoded from a chain of signifiers and another corresponding message is encoded in another chain, which the translator provides.”\textsuperscript{66} This definition, he explains, demonstrates the profoundly transformative nature of translation and the translator’s active intervention.

These two revolutionary notions by Barthes and Venuti provide a pertinent conceptual framework for a new understanding of Mariam Naoum’s task as she contends with three authors and their literary texts. Indeed, in a talk titled, “From Text to Screen: adaptation as a point of departure,” Naoum describes her approach to adaptation and brings these ideas to the fore. “I cannot reflect the author’s point of view,” she explains, “I read the texts, absorb them to the best of my abilities, then put them aside and start to think of how they have impacted me personally, what I have extracted from them, and how I can turn them around to relay my own convictions.”\textsuperscript{67} In this process, the novel and the novelist become part of the tissue of citations, a component in her treatment, and a point of departure, into a world that belongs to her.

\textsuperscript{64}Lawrence Venuti, \textit{The Translator's Invisibility}: A History of Translation. (New York; London: Routledge, 1995)

\textsuperscript{65}Ibid.,180.

\textsuperscript{66}Ibid., 182.

\textsuperscript{67}Mariam Naoum, “From Text to Screenplay: Literary Adaptation as a Point of Departure” (Talk at The Centre for Translation Studies, The American University in Cairo, Cairo, September 28, 2014).
‘CARRYING’ 2011 ‘ACROSS’

The uprising that toppled former President Husni Mubarak created an urgent need for new translations and translators if Egyptians were to preserve and propagate their newly acquired sense of national, cultural and gender identity. Here, Samia Mehrez’s *Translating Egypt’s Revolution* is indispensible to understanding the importance of Mariam Naoum’s contribution to this process. The word “translation,” Mehrez explains, derives from the Latin root, *translatio, tranduco, transferre*, all connoting the notion of ‘carrying across.’ In Arabic, *tarjama*, means to translate from one language to the other, but also to interpret or expound the words of an “other,” to write the other (as in biography: *tarjama*), and to write one’s self (as in autobiography, *tarjama dhatiya*). In breaking the ‘fear barrier’ embodied in the Mubarak regime, Egyptians had indeed carried their nation across a hugely significant symbolic bridge as well. It was the “bridge of fear, of oppression, of class and social hierarchies, of gender divide and religious affiliations, of ideological orientations and political sympathies and agendas.” These are the kinds of gains and beliefs Naoum is interested in protecting and ‘carrying across’ into a post 2011 Egypt as well. Indeed, most notably, all three television dramas are a product of writing workshops in which more than one young writer participated under the supervision and guidance of Mariam Naoum. These workshops have democratized the writing process by emphasizing diversity and giving budding writing talents access to

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69 Ibid., 25.

70 While *Muga Harra*’s dialogue was written by Nadine Shams, Wael Hamdy, Islam Adham and Hala al-Dhagandy; The last fifteen episodes of *Bint Ismaha Dhat* were co-written with Najlaa’ al-Hidiny, and *Sign al-Nisa*’s dialogue was written by Hala al-Dhagandy.
literary production. “These workshops were fertile grounds for the exchange of experiences and ideas,” Naoum explains, “Not only did they give the chance to many new writers to be seen and heard, but they also enriched the writing process as a whole.”\textsuperscript{71} In ‘re-interpreting’ and ‘expounding,’ these literary texts, Naoum and her team of writers assimilate these gains and convictions into the narrative to make new, diversified and empowered statements about the nation. In this process, they have written themselves in new and empowering ways too as voices that are able to partake in the national dialogue and compete within the literary establishment. As they re-define the self, the other is re-defined as well, and relations of dominance are altered to produce a plurality of difference and new gender politics.

**MARIAM NAOUM: PLURALITY & VISIBILITY**

Mariam Naoum is the most visible name in the field of literary adaptation in the aftermath of the 2011 Egyptian uprising. Her background, which perfectly incorporates both literature and film, places her in an ideal position to adapt these literary texts to screen. As the daughter of novelist Nabil Naoum, she grew up in a literary home where the likes of Sonallah Ibrahim were frequent visitors. Inheriting her avid love of literature from her father, she recounts how he worried that she would marry someone who did not appreciate her collection of books, passed down to her by him and by his father before him.\textsuperscript{72} Naoum also grew up observing her mother at work, famous Egyptian jewelry

\textsuperscript{71} Mariam Naoum, interview by May N. Serhan, Cairo, September, 2015.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.
designer, Suzanne al-Masry. Jewelry design here also being an act of self-expression that requires constant re-invention and that draws on and assimilates various historical, social, and cultural contexts. This creative background is complimented by Naoum’s own ventures into the world of film. As a student at The Higher Institute of Cinema, she specialized in screenwriting and spent years after graduating honing her craft.73

As a self-proclaimed “daughter of the revolution,”74 Naoum counts it as the time that has constituted her consciousness as a writer. Indeed, her commitment to the social and political issues that burden Egyptian society was intensified due to her active participation in the uprising. With the “woman question” being such a central topic of debate, standing at the intersection of the social and the political, it has come to occupy a pivotal position in all of Naoum’s adaptations. The sense of collective engagement, which was momentarily experienced in Tahrir Square also feeds into her approach to writing. It is what has given further appeal to the idea of the writing workshop and in turn what sets these adaptations apart from the rest.

This successful writing model has encouraged many other television writers to follow suit. Indeed in Ramadan 2017 ten out of thirty eight television dramas were written by more than one writer; six of which were products of writing workshops.75 Even though it has stirred the pot of debate once again over matters of authorship, democracy and intellectual rights, it shows no signs of slowing down with many

73 Mariam Naoum, “From Text to Screenplay: Literary Adaptation as a Point of Departure”

74 Ibid.

prominent Egyptian writers adopting the model and establishing their own workshops; Most notably, Mariam Naoum herself, who in 2015 launched the writing workshop *Sard*, meaning “to narrate.”

**THE CASE OF THE VISIBLE TRANSLATOR AND INVISIBLE AUTHOR**

Few people knew Osama Anwar Okasha as a novelist before the adaptation of his novel, *Munkhafad al-Hind al-Mawsimyy* to television. Okasha began his writing career as a novelist, before taking a sixteen-year hiatus from his original craft to focus on a career in television. Munkhafad al-Hind al-Mawsimyy is his comeback novel after this extended break. The novel was penned down in the year 2000 and serialized the same year in the Nasserist newspaper, *al-Jumhuriyyah*. However, it remained virtually unknown, hardly ever read or reviewed by critics. With no recognition or circulation to speak of, it was left to gather dust on bookstore shelves. As such, the author failed to make the comeback that he had hoped for as well, leaving Naoum with the privilege of thrusting this timely work into the spotlight and granting it the afterlife it deserved.

However, it is in adapting Okasha’s novel to television that Naoum’s real challenge laid, since it is here that Okasha cemented his name as a household name. In *Dramas of Nationhood*, Lila Abu-Lughod sets out to prove that television drama is the most powerful tool for establishing a sense of cultural unity. In it, she reflects on the impact of Okasha’s hugely successful drama, *Layaly al-Hilmiyya* (*Hilmiyya Nights* 1987-

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1995), a historical epic about modern Egypt that turned Okasha into the “most popular television writer in Egypt.”  

Layaly al-Hilmiyya stirred public debate on the street and within intellectual circles in unprecedented ways, Abu-Lughod argues. So much so, that for the first time television drama could be seen as a format that could shift national policy altogether.  

Leading Egyptian intellectual, al-Sayyid Yassin for example, used the series as a metaphor for Egypt’s real abilities, suggesting that “what Egypt needed was a better text to guide its director (the president), more respect for its audience (its citizens) and the introduction of new political actors.”  

What this kind of praise reveals, is that Okasha set new standards for television drama long before Naoum’s own success. This benchmark needed to be met if the female writer were to truly seize authorial power from her male precursor.

Interestingly, the debate over the secondary status of television as it relates to literature is one that both Okasha and Naoum are part of, since they both produced television works that challenge this status quo. The kind of success that Okasha enjoyed after Layaly al-Hilmiyya prompted him to declare television writers as the real ‘conscience of the nation,’ an epithet reserved solely for writers within the literary field. He reportedly once said:

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78 Ibid.

79 Ibid.

80 For more on the writer as the ‘conscience of the nation,’ see Richard Jacquemond’s book: Richard Jacquemond, Conscience of the Nation: Writers, State, and Society in Modern Egypt (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2008).
Nothing today awakens the distrust and suspicion of the priests of literature like the question of broadcasting,” he once remarked. They look askance on radio and television fiction and want to cast these texts out from the canon of real literature at all cost, as if the only thing that deserved the dignity of the name was literature reserved for the intellectual elites.  

Statements such as this pre-empt Naoum’s own efforts as she expands the limits of television drama through her own adaptations. As she puts it in her own words, “I see television drama as a long film. I write it the same way and with equal effort and enjoyment. I do not feel like I abandoned cinema for a second-rate medium.” This statement reveals Naoum’s awareness of the organization and location of power within the cultural field. As she and her team set out to disturb this organization, they inject television with a potent cinematic language that also happens to be crafted out of great literary narratives. This in itself is a formula that is guaranteed to emulate her male precursors achievements in television.

The respective historical moments of text and screenplay are key to understanding how Naoum turns Okasha’s text around. While the male writer writes in the year 2000, during the Mubarak era, a time characterized by a stale political scene, Noaum writes in


82Mariam Naoum. “From Text to Screenplay: Literary Adaptation as a Point of Departure.”

83In “Egypt on the Brink,” Tarek Osman describes the Mubarak days as an insipid era marked by the absence of any Egyptian project and leadership, crushing socio-economic conditions and wide-spread corruption. Tarek Osman, Egypt on the Brink: From Nasser to Mubarak (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 189.
the heels of an uprising saturated with grand national narratives that believed in change. It is this hopelessness in Okasha’s novel that brings about the sense of doom, while it is hope in the future that enables Naoum to depict a nation that is changing through and by its women.

**DEPOSING THE FATHER AUTHOR(ITY) IN DHAT**

In adapting Sonallah Ibrahim’s *Dhat*, Naoum contends with one of the most powerful and autonomous male voices in the literary field. To understand how Ibrahim reached this distinguished position, it is important to first describe the writer’s formative years. In *Egypt’s Culture Wars*, Samia Mehrez explains that Ibrahim’s constitution as a writer was born out of his jail experience. It is after a crackdown on communists by the Nasserist regime in 1959 that the author found himself serving time in political detention. This incubation period so to speak, formed much of the values that he and his work ethic have come to stand for today. Upon his release, Ibrahim vowed to distance himself and create an autonomous space, from which he could be critical of the system and free to address the national issues that matter to him.\(^{84}\) As such his writing journey has been personal as much as it has been political. Through it, he has demonstrated a steadfast commitment to “the production of alternative knowledge,”\(^{85}\) relentlessly challenging and even rivaling the power apparatus and its different machinery with every project.

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\(^{84}\) Samia Mehrez, “The Writer Against the Establishment” in *Egypt’s Culture Wars*. (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2010), 74.

\(^{85}\) Ibid., 75.
Nowhere is Ibrahim’s author(ity) more visible than in the case of the publication and reception of his novel, *Dhat*. Unlike all his previous works that were either banned, censored or published abroad, *Dhat* was published in Egypt by *Dar al-Mustaqbal al-'Arabi*, a Leftist, Nasserist publishing house headed at the time by Muhammad Fayyiq, significantly, the former Head of the Human Rights Organization in Egypt.\(^86\) In *Egyptian Writers Between History and Fiction*, Mehrez describes how “*Dhat* generated an outpouring of articles and reviews in both Egyptian and Arab newspapers, magazines and literary journals by some of the most distinguished journalists and critics.”\(^88\) This critical acclaim made it a natural contender for a national award at the Twenty-Fifth Cairo International Book Fair. However, the nomination was withdrawn once it was brought to the attention of the committee “that it might be somewhat awkward for the state to honor a text that so vehemently discredits it.”\(^89\) As Mehrez confirms, this is one example of just how Ibrahim’s career has come to embody French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu idea of the ‘social miracle’ in which, as he puts it, “he who loses wins.”\(^90\) Indeed, it is the author’s decision to remain on the margins of power that has made out of him a celebrated literary figure whose politics and practice are instructive of the field itself.\(^91\)

\(^{86}\) Ibid., 123-128.

\(^{87}\) Mehrez, “Sonallah Ibrahim and the Duplicity of the Literary Field” in *Egypt’s Culture Wars*, 25.

\(^{88}\) Ibid., “Sonallah Ibrahim’s Dhat: The Ultimate Objectification of the Self” in *Egyptian Writers Between History and Fiction* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1994), 119-121.

\(^{89}\) Ibid.

\(^{90}\) Ibid., *Egypt’s Culture Wars*, 26.

\(^{91}\) Ibid., 25.
Negotiating female agency from such an authority in the literary field then is a challenging task to say the least. What more, he is also, literally, a father figure to Naoum. As such, “killing the father,” so to speak, represents a double challenge, one that Naoum, nevertheless takes on.

The fact that 2011 was an empowering moment for Egyptian women is what enables Naoum to take on this daunting project. Sonallah Ibrahim wrote his novel following a historical moment marked by failure, most notably after the 1967 War, the 1991 Second Gulf War, and a post-"Infitah" period that radically changed the national and cultural identity of the nation. In her examination of the impact of these negative transformations on the literary imaginary of the 1990s, Mehrez references literary critic, Sabry Hafez and author, May Te’lmissany. “These radical changes,” Hafez explains, “engendered and necessitated a transformation in the emerging literary discourse.”92 In “al-Kitaba ‘ala Hamish al-Tarikh” (Writing on the Margins of History), Telmissany describes this literary shift. Given the absence of a collective movement and the individual’s disillusionment with the validity of the grand narratives, Telmissany explains, the self became the core of the literary expression, “reflecting the writer’s dilemma and existential anxiety in confronting the world.”93 In this light, the author’s identification with an unsalvageable female central character who lacks agency is perfectly in line with the defeated spirit of the time, and his own position as a father author(ity) in the literary field.

92 Mehrez. “Where have all the families gone?” in Egypt’s Culture Wars, 124.

93 Ibid., 125.
*Bint Ismaha Dhat*, on the other hand, was conceived after a moment of victory, not only for the Egyptian Self, but for the female Self in particular. The 2011 uprising saw many Egyptian women abandon the home, lead men in demonstrations, stand in front of police tanks, and take over the megaphone. To “carry” the spirit of revolution “across” necessitated the revision of the gender politics and expressions of dominance in the novel. As such, the voiceless and hapless central female character of Ibrahim’s novel was the perfect candidate to reflect and assert this transformation. Encouraged by the optimism that marked this period, Naoum not only empowers Dhat.

**BREAKING OUT OF “SIGN AL-NISA’”**

Several key factors distinguish Mariam Naoum’s adaptation of Fathiyya al-Assal’s play, *Sign al-Nisa’*. Unlike the first two adaptations, here we have one woman re-writing another woman’s text. As women writers, they both consciously labor through and against a male-dominated writing establishment to alter the expressions of domination, and assert gendered agency. There is also another key distinguishing factor: Unlike the two previous ‘original’ texts, this one is a play, governed by an entirely different narrative arrangement and mutational process.

To begin with, there are the two women whose backgrounds inform their respective interpretation of narrative in very different ways. Unlike Naoum, Assal grew up in a home that denied her some very basic rights for the simple reason that she was female. For example, as a young girl, Assal was denied an education by her father. That kind of gender-bias triggered a life-long struggle to reject patriarchy in all its forms and to affirm in its place a female authority that is critically different. She fought hard to be
literate, to carve a name for herself as a playwright, political activist and feminist, and to compete for her rightful voice and space as a woman. As such, one will find Assal’s hardline feminist stance in *Sign al-Nisa’* is deeply informed by her own personal struggle. Naoum, on the other hand grew up in a cultured environment that nurtured her own development as an independent and creative talent. This democratic background was given further impetus with her involvement in the 2011 uprising, which called for pluralism, gender equality and social justice, values that find their place in her adaptation and distinguish her work from al-Assal. As such, we are again reminded of Barthes idea of the text as an intertextual space, which allows every reader to become a writer who is able to produce the text over and over again every time it is read.

The fact that Assal wrote for the stage and Naoum re-wrote for the small screen is another key differentiating factor in how their narratives are respectively constructed to produce gendered agency. In *Film and Theatre*, Susan Sontag reflects on whether there is an unbridgeable division between these two art forms. One of her key deductions is that “the history of (film) is often treated as the history of emancipation from theatrical models.” Indeed, while a play is typically two acts, a screenplay is three acts, and as such allows for a more expansive and elaborate narrative. Moreover, while the stage is restricted to a fixed space, television typically uses three cameras that move around and provide a more immersive, and again expansive, experience. By following the camera, the viewer can be transported to other worlds, which a stage set-up cannot provide. In

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Shakespeare and the moving picture: the plays on film and television, Anthony Davies and Stanley W. Wells point to another important difference. Quoting Sontag, they write, “While the theatre stage can accommodate and effectively present characters who bear “the lineaments of universal humanity,” the realism of (film) tends to deal with characters as individuals without exceptional stature.” 96 Indeed, while this broad universal dimension recreates gender constructs and lends itself to broad generalizations in Assal’s play, it is the individualistic treatment of characters that highlights critical differences in Naoum’s adaptation. In re-writing the narrative then, in expanding its scope and nuancing its meanings, Naoum is able to develop gendered agency further. Indeed, unlike the “power over” dynamic that characterizes the two previous adaptations, here the re-writing takes on the form of “more power to” the original author and her play.

THE SMALL SCREEN’S GOLDEN MOMENT

The massive potential of television was put to the test during the 2011 uprising. With normal life and daily routines receding to the background, all eyes, and cameras were transfixed on Egypt’s Squares. If one was not on the street, television brought it all to the comfort of one’s living room: The battles, the army speeches, the demonstrations, the conspiracies, the hidden agendas, the chants, the talk shows, and much more. As Reem Bassiouney explains in “Politicizing Identity,” with all these voices competing for the revolutionary narrative, the uprising “became a media war,” 97 and television became the

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primary site through which the battle played out, galvanizing the nation and moving it to action in different directions. While Egyptian state TV systematically suppressed information about the uprising, ONTV was home to a slew of pro-revolution presenters, CNN walked the thin rope between ‘for’ and ‘against,’ and the Qatari-funded, Al Jazeera promoted the Islamist agenda. At the heart of this media war was the question, who was going to seize authorial power? Who was going to narrate the nation?

While campaign commercials, talks shows and national hymns were all forms of directive programming that competed for influence, it was really television drama that proved the most successful. In *Dramas of Nationhood*, Lila Abu Lughod gives further proof to this power by using a definitive quote by one time Director of the Egyptian Union of Radio, Television, Film and Serial Production Sector, Mamduh al-Laithy. “We need to inculcate the spirit of patriotism, morality, religion, courage, and enterprise,” he purportedly once said, “We have found that the best means to reach the individual is through drama. It works like magic.”98 Indeed, nothing ‘hooks’ the audience better than a good television drama. It provides a completely immersive experience, allows its audience to form lasting attachments to characters, invest emotionally in plotlines, memorize scores, repeat lines, and anticipate day by day what will happen next. This far-reaching and consuming power ensures that those who write television dramas could potentially narrate the nation.

Finally, no other time of the year guarantees a writer’s visibility more than the month of Ramadan. In writing for television, in writing a drama for television, and in

writing a drama for television in the month of Ramadan, Naoum is not only visible, she is in the spotlight. Typically, primetime is after Iftar when all the family gathers around their television sets and watch one drama series after another. In between episodes, viewers will go on Facebook or Twitter, or meet out with friends and family where they go through all what they have watched and how it has affected them personally. In “Taking the Soap Out of the Opera,” Mehrez explains that scripts during the month of Ramadan are geared towards this collective viewership, which could identify with these dramas despite their political affiliations, religious beliefs, social class, race, sex and age.\textsuperscript{99}

These families become microcosms for the big family, the nation, Egypt. In \textit{Egypt as a Woman}, Beth Baron examines the influence of gender in shaping the Egyptian nation and the metaphors that have come to stand for it. “The nation as one family,” Beth explains, “descendants of the same roots with shared blood. Young men are its ‘sons’ and young girls are its ‘daughters.’ At the head generally looms a dominating ‘father’ figure or group of ‘founding fathers,’ and by his side a resilient mother who is ascribed the role of biologically and culturally reproducing the nation.”\textsuperscript{100} This metaphor finds its way into the most resonating Ramadan series for its readiness to address the nucleus of every family and the nation’s larger defining questions, as we shall see.

In narrating the nation, Naoum takes full advantage of these national metaphors to re-define gender politics on social and national levels. The ‘founding fathers,’ in \textit{Muga}

\textsuperscript{99}Mehrez, \textit{Egypt’s Culture Wars}, 172

\textsuperscript{100}Beth Baron, \textit{Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics} (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2005), 5.
*Harra* for example, who stand for authority, are eliminated altogether and replaced by powerful matriarchs who culturally produce the nation in new and empowering ways. “The sons and daughters,” in *Dhat* are seen as equals and signify the hopes and the anxieties of the future. As for *Sign al-Nisa*, Naoum dispenses with the family altogether to make a powerful statement about the absence of the state in 2014, the year chaos prevailed and the spirit of the uprising was effectively thwarted for good.\(^1\)

\(^{101}\) 2014 was the most demoralizing moment in the brief history of Egypt’s uprising: beginning with the military’s seizure of power from the Islamist government, to the Rab’a Massacre which killed 817 Muslim Brotherhood sympathizers, the comeback of terrorism, the nation-wide arrests of revolutionary figures, the economic crash, and the failure of the state to provide safety and stability.
From Munkhafad al-Hind al-Mawsimyy to Muga Harra
While Osama Anwar Okasha penned down *Munkhafad al-Hind al-Mawsimyy* in a desperate moment in Egypt’s history, Naoum adapted it for television on the heels of the 2011 uprising. As such, one will find that the text and the screenplay mirror the spirits of their respective times. Informed by the Mubarak era’s absence of a national project, its fixation on economic objectives, and its rampant corruption, Okasha’s novel depicts characters that are equally vacuous, materialistic and crooked; the result of which permeates the novel with a sense of impending doom. In contrast, in adapting the text to a post-2011 Egypt, Naoum is impacted by an empowering moment that promised change and even momentarily delivered on that promise.

This chapter will examine Osama Anwar Okasha’s novel, *Munkhafad al-Hind al-Mawsimyy* in relation to Mariam Naoum’s television adaptation *Muga Harra*. In doing so, it will focus on how the revolutionary moment allows Naoum to seize authorial power, so as to overturn the relations of dominance, and redefine the nation’s social, religious and political character through its women.

**ENTITLED TO HOPE**

Reworking the title to *Muga Harra* is the adaptation’s first portent of a revolution. Although the novel and television drama titles both declare the coming of a hot spell, the inherent implications are different. *Munkhafad al-Hind al-Mawsimyy* is a cryptic weather forecast term that most significantly contains the word, “Munkhafad,” literally meaning ‘depression;’ the term as a whole denoting a hot wave incoming from foreign lands,

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102See Tarek Osman, “The Mubarak Years” in *Egypt on the Brink*, for more detail, 179-212.
specifically, the Arabian Peninsula; the Gulf here being framed as the foreign hands meddling in Egypt’s affairs and instigating its descent into materialism and Islamic fundamentalism during the Mubarak era. As such, the opaqueness of the original title could be read as alluding to a decline, slump or downturn of events that is foreign to and uncharacteristic of the nation. *Muga Harra* on the other hand, is a title informed by an uplifting moment, the 2011 uprising. As such, it literally rides on this ‘wave’ and turns the heat into something positive. Assuredly clear, the heat here is suggestive of a fever that washes over the nation, rather than a depression; The kind of fever that galvanizes people into action, rather than stifle them; one that, in the broader sense, is able to transform gender, cultural and political realities rather than destroy them.

**EGYPT AS A WOMAN**

Structurally, both text and screenplay are organized to convey a series of competing discourses and reflect a nation in strife. Okasha, however, deems this fate inevitable and locks down the chapters into binaries that are impossible to reconcile; “Saad and Nabil,” “al-Manfa wa-l-Marfa” (Exile and the Haven) and al-Zahra wa-l-Hagar” (The Flower and the Stone), and so on are all chapter titles that are named after a dichotomy, two conflicting forces or two opposing values. In Naoum’s adaptation on the other hand, the writer searches for solutions that would spare the nation the turmoil and strife and revises the plot accordingly.

It is through the women characters that Naoum finds these solutions and overturns the fate of this embattled nation. Here again, one must refer to Beth Baron’s *Egypt as a Woman*. In examining the influence of gender in shaping the Egyptian nation and
analyzing its gendered language and images, Baron explains that the national imaginary typically subscribes to the mother the role of biologically and culturally reproducing the nation. The consummate example of this analogy is Umm Mamduh. Referred to in both text and screenplay as Umm al-Jam‘i “mother of all,” Umm Mamduh is the matriarch of the ‘Agaty family. Mother to Mamduh, the martyr, Nabil, the socialist, Sayyid, the police officer and godmother to Saad al-Agaty, the Islamist preacher, her children indeed represent some of the main conflicting ideologies within the nation.

While Umm Mamduh in Okasha’s novel is a debilitated character that is unable to consolidate her family, Umm Mamduh in the screenplay is an empowered woman who emerges as a unifying force. In the novel, the mother is hardened and hampered by grief over the death her martyr son; mourning the martyr here being a symbolic reference to the loss of the grand national narrative in Mubarak’s era; an era that stands in sharp contrast to the heroism drummed up during both Nasser and Sadat’s time. Just like the city, al-Qahira, here understood as “The Oppressive,” Umm Mamduh is depicted as someone who is cruel, unjust and unavailable to her two remaining children. As by-products of this loveless mother-son relationship, Sayyid and Nabil, ‘the sons of the nation’ turn out to be incompetent, the one an impotent and corrupt police officer, the other a socialist sloganeer whose views never translate into actions. As such, Okasha’s portrayal of the mother figure reflects the country’s status quo as stagnant, corrupt and incapacitating.

103 Baron, 5.

In *Muga Harra*, Naoum is impacted by a hopeful moment and as such is able to articulate through Umm Mamduh the cultural and national values of a strong nation. The first step in this process is achieved by eliminating the patriarch in the novel, Rashid al-Agaty and by putting in his place, Umm Mamduh as the undisputed authority within the Agaty household. The second step is achieved by anchoring Umm Mamduh’s home in Sayyida Zaynab, a Cairiene neighborhood of great spiritual and moral significance. The neighborhood of Sayyida Zaynab is named after Prophet Muhammad’s granddaughter, Ali and Fatima’s daughter, and Imam Husayn and Imam Hassan’s sister. Sayyida Zaynab is also the patron saint of Cairo, a figure of strength, sacrifice, piety, and rather tellingly, revolution. If the spirit of ‘The Pure Lady,’ who witnessed Imam Husayn’s execution in Karbala, and “carried the message of revolution to others,”¹⁰⁵ is anything to go by, then this corner of Cairo is also the birthplace of a female-inspired revolution. Naoum places great emphasis on the bond between Umm Mamduh and her neighborhood through frequent references to “The Lady” and regular visits to her shrine. “Who else can I pour my heart to?” asks Umm Mamduh rhetorically, “She is my lady.” In anchoring Umm Mamduh in a neighborhood with such strong spiritual roots to the past and equally strong stakes in the future, Naoum makes a powerful statement about the nation itself. As Homi K. Bhabha puts it in *Nation and Narration*, “a nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things that are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present.”¹⁰⁶ As such, the values associated with Sayyida Zaynab, strength,

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sacrifice, spirituality, and revolution are seen as the cultural and national traits necessary to ‘carry’ the nation ‘across’ an important transitional moment in its history.

In depicting Umm Mamduh as a mystic, Naoum breaks away from dominant literary representations of women, and thereby asserts her own creative agency as a female writer. According to Toril Moi, “Mysticism seems to have formed the one area of high spiritual endeavor under patriarchy where women could and (do) excel more frequently than men;”¹⁰⁷ The reason here being that mysticism involves the loss of subject-hood and an opportunity to dissolve all differences. This experience, Moi maintains, “eludes the rationality of patriarchal logic.”¹⁰⁸ Indeed, in Muga Harra, Sufi chants provide the soundtrack to Umm Mamduh’s home living. Combined with her frequent visits to the shrine of “The Pure Lady” and her deep connection to her neighborhood, she becomes almost a transcendental figure, whose persona functions as a gravitational force for the entire gallery of characters. By portraying her as a mystic, Naoum rises above traditional male poetics, which either depicts women as passive and selfless or monsters that refuse to be selfless.¹⁰⁹ In doing so, she disengages from this patriarchal literary tradition and rises above these gender constructs to constitute the matriarch in a new and empowering way. This in turn allows Naoum to transcend common female representations, assert her creative input, and claim authorial right over the text.

¹⁰⁷Moï, 136.
¹⁰⁸Ibid.
¹⁰⁹Ibid., 58.
In making Umm Mamduh’s home the gathering place for all the members of the family, Naoum articulates through the matriarch the importance of unity. Indeed, in defining the nation, Bhabha makes a direct connection between it and the house. “One loves the house that one has built and that one has handed down,” he writes. Contrary to the closed-up character that we encounter in the novel, here the mother’s doors are always open. It is her home that all the sons and daughters turn to in times of strife looking for peace, strength and protection. The home as a unifying force is so important that Naoum concludes her screenplay with a scene that includes the entire cast of characters around the Iftar table. By placing the socialist next to the Islamist preacher, the wife from Garden City next to the mother from Sayyida Zaynab, the police officer next to the pimp’s children, the message is clearly one of unity despite differences. “We are all the same,” Umm Mamduh concludes, “from the shaykh who appears on satellite TV to the leftist who walks in demonstrations.”

In her role as the one “responsible for biologically and culturally reproducing the nation,” Umm Mamduh is made to redefine its gender, cultural and political roles. For example, when Shaykh Saad forbids his wife to seek medical help in order to bear children, deeming it “against God’s will,” it is Umm Mamduh who stands up against him, who calls him a tyrant, and who subsequently banishes him from the fold. Moreover, when she finds out about how Sayyid tortures jail detainees, she gives him a sobering lecture about the principles that must govern the duties of the police force:

110Bhabha, 19.

111Baron, 5.
“Do you remember what I said to you the first time you walked in on me in a police uniform? You forgot. I’ll remind you. I told you never to use your power to trample on anyone. And you did. Remember the picture frame hung over your head as you sat on your desk? It read, ‘Justice is the cornerstone of sovereignty.’ You have all the power, but you are unjust.”

Next, through the character of Khadra al-Shinawiyah, Naoum continues to assert her own creative autonomy and gendered agency. In contrast to Naoum’s adaptation, Okasha’s novel suppresses this strong character. When the novel opens, Khadra is already dead. In a few lines, the author describes Khadra as a legendary character whose story is the stuff of legend. According to Okasha, rumor has it that Khadra got pregnant two years after her husband was locked up in jail. It is for that reason that she became known by this name, an ironic reference to Khadra al-Sharifah, Abu Zayd al-Hilaly’s woman, who was falsely accused of carrying someone else’s child, before proven innocent. Khadra here literally meaning, “green,” is an ironic allusion to her purity and chastity. Despite her death, Khadra exerts enormous influence over her son Hamada

112 Mariam Naoum, Muga Harra, Television Drama, directed by Muhammed Yassin (2013. Cairo: WIKA), Television.

113 Abu Zayd al-Hilali is an 11th century leader and hero of the Amarid tribe of Banu Hilal who personifies the Arab leader whom the nation looks up to. Tabara, Acil, “Banu Hilal Story in Present Arab World,” Middle East Online, November, 2013. http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=7825
Ghizlan, the pimp. It is perhaps this strength of character that prompts the male author to eliminate her from the text.

By giving life to Khadra, Naoum constructs the nation’s contradictory and multifaceted realities independent from the novel. In contrast to Umm Mamduh’s moral and spiritual significance, Khadra is dark, seedy, promiscuous and irreverent, a testament to the nation’s dark side. Just like Umm Mamduh, she is also assigned the role of biologically and culturally reproducing the nation. Hamada Ghizlan, her son, is Muga Harra’s villain, a pimp who made his fortune handling the affairs of a shaykh in the Gulf before returning to run the latter’s prostitution network in Egypt; making connections between the Gulf and prostitution here being a reference to Egypt’s economic dependence on the Gulf petrodollar, a dependence that has compromised its integrity and reputation.

While Okasha stresses this licentious side of the nation through the character of Shahinda, Naoum’s adaptation redeems Shahinda of these characteristics, subsequently redeeming the nation itself. In Okasha’s novel, Sayyid al-Agaty’s wife is a vacuous woman who whiles her empty days gossiping on the phone, and flipping through TV channels. Although Sayyid is physically abusive to her, it is his meager salary that is her main source of anguish. However, there is also another reason for Shahinda’s resentment. Before marrying Sayyid, Shahinda was supposed to be sold in marriage to an old and wealthy suitor associated with Hamada Ghizlan’s prostitution network who had promised to pay a hefty sum in return. Turning down that offer torments Shahinda throughout her marriage. So much so, that Okasha chooses to make her opt out of the marriage at the end of the novel. In Naoum’s adaptation, however, Shahinda is turned into a loving wife who stands by her man despite their differences. Even though the lure of the material world is
a constant reminder of the life she could have had, Shahinda shows resilience and strength of character. In turning Shahinda’s character around, Naoum makes a statement about the nation once again. Although crushed under socio-economic pressures, love is seen as the one thing that can carry the nation across its turmoil and save its graces.

**REVISING THE GENDER POLITICS**

By overturning the gender politics informing Shahinda and Sayyid’s relationship in the novel, the nation’s subordinate status is overturned as well. Okasha’s narrative never exposes Sayyid’s impotence to other characters. The shame he is left to deal with is internalized and left to fester inside him, manifesting itself through abusive patterns of behavior both at home and in the vice squad where he works. These abusive patterns are never questioned. Instead, they extend him with a false sense of reassurance in his own authority, as a man. For example, aware of his impotence, Shahinda still allows him to abuse her, bar her from leaving the house then mount her like a prisoner of war. At work, even though Sayyid holds a record of abuse and torture, the file is quietly closed and the deed goes unpunished. By representing us with an unredeemable main character, Okasha again reiterates a sense of hopelessness in the entire power system, be it on the personal or political level. In the adaptation, however, we again witness how an empowering moment revives the sense of hope in the nation’s narrative. Here, Shahinda’s love for Sayyid prompts her to protect his image before his family and pretend to be the one who is infertile; a lie that costs her her relationship with Umm Mamduh, and years of hostility and ridiculing. In protecting Sayyid’s ‘manhood’ and undermining her ‘womanhood,’ Naoum intelligently pulls the mask off these labels, essentially revealing them as nothing
more than constructs. When Sayyid finally confesses to his mother that he is the one who cannot have children, the masks come off, the façade of strength, power and authority disintegrates, and he is reduced to shame, a feeling rarely associated with ‘real’ men. “Aren’t you ashamed of yourself?” his mother tells him, “All these years she has sacrificed herself for you. What is her fault to bear all this?”114 In reversing the gender dynamics in this relationship, Shahinda is relieved of her subordinate position. So much so, that in her strength, sacrifice and united front, she comes to resemble Umm Mamduh, the mother of the nation.

Indeed, as the one who reforms Sayyid, Shahinda also gets to partake in reproducing the nation. Unlike Okasha’s novel, where the couple divorce and Sayyid remains unredeemed in the police force, the adaptation sees the couple remain together and Sayyid resign from the police force. To salvage their marriage, Shahinda urges Sayyid to take time to re-examine his life. In a bid to put an end to all the issues that plague him, Sayyid heeds the call. This period of self-reflection allows him to emerge as a new and reformed man.

**QUESTIONING AUTHORITY**

A series of interrogation scenes help Sayyid question his ideas about power as pertaining to himself as a figure of authority both as a husband and state symbol. Here we have the ultimate figure of patriarchal authority, a police officer in the vice squad who also happens to be impotent. According to Jane Sunderland in *Gender Identity and Discourse*

114 Naoum, *Maga Harra.*
Analysis, masculinity traditionally associates itself with power and privilege. The fear of losing this power results in an excessive and defensive aspect of hegemonic masculinity, also described as the “masculine protest.” To avert the blame then, Sayyid convinces himself that all women are prostitutes who deserve to be controlled or punished. Whereas he physically abuses his wife at home, he also takes pleasure in taunting and shaming women during interrogation. With time however, these interrogations collapse the gender constructs and make way for new formulations. With every ‘prostitute’ sent to his office, we get to hear a new story, an uninterrupted monologue that in turn humanizes and liberates these women from this static label. The first, a middle-class, middle-aged woman, who was caught cheating on her husband, tells the story of his neglect and her own loneliness, citing them as reasons for seeking emotional satisfaction with another man. The second, a young and hip woman who was caught with her man ‘swinging’ with another married couple over the Internet, speaks defiantly about this being the only route to keeping her man appeased and her marriage intact. The third, an even younger girl speaks about her family’s inability to put food on the table. Clearly desensitized and unapologetic, she tells Sayyid, “The government wants to sell me then punish me when I sell myself.” In contrast to these three women, we also get to meet a sexually-crazed man who, addicted to Viagra and cheap thrills, bemoans the hefty price of marriage and the struggles of abiding by God’s laws. Whilst these accounts run the risk of constructing new misogynistic clichés, they still present Sayyid with a different point of view. Through it all, we watch him, listening, sometimes indignantly and sometimes

sympathetically, but all the while learning about real accounts and real people; accounts that constantly present him with fluid subjects, multilayered narratives and contradictory realities that challenge his pre-conceived notions. Indeed, by having his wife dessert him and force him through a period of re-examination, by having his mother confront him and deliver a sobering speech about justice, and by exposing him to all these real life accounts, Sayyid does emerge as a changed man. So much so, that he actually ends up resigning from the police force. Not only does he resign from the vice squad, but he also delivers his own attack on the entire justice system, as he challenges his senior, in turn, with the following words:

"أحننا راهين فين? الناس رخيصة.
الشرف رخيص القانون بقى عجينة
العدالة كذبة. القاهرة بتغوص في
الوحل والعاهرة أشرف من السجان."

"Where are we heading? People are cheap. Honor is cheap. Law is like dough. Justice is a lie. Cairo is sinking in mud and the whore is more honorable than the jail warden." 116

This scene is so pivotal to the drama that Naoum decides to repeat it, in its entirety, in the next episode. “I don’t want to drown,” he continues, “this ship is sinking and I don’t want to go down with it.”

**CHALLENGING THE RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE**

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Naoum enables women to challenge authority once again in her attack on the ultra-conservative Salafist discourse personified in the Islamist preacher, Saad al-Agaty. In *Muga Harra*, the shaykh is a product of the rise of this extremist misogynist discourse. By 2012, Salafism controlled many satellite channels and gained a huge following. Their doctrine sought to isolate women from public life and limit their full citizenship, granting them no political rights beyond the right to vote and only in the way that seems like a pledge of allegiance. Moreover, they not only sought to isolate women socially, but some even issued peculiar *fatwas* (sic) justifying the rape of women in Tahrir Square under the pretext that it was punishment for them unveiling themselves. According to an online report published by The Brookings Institution, entitled “Sheikhs and Politicians,” the threat became more real when in the parliamentary elections of 2012, “almost 40% of those who voted for Islamists did not pick the well-established Muslim Brotherhood. Instead they backed a coalition of three recently created Salafi parties.” Inspired by these events, Naoum turns the shaykh into an influential Salafi figure who derives all his powers from being the mouthpiece of the state. Lured by fame and fortune, the shaykh here is a television personality who reiterates what is fed to him by state security in his regular briefings. Naoum uses one of his television appearances as a platform from which to launch her attack on the official Islamic discourse. Significantly, the person conducting the interview is a woman, who could very well be the writer herself. In no time, the questions turn into a clear and unapologetic attack that does not await answers: “Praying

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by the shrines of saints, treating them as mosques, and building on top of them are all new fads that are not in line with the preachings of Prophet Muhammad,“¹¹¹⁹ the woman begins. Before the shaykh could answer, she continues, “You claim that to arbitrate anything in this life, one must return to the word of God and Prophet Muhammad’s Sunnah. Is that even possible in today’s world?”¹²⁰ As he still struggles to process, she strikes again, "Your sermons never tackle rising up against injustice. Instead, you preach patience and waiting for the reward in the afterlife. Is this your way of ensuring that the poor and destitute never resort to revolt?”¹²¹ Starting to sense a conspiracy, the shaykh looks around in panic and anger. Here, the scene cuts to the control room, where we discover that it is Nabil, the shaykh’s socialist nephew, who had prepared these questions for his uncle. When we return to the interview, we find the shaykh refusing to take part. Unabashed by his anger, the interviewer continues,"You declare other Muslims apostates, you ignore Egypt’s traditions, you deny Egyptians their Egyptian-ness."¹²² At that point, the shaykh stands up. Just as he is about to storm out, the woman interviewer delivers her final blow: “Why do you ignore human rights in your sermons? Why don’t you encourage people to follow their dreams just like you followed your own when you accepted a hefty fee for this interview?”¹²³ When the shaykh finally discovers that it is

¹¹¹⁹ Naoum, Muna Harra.
¹²⁰ Ibid.
¹²¹ Ibid.
¹²² Ibid.
¹²³ Ibid.
his nephew that has set this trap for him, he uses his connections to the state to send Nabil to jail. By updating the character of the shaykh from an upwardly mobile preacher to a powerhouse backed up by the state, Naoum is able to interject and comment on a phenomenon that was taking place right as she was writing her screenplay. The timing enabled her to use the adaptation as a platform from which she could protest the religious discourse of the Islamist government and expose its injustices and hypocrisies. As such, as she writes women’s agency into the narrative once again, she is also writing her own.

**THE SOCIALIST’S AFTERLIFE**

Finally, it is in turning the socialist from an obsolete sloganeer to the spark of the revolution that Naoum truly fulfills Walter Benjamin’s vision of translation as an activity that must “seek the essence of change.” While Okasha’s Nabil reflects the author’s disillusionment with the grand narratives of the intellectual left, Naoum’s Nabil reflects her renewed faith in their capabilities. Taking stock of Nabil’s room reveals a great deal about how far he has gone from text to screenplay. In the novel, the room reveals a disconnected world, an ideology that holds no currency, and a person who speaks no common language with the people around him:

"صورة ذلك الرجل ذو اللحية الكثيفة مجاورة للأصلع الأخر ذو النصف لحية في منتصف الذقن وعرفت منك أن الأول هو كارل ماركس والاخر لينين وتحتهما برؤاز به عبارة "أيها الشغيلة في كل أنحاء العالم... إتحدوا" الشغيلة وملح""  

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“The picture of that man with a dense beard next to the bald one with half a beard. I found out later that the first one was Karl Marx and the second, Lenin. Underneath them was a frame with the words, “Workers of the world, unite.. workers and the salt of the earth.. the dialectic.. the comprador.. and dictatorship of the Proletariat.. the surplus.. world crisis.. Maoism..Trotskyism..Kerenskyism.”

In her adaptation, Naoum transforms the ‘sloganeer’ to a seasoned articulator of reform. The first step in this process is to diversify and modernize these posters on the wall to include, Ghassan Kanafani, Nelson Mandela, Che Guevara and Shaykh Imam. In doing so, she opens up Nabil to the world and allows him to inch closer to the viewer’s world. Moreover, Okasha’s socialist is a bald and middle-aged man, whose ideology is seen as a means for him to distinguish himself amongst his brothers. As his brother, Sayyid, puts it:

“Exhorted that you are different..always a contrarian..Umm Mamduh used to call you the devil’s advocate! As if

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125 Okasha, 92.
when you searched for a place for yourself between
the eldest and the youngest, you only found the role of the
‘intellectual’ to differentiate you from the commoners and
ignorant amongst your people.”

Naoum’s Nabil on the other hand, is the youngest of his brothers- and for good
reason. The Egyptian youth were the ones disenfranchised the most by the stagnant social
and political climate before the uprising, “They (were) the generation waiting for better
access to quality education, secure employment, and the financial stability necessary to
get married and start their own families.”\textsuperscript{127} They were also the ones demoralized the
most by state-of-emergency laws and police brutality. As such their participation was
integral to changing the status quo, and indeed they were the ones who called for
nationwide demonstration on January 25, 2011. Okasha’s Nabil in contrast is so outdated,
that the author dedicates a whole chapter to him entitled, "The Dinosaur Laughs;'\textsuperscript{128} the
dinosaur here being a reference to an ideology that the author regards as extinct. The
laughing matter here being that Nabil is not too bothered by his disconnectedness. In fact,
he is comfortably married to Buthayna, his late brother’s fiancé, the daughter of a well-
to-do jeweler. In other words, he is a freeloader and a sell out. Whereas his relationship
with Buthayna is seen as a form of betrayal in both text and screenplay, Naoum redeems
this relationship, by changing its inner dynamics and by building it on trust, respect and

\textsuperscript{126}Ibid., 91.

\textsuperscript{127} Farzaneh Roudi-Fahimi, Shereen El Feki and Tyjen Tsai, “Youth Revolt in Egypt, a Country at the Turning
egypt-revolt.aspx.

\textsuperscript{128} Okasha., 91.
love between the couple.

**ON “GENDER EQUITY”**

Indeed, in salvaging their relationship, Naoum redefines gender politics in a post-2011 Egypt. Speaking of moving on from the past, Buthayna tells her mother of Mamduh,"I never loved him. It is you and Umm Mamduh who forced this engagement on me, and he died before I even got to know him." It is this significant disclaimer that allows Nabil and Buthayna to move into future, together. Their compatibility and support for one another is what empowers them to be the change they want to see in the country. In making them two sides of the same coin, Naoum insists that the country needs them both and as such, writes women’s agency back into the historical narrative of revolution. In one of the first scenes in the drama, we see them head to al-Husayn mosque to pray so that Umm Mamduh would bless their union. As such, Naoum roots the socialist in a familiar Egyptian-ness, which helps dispel the misconception in the novel that associates socialism with communism, and by extension, atheism.

Here again, the screenwriter gives life to a character that otherwise is nothing more than a few lines in the novel. Independent and committed to the cause, Buthayna is made to speak her mind and rebel against patriarchal values at home that hamper her involvement in the youth movement. By beginning the story six months before the uprising, Naoum turns Nabil and Buthayna into the seeds of very pregnant times. As such, she revives the left’s pull within the political arena and restores their voice and impact, allowing them to spearhead new movements, lead demonstrations and form new

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129 Naoum, *Muga Harra.*
We see Buthayna and Nabil discuss and come up with proactive solutions for current issues, such as the rise in food prices, the failure of the education system, obstacles in insurance policies, and the problem of illegal settlements in the slums of Cairo. We see them partake in think tanks and secret meetings where they organize and plan for demonstrations, print t-shirts, sing revolutionary songs, and create the famous chants that have come to characterize the Egyptian uprising. After his arrest and torture at the hands of state security, Nabil returns home, significantly on the first day of Ramadan to be united with Buthayna and the family. As he walks into the house, he delivers a determined call for action, "If there was the slightest possibility that I would drop everything I’m doing, it is no longer there. Now I am sure we are on the right track. They are terrified of us. What happened to me is the biggest proof that we are strong."

The ‘we’ and the ‘us’ here allude to Buthayna, as he assertively takes his place next to her at the Iftar table.

**DISMANTLING PATRIARCHY**

As Naoum constructs a future dependent on both men and women, she dismantles a past that is dependent on oppressive patriarchal values. Notably, there are no patriarchs in *Muga Harra*. While the patriarch of the Agaty family in the novel is a weakling with nothing to say, the screenplay eliminates him altogether and puts in his place the mother

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131 Naoum, *Muga Harra*. 
as the undisputed authority in the home. Likewise, Hamada Ghizlan is banished from his children’s life because of his crooked line of work. In his place sits his wife, Iglal. More domineering than any other figure in the drama, Iglal exerts the kind of control that emasculates men and particularly her son. Fed up with being a push over, her son finally explodes, “You make me feel like a girl!” he tells her, “You make me mop the floors for you and go to the market to buy your vegetables. Enough!”

Same goes for Hamada Ghizlan himself. While both mother and father are absent from his life in the novel, Naoum chooses to revive the mother, Khadra al-Shinawiyyah only to reduce the mighty Ghizlan into a weakling before her. So unbreakable is al-Shinawiyyah, that when Ghizlan goes to her weeping after being sexually abused in prison, she forbids him from weeping. “You will not weep,” she tells him, “You will only strike back.”

As such, we find Naoum working on different levels to dismantle patriarchy, either by eliminating the patriarch altogether, criticizing the domineering women that stand in his shoes, or rework them into powerful women who give their children the love, strength and support they need.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined how the Egyptian uprising enabled Mariam Naoum to turn a story about a nation’s impending doom into a story about hope and change. In turning this story around, she has given a virtually unknown novel and a stagnant narrative their

132 Ibid.

133 Naoum, Maga Harra.
much-needed lifeline, or as Walter Benjamin puts its, afterlife. “Translation,” Benjamin explains, “is an activity that must shine all the more light on the original”\textsuperscript{134} and allow it to “attain its ever-renewed, latest and most abundant flowering.”\textsuperscript{135}

While \textit{Muga Harra} did thrust Okasha and his novel into visibility, it is really the screenwriter and her adaptation that have shone all the more brighter. Naoum’s ‘visibility’ stems from her focus on women as the key to dismantling old gender, cultural and political identities, and in empowering female images in the novel; In other words, her visibility is a result of “womanhandling”\textsuperscript{136} the text. It is there that she “reinstates her own position of mastery”\textsuperscript{137} as a woman writer over her male precursor.

This adaptation was written in a moment of transition, where various ideologies were competing for the national narrative. While an Islamist government threatened to strip the nation of its Egyptian identity, there was also the looming threat of a rabid police force that until the moment of writing was still not brought to justice, and belonged to a power apparatus that worked on denying women their part in the uprising. As such, the intervention of a woman writer was crucial to questioning and challenging all these forms of patriarchal coercion.

In taking on this challenge, and in taking this challenge to television where

\textsuperscript{134}Walter, 18.

\textsuperscript{135}Ibid., 17.


\textsuperscript{137}Ibid.
Okasha is lauded as “the most popular writer,” Naoum’s writing is significant in more ways than one. Not only does she succeed in partaking in the nation-building project by narrating the nation at a decisive historical junction, she also insists on the same rights for her female characters. Finally, in adapting from text to screenplay, Naoum emulates Okasha’s television success and builds on his television legacy as a screenwriter who was able to blur the lines between author and screenwriter and literature and television drama.\textsuperscript{138}

\textit{From Dhat to Bint Ismaha Dhat}

While the central project in Sonallah Ibrahim’s novel *Dhat* is to depict the Egyptian Self as a completely disenfranchised woman, the central project in Mariam Naoum’s adaptation is to reclaim the nation through its women. The male author and the female screenwriter’s contrasting interpretations are a direct result of their respective historical moments. While Ibrahim’s novel is impacted by a historical moment marked by failure, Naoum’s adaptation is empowered by the momentary historical win of Egypt’s 2011 uprising. Ibrahim’s novel belongs to the literary imaginary of 1990’s. This generation of writers suffered from the disillusionment with all grand narratives, beginning with the 1967 War, to the 1978 Camp David Accords, to Sadat’s extensive crackdown on Egypt’s intellectuals in 1981, the 1991 Second Gulf War, and ending with the total defeat of the post-*Infitah* era. Quoting Sabry Hafez in *Egypt’s Culture Wars*, Samia Mehrez explains that the disempowerment on a personal and collective level made this generation come to
know “the impossibility of becoming what one wants.”\textsuperscript{139} The only space left to exercise any semblance of power was the literary imaginary. As such, Ibrahim’s choice to project his own sense of selflessness on a central female figure echoes Toril Moi’s remarks in Sex*ual Text*ual Politics, where she maintains that the domination of the patriarchal discourse can only be secured through regarding female difference as an absence.\textsuperscript{140}

Indeed, it is primarily through Dhat that the male author tries to re-negotiate his own power vis-à-vis his narrative.

On the other hand, women’s great turn out and remarkable participation in the 2011 uprising is what enables Naoum to alter the expressions of dominance in the narrative and empower the women characters. In many ways, the uprising restored confidence in the Egyptian Self and the belief that it could yield new meanings and construct new national and cultural identities. The moment was especially significant for the large number of women who supported the uprising, who in toppling the Mubarak regime toppled the ‘father’ of the nation himself. Suddenly, the struggle with a strong patriarchal precursor in the text, as Chamberlain puts it, seemed like a viable task, and one that presented Naoum with abundant opportunities for self-assertion as a female writer.\textsuperscript{141}

This chapter will analyze Sonallah Ibrahim’s Dhat (1992) in relation to Mariam Naoum’s television adaptation, Bint Ismaha Dhat (2014). The analysis will focus on how the adaptation liberates the central female character and the screenwriter from the stronghold of male author(ity) so as to reintroduce gendered agency to the nation and the

\textsuperscript{139}Mehrez, Egypt’s Culture Wars, 125.


\textsuperscript{141}Chamberlain, 324.
literary imaginary. In doing so, it will compare narrative techniques, language modes, female images and gender politics in both text and screenplay.

**GENDERING THE TITLE**

The title of the adaptation flaunts the first sign of Mariam Naoum’s intention to challenge male authority and introduce gendered agency to the nation. According to Mehrez, the novel title, *Dhat*, meaning “self,” is an indefinite noun that suggests it could be any self, or perhaps all selves, a strategy which displaces it from the private /individual to the public/collective. The displacement into the public sphere suggests that this self is a reflection of the nation, as an indeterminate (non)-entity. *Bint Ismaha Dhat* on the other hand, asserts the critical difference of the female identity in a very visible and literal way that leaves no room for doubt. As such, the female ‘absence’ we encounter in the novel is replaced with an inescapable and specified presence right from the onset. This in turn reiterates Baron’s idea that women are indeed emblematic of the nation.

**THE DEATH OF THE AUTHOR AND THE BIRTH OF DHAT**

The second move is to eliminate the father authority in the text as represented by the omniscient narrator. In *Dhat*, Ibrahim appoints an all-powerful omniscient narrator to speak on his behalf, to interpret and judge his stunted set of characters. In doing so, he applies what Jacques Derrida describes as “the prerogative of the phallus to declare itself sovereign source.” As such, one will find that the notion of the author as god, the

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142 Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers Between History and Fiction*, 130.
father of the text, and the sole origin of its “meaning, reason, science and law,” as Barthes puts it, is very prominent in the narrative. Looking at them from above, he not only dwarfs them and strips them from any agency, but also reserves all agency to himself. The result is a palpably conflicted author who is torn between a need for power and a feeling of utter uselessness.

That said, it is Ibrahim’s embattled sense of masculinity that impels him to dominate his characters in such an overbearing way. As he negotiates his power over the text, he also reveals a bruised male-identity that has come apart in a moment of defeat. In *Masculine Identity in the Fiction of the Arab East*, Samira Aghacy offers an exploration of masculinity in the literature of the Arab East in the context of a specific set of anxieties about gender roles and sexuality in Arab societies. Aghacy explains that the general climate following the 1967 war was heavily permeated with a sense of failure, and as such struck men with a “daunting sense of impotence and ineffectiveness, (that) demystifyed an essentialized masculinity generally viewed as firm and stable.” Proof of which is in the complete withdrawal from the political arena and the plethora of male introspective literature that voiced inadequacy and loss of purpose. In that vein, we find the author of *Dhat* constantly struggling in a space between essentialized masculinity and emasculation. While asserting his power through his omniscient narrator, he simultaneously interrupts and undercuts the narrator to make allusions to himself:

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143 Nancy Holland, *Feminist Interpretations of Jacques Derrida* (Penn State Press, 2010), 44.

144 Barthes, 142.

"We can start the story of Dhat from its natural beginning, that is, the moment she slipped into our world tainted in blood and what followed, beginning with the first shock when she was lifted in the air, turned upside down, and then slapped on her behind (that did not indicate, at all, the size it later reached). But critics will not welcome such a beginning." 146

This statement takes attention from the narrator and to the author’s personal position vis-à-vis power within the literary field.147 Then with caustic irony, he undermines the art of storytelling itself, calling it a patriarchal art that can end the way stories end - or not.148 The sexual innuendo here reverts back to George Steiner’s After Babel in which Steiner equates discourse with intercourse.149 In doing so, the author hints that failure to write is directly related to failure to ‘perform,’ or to ‘release.’ In other words, he points to his own fears and anxieties if he fails to substantiate the phallus, the father author(ity) over the text.

Not only does the adaptation eliminate the omniscient narrator and its tense struggle with power, it also significantly expands the narrative. The decision to do so is again impacted by the revolutionary moment, which gave voice and agency to various


148 Ibid., 9.

political factions and social strata, which were otherwise buried. The narrative technique in *Bint Ismaha Dhat* mirrors this phenomenon without fear or anxiety. As such, one will find that the omniscient voice is abandoned in favor of an impartial eye that is on par with and sympathetic to all its characters, one that relays rather than dictates thoughts and emotions. As they break free from the stronghold of the narrator, they start to speak of inter-subjective realities that do not conform to the male author’s gender constructs.

This liberating thrust allows Naoum to also expand on Ibrahim’s narrative. While *Dhat* deals with the 1970s and 1980s with flashbacks to the Nasser era, Naoum transforms the narrative into a grand historical saga that starts in 1952 with the fall of King Farouk and ends with the Egyptian uprising of 2011. In expanding the historical time bracket, Naoum transforms her adaptation from a reproduction of the literary text to a production in its own right, thereby deposing the father authority in the text. This creative license then thrusts the screenwriter into high visibility, where she clearly comes to contest the perception that the work of the translator should be regarded as a self-effacing and “self-annihilating”\(^{150}\) activity.

**SHE SPEAKS**

Then there is Ibrahim’s use of irony, which Naoum also neutralizes in favor of an undominated and un-intimidated language style. According to Aghacy:

“Under the iron hand of the macho state, men emerge paradoxically as perpetrators and defenseless victims of patriarchal oppression. At the same time, the sheer act of writing and the use of irony and

\(^{150}\) Venuti, 180.
other oblique strategies as defense weapons show resistance to the totalizing discourse of the state and a strong desire to change." 151

Indeed, throughout the narrative chapters, Ibrahim uses irony as a way to judge and evaluate various historical narratives and socio-political discourses without coming into direct confrontation with power. As such, irony here is used to navigate through his own sense of essentialized masculinity and emasculation once again. In “Sexist Talk,” Susan Spears examines the relationship between gender and language. One of the pertinent points Speers makes is that irony is a discursive tool that is used as an ideological filter. 152 Nowhere is this filter more strikingly applied than in the author’s creation of a female protagonist who is a feminized version of himself. According to Mehrez, the author uses this other woman to speak about him(self), a strategy that, she explains, is indicative of the highest objectification of the self. 153 Indeed, its is in the crushed character of Dhat that the author delivers his most vehement, and yet filtered, attack on the oppressive system.

In empowering Dhat, Naoum roots out the ironic mode and substitutes it with an un-dominated and un-intimidated language. By allowing the entire cast of characters to speak their minds, the author as god, the sole origin of meaning, gradually recedes until he eventually fades away. By refusing to assign an ultimate meaning to the text, the screenwriter liberates it through what Barthes calls “an anti-theological activity.” 154 As a

151 Aghacy, 98.


153 Mehrez. Egyptian Writers between History and Fiction, 131.
result, the expressions of dominance in the text are altered as well, allowing new images of women to come forth and become visible. For example, far from the initial images in the novel of a newborn girl’s body being passed around and slapped on the behind, here Dhat’s arrival is met with a loud and triumphant cry followed by the unanimous ululations of neighbors and family. There is further cause for celebration here. Naoum associates the girl’s arrival with a historical moment depicted within the official national narrative as triumphant: The coup d’état that overthrew the monarchy and established the Republic in 1952. The juxtaposition of these two moments is of strong significance, since it is during Nasser’s reign that the debate about gender roles in the family and society reprised its momentum. In Revolutionary Womanhood: Femininity, Modernity and the State in Nasser’s Egypt, Laura Bier provides the first major historical account of gender politics during the Nasser era. Bier explains, “the liberation of women, like modernization itself, appeared not only as a goal but as a historical inevitability… For the first time, the state exhorted women to assume their role in building a modern Egyptian nation as fully enfranchised citizens and national subjects.”

Then there is Dhat as a young woman with her whole life ahead of her who articulates her fears and longings in a language that is openly and unmistakably female. In “Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation,” Chamberlain explains the difference between male and female speech in the following: “Women’s speech is richer than men’s in those shadings of desire and futurity. (They) seem to verbalize a wider range of qualified resolve and masked promise. They

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154Barthes.147.

multiply the facets of reality and strengthen the adjective to allow it an alternative nominal status in a way which men often find unnerving.” Indeed, language here provides us with a window into the intimate world of a woman who yearns to break free and who is aware of the full extent of her siege. “I am in a prison,” she says, “solitary, for life, and I need a pardon by a Presidential decree.” It is through this inner thought, that Dhat articulates her full awareness of the multi-layered trappings of patriarchy, starting with the father and ending the state itself. When Dhat finally gets pregnant with the much-awaited boy, the so-called ‘heir,’ she wonders where she fits in the equation, a thought that is never vocalized in the novel. “Everything is for the boy. Don’t lift anything heavy, for the boy, eat well, for the boy, rest well, for the boy. When it comes to me, to hell with me!” she exclaims. These inner thoughts are eventually even vocalized when she comes head to head with the ‘patriarchal authority’ in the narrative, Abd al-Magid (‘Abd al-Majid), her husband. Sick of his false promises and fake showmanship, Dhat delivers her most “unfiltered” attack on patriarchy yet:

"أنت السبب في عيشتنا دي! ما خلنتيش أخد شهادتي!
أنا كنت غبية وصدقتك. صدقتك كل وعودك الكاذبة و دلوتني بص عليا! بطبخ وأنضف وأشتغل زي العبدة.
أنت عمرك ما حتكون حاجة. علشان كدة قعدتي من الجامعة علشان ما أبقاش أحسن منك. رجعتني لورا.
حياتي معاك تعيسة تعيسة تعيسة."

"You are the reason why we live like this,

156 Chamberlain, 321.


158 Naoum, *Bint Ismaha Dhat*. 
you did not let me get my degree! I was stupid.
I believed you. I believed all your false promises, and now look at me! I cook, clean and work like a slave. You will never be anything. That is why you kept me from university, so I don’t become better than you. You set me back. My life with you is miserable, miserable, miserable!” 159

By expressing ‘desire and futurity,’ by ‘verbalizing a wider range of qualified resolve and masked promise,’ and by ‘strengthening the adjective,’ as Chamberlain puts it, Dhat speaks in a language that is distinctly female. More importantly, however, this attack on the male character in the text is also an attack on the author himself, who in crushing his female protagonist projects on her his own feelings of debilitation and exercises his last semblance of power.

RECONSTRUCTING THE BODY NARRATIVE

While Ibrahim’s Dhat is reduced to a spiritless corporeal dimension, Naoum brings Dhat to life by re-constructing her body narrative. “The body is a construct,” 160 explains Sherine Hafez, and as such it is also “a space of contestation over which battles over authenticity, cultural dominance and political control are fought.” 161 In objectifying Dhat’s body, Ibrahim again walks the thin line between asserting his dominance over the narrative and battling his sense of emasculation. So dehumanized is Dhat in the novel that

159 Ibid.
160 Hafez, 172–85.
161 Ibid.
the bare minimum words suffice to construct her body narrative. Indeed, the very first pages of the novel introduce Dhat as an upside down organism tainted in blood. Then, instead of learning about her character, we learn about her various bodily functions (or dysfunctions): First, an image of a huge backside on a toilet seat, defecating, then the body is engulfed in the shame of menstruation, next it is mutilated through the act of circumcision, then the confusion over a broken hymen on her wedding night, later the cleft lip deforming the words, and finally, the tears that roll down with the activation of the eye ducts, like a robot. This kind of depiction echoes Freud’s theory of sexual difference as absence, which in turn is borrowed from what Moi calls “the oldest of ‘phallocratic’ philosophical traditions.” If we continue with Mehrez’s line of thought, which argues that Dhat represents the male author him(self), then the circumcision episode is especially significant since it mirrors Ibrahim’s own sense of emasculation, or in other words, fear of castration. In turn, it is only logical then for Dhat to suffer from a cleft lip as well, since she cannot tell her story and Ibrahim makes a connection from the very beginning between discourse and masculine ‘performance.’

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162 Ibrahim, Dhat, 9.
163 Ibid., 10.
164 Ibid.
165 Ibid., 16.
166 Ibid., 17.
167 Ibid., 97.
168 Moi, 132.
169 Mehrez, Egyptian Writers Between History and Fiction, 131.
If this body narrative seems reductive, the author later works on doing away with it altogether. When Ṣabd al-Majid decrees, “You must get veiled”\textsuperscript{170} Dhat does what she does best: She complies. The apparent reason here being a desire to fit in with her colleagues at work and to please him. In \textit{In a Different Voice}, Carol Gilligan sets out to correct psychology’s misperceptions about women’s motives, moral commitments and their course of psychological growth. In discussing women’s moral trajectory, Gilligan argues that the notion of ‘virtue’ is a man-made notion that is readily assimilated into women’s psychological constitution. To impose the veil then is quite literally, as she puts it to “fashion women out of masculine cloth.”\textsuperscript{171} In other words, the veil’s real function here is to cover up Ṣabd al-Majid’s fears more than Dhat’s modesty; the fear of this body breaking free from male control and constructing its own independent narrative. Gilligan continues to explain that ‘virtue’ is a kind of female self-sacrifice, which in itself is a notion that is in direct conflict with the concept of rights.\textsuperscript{172} In that sense, the veil could be seen here as a sign of man’s desire to dominate and women’s compliance as a need to absolve the body narrative from shame.

In censoring the body, the male author stunts Dhat’s mental development and suppresses her moral consciousness as well. In “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,” Freud describes, “the inhibition of thought (as) necessitated by sexual

\textsuperscript{170}Ibrahim, \textit{Dhat}, 177.


\textsuperscript{172}Ibid., 132.
Indeed, all along, we see Dhat’s sexual defilement go hand with her mental regression. From dropping out of university, to embracing the heater, stove and Ideal fridge as the new holy trinity of a good living, and from using the Qur’an to ward off bad spirits, to making out of an expired tin of Greek olives, a national cause. The olive can example is particularly significant since it carries wider implications. The story goes as follows: Dhat buys a tin of Greek olives from the grocery shop with a paper sticker indicating that the expiry date is two years away. Upon washing the tin can, the sticker peels off revealing that it had already expired. The case of the olive tin can awakens in Dhat her sense of duty towards her country, and she decides to raise the matter to authorities only to have her efforts quashed in the corridors of a complacent government buildings. Besides revealing Dhat’s ridiculousness, in reducing the national cause to an olive tin can, this final episode reveals Ibrahim’s own disillusionment with all grand national narratives.

Naoum’s adaptation breaks free from this debilitating body narrative by bringing Dhat into consciousness. In Women’s Consciousness, Man’s World, Sheila Rowbotham examines female consciousness from different vantage points- social, sexual, cultural and economic. In it, Rowbotham argues that language is the art of political and ideological power, adding that, “we cannot just occupy words. We have to change the meaning of

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174 Ibrahim, 13.

175 Ibid, 343.
Indeed, in giving Dhat agency, Naoum challenges many of the body narratives in Ibrahim’s text, from ‘virtue,’ and ‘shame’ to ‘wedded bliss’ and ‘good living.’ Even though agency remains a struggle and a negotiation due to the systematic obliteration of her character throughout her life, Dhat is still brought to consciousness where she is able to vocalize her body’s grievances and test its boundaries. For example, even as a newborn, Dhat is made to speak. Encountering the chaos of the world for the first time, she wonders, “What is all this noise? My ear drums hurt!” Later, ‘wedded bliss’ is referenced more accurately as ‘bedded bliss.’ When sex on Dhat and Abd al-Magid’s wedding night proves a disappointment, she vocalizes her anguish. Speaking to her best friend and sister-in-law, she exclaims, “Why didn’t you tell me?! You lied to me, Huda. You lied to me!” In saying that, we encounter Dhat as a sexual being who has needs and rights to these needs for the first time. A few years down the line, the idea of virtue as represented through the veil is also tested. When Abd al-Magid leaves to the Gulf, Dhat continues to test the limits of her body and by extension, her freedom. She dyes her hair blonde, albeit under the veil, starts smoking cigarettes, and goes out to the movies with her friends. “Just don’t tell my mother!” she tells her neighbors. Finally, the idea of ‘good living’ is given a complete overhaul when the body is allowed to cross from the private to the public realm and from individual to collective

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177 Naoum, Bint Ismaha Dhat.

178 Ibid.

179 Ibid.
consciousness. When Dhat encounters the crowds sweeping before her, chanting in unison, “Bread, Freedom, Social Justice” (عيش، حرية، عدالة إجتماعية) she joins them and chimes in. In “The Revolution Shall not Pass Through Our Bodies,” Hafez explains: “Women's bodies that engage in protest articulate (the) discourse of dissent. Their bodies perform new meanings and re-inscribe new understandings of what a woman's body in a public space has to say.”\textsuperscript{180} Indeed, it is in joining the ranks of the revolutionaries that Dhat starts to write her own body in new and empowering ways. In chanting, “Bread, Freedom and Social Justice,” along with the crowds, she articulates the values of the uprising which now come to reflect her own position. As such, she too is ‘carried across’ the “bridge of fear, of oppression, of class and social hierarchies, of gender divide and religious affiliations, of ideological orientations and political sympathies and agendas.”\textsuperscript{181}

**REDRESSING THE PATRIARCH**

Toppling the ultimate father figure, embodied in the sovereign ruler, Husni Mubarak, paved the way for new understandings of male authority. Mariam Naoum’s adaptation reflects on these changes through the characters of Abd al-Magid and Saad, Dhat’s father.

While the novel portrays Abd al-Majid as the ridiculous mouthpiece of the Infitah era, the adaptation is much more sympathetic to his character. Naoum constructs Abd al-Magid using Ibrahim’s same premise. He is portrayed in both text and screenplay as

\textsuperscript{180}Hafez, 172-85.

\textsuperscript{181}Ibid., 25.
someone who excels in ‘broadcasting’ the *Infitah* mandate, and as such a product of the patriarchal state under Sadat with all its megalomania, material aspirations, and promises of upward mobility. A first look at ‘Abd al-Majid in the novel sums up this premise:

"كان وسيما، أنيقا، مسلحا بالضرورات الذهبية: علبة السجائر والولاية (رونسون)، الخاتم، عطر أولد سبايس، الحذاء الضيق المدبب، معرفة بأنواع الطعام وبروتوكولاتها، شكوى دائمة من سياسة الدولة المتحيزة للقطاع العام والتصنيع، طريقة متعالية في الإشارة لسائقي التاكسي تجبرهم على التوقف، وتعلن ذات بالزهو، أهمية بالغة يضيفها على كل حرف يخرج من بين شفتيه، أراء قاطعة في مختلف الأمور يدلي بها في ثقة تجر الأخرىن (أو على الأقل ذات) على الإقناع به."

“He was handsome, elegant, armed with the golden necessities: A cigarette pack and the lighter (Ronson), the ring, Old Spice eau de cologne, slim pointy shoes, knowledge of different cuisines and their protocols, constant complaining about the state’s politics and bias towards the public sector and industrialization, the snooty way he hailed taxis forcing them to stop which filled Dhat with pride, the great significance he gave to every letter leaving his lips, and decisive opinions about various subjects that exude confidence and force others (or at least Dhat) to consent.”

Dubbed “‘Abd al-Majid Of Course” for his frequent use of the English word, Ibrahim uses English to mimic the state discourse. In “Stance and Indexes of Code-Switching in the Egyptian novel Dhat,” Rasha Soliman sets out to analyze this language. In doing so, she explains that the use of English in the text is there to ironically signify the language

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182Ibrahim, 12.
of ‘modernity’ and ‘social prestige,’\textsuperscript{183} and by extension the language of the *Infitah* and Western domination. The fate of this character is so inextricably tied to the political reality that when Sadat’s successor introduces himself to the world with the words, “My name is Husni Mubarak,”\textsuperscript{184} we realize there is no way out for ʿAbd al-Majid. Oppressive and delusional, he exhibits all the markers of false virility true of man and ruler.

Naoum takes Ibrahim’s premise and constructs out of it new meanings that eventually redeem Abd al-Magid. In eliminating the omniscient narrator, Naoum humanizes Abd al-Magid and rids him of his ridiculousness, the effect of which exposes his struggles and weaknesses and allows the viewer to sympathize with his character. Although he is as controlling of Dhat in the adaptation as he is in the novel, denying her a right to a university degree and forcing the headscarf on her, he is very much a family man with deep attachments to Dhat. This in turn revises the gender politics informing their relationship from a static master/slave dynamic to a more fluid and multi-layered one.

“No one is better than you,” he tells her, “You are more woman than any woman.”\textsuperscript{185} This declaration alone is a radical departure from the novel. Indeed, in the adaptation Dhat constantly vocalizes her husband’s ineptness, even calling him a “loser” (فشل) for not delivering on his promises and not catching up with his neighbors who have all

\begin{footnotes}
\item[184] Ibrahim, 23
\item[185] Naoum, *Bint Ismaha Dhat*.
\end{footnotes}
grabbed at the opportunities represented by the *Infitah* to become rich. These opportunities are only made available to those willing to swindle, embezzle and extort their way through the system, activities that Abd al-Magid categorically refuses to do. As such, he emerges as one of the only conscientious characters in the drama, refusing until the very end to swindle his way up the socio-economic ladder. The pressure Dhat puts on Abd al-Magid is so relentless, that he eventually breaks down. “I do not know how to steal!”\(^{186}\) he screams through his tears. In breaking down and exposing his weakness, the mask of virility comes off, allowing us to see him as a victim rather than a culprit of the system. In re-envisioning the character of Abd al-Majid, Naoum introduces both love and moral resolve. Although Abd al Majid is far from being an ideal man or a success, he is human nevertheless, and in just being that, he is redeemed.

Naoum compensates for this crushed male anti-hero by introducing the character of Saad. In the novel, the patriarch of Dhat’s family is not named, and depicted as a silent, passive and an absent figure that goes along with anything his wife decides to do. When Dhat menstruates for the first time for example, the narrator has the following to say about the father’s position: “No one prepared Dhat for this development. (Because the father, like all fathers, preferred to ignore such matters and leave them for the mother to handle.)”\(^{187}\) As for his position with regards to Dhat’s circumcision, “he would have preferred to exempt her from the customary procedure, assuming (rightly or wrongly) it

\(^{186}\) Ibid.

\(^{187}\) Ibrahim, 10.
was also responsible for the fate of his private ‘bulge.’” The caustic irony of this statement is not to be missed. By likening circumcision to the state of his own phallus, Ibrahim strips the patriarch of all powers and anchors him in absence. The first decision that Naoum takes to redeem the father is to give him the name, Saad.

The name here evokes the spirit of Saad Zaghlul, the leader of the 1919 revolution in Egypt. In doing so, Naoum instills in him all the values that the leader stood for, nationalism, progressiveness, courage and dignity. Indeed, it is Saad who sees through Abd al-Magid’s bogusness and cautions his daughter against marrying early, it is he who stands up for Abd al-Magid when he denies Dhat access to a higher education, it is also he who calls his son a ‘cop out’ when he decides to move to America and ‘abandon’ his country, and finally it is he who dies when Sadat signs the peace treaty with Israel. Indeed, in naming him Saad, Dhat becomes Dhat Saad, literally meaning Saad’s Self. As such, Naoum projects on Dhat all these values as well, making a connection between Egypt’s history and its future. What more, it is Saad who gives Dhat her name. “I will call her Dhat, after Princess Dhat al-Himma” he says proudly. By explaining his choice, Saad makes visible a connection that otherwise was only implied ironically in the novel. Quoting critic Ibrahim Fathy, Mehrez explains that the character of Dhat in the novel “is an inversion of the mythical character of princess Dhat al-Himma who fought against the Romans and defended the forts during the ‘Abassid period.”

**RE-IMAGINING THE FUTURE**

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\[188\] Ibid.

\[189\] Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers Between History and Fiction*, 129.
While the future in *Dhat* is imagined through doomed and crippling images, the future in *Bint Ismaha Dhat* is re-imagined as a prospect filled with hope. The degenerate Self in Ibrahim’s novel becomes the legacy that is passed on to the offspring, ‘the future of nation.’ To begin with, there are Dhat’s daughter’s, Doaa (Do‘a’) and Ibtihal, literally meaning ‘invocation’ and ‘supplication,’ named so since their birth was seen as God answering ‘Abd al-Majid’s prayers and reclaiming his confidence in his phallus. Intentionally marginalized, we only encounter them watching television, memorizing the Quran, with the help of their mother, or quoting *hadith* in their everyday conversation. Other than that, the girls remain unheard, unseen and non-consequential. The son on the other hand, is named Magid, meaning ‘glorious,’ after his ‘glorious’ father, ‘Abd al-Majid *Of Course,* and is referred to as the ‘heir’ to his father’s ‘legacy.’ Notably, Magid’s nickname is Magda, the feminine version of the name. Born with a speech impediment, he later overcomes it only to speak in English, which for Ibrahim functions as another speech impediment. Through these sons and daughters of the nation, we get to form an idea of what this nation will look like in the future. While the girls will probably grow up in an oppressive atmosphere of conservatism, marginalized, unseen, unheard and of little consequence, the boy will grow up to ensure that the status quo during the *Infitah* era remains unchanged.

The fates of these children of the nation are radically transformed in the adaptation to once again “carry” the values of the 2011 “across.” First, there is the inspiring character of Ibtihal who is depicted here as the free, socially responsible, self-determined and strong ‘daughter of the revolution.’ Ibtihal’s independent character is formed during her frequent trips to Maspero where her mother works. There, she gets
exposed to the news and listens in on debates about world affairs and local politics. Unlike her mother who embraces the veil as a sign of ‘virtue,’ Ibtihal understands that morality goes beyond notions of virtue and self-sacrifice. As such, it is really through this female character that Naoum comes to apply what Rowbotham calls for, namely to change the meaning of words before taking them over.  In redefining female morality, Rowbotham goes to explain it as “the sense of concern for another human being and as a sense of concern for the self.” Indeed, when the 1992 Cairo earthquake collapses a building, killing Ibtihal’s school friend, she starts to form ideas about her rights and responsibilities within society, and as such starts to acquire a mature notion of freedom. This strong sense of self is what prompts her to ask her mother, “Why do you want a boy? Girls are great. Look at us.” It is also what prepares her to choose the right partner. Years later, when she falls in love, the young man turns out to be insecure and controlling. Yet, instead of surrendering to his will, like her mother did as a young woman, Ibtihal ends the relationship. Just like Naoum, Ibtihal decides to enroll in the Higher Cinema Institute. When her family objects to this career path, she firmly stands her ground, saying, “I will apply for Film whether they agree or not.” As a film student, she creates a new show called “il-Nas il-i-Taht” meaning, (The Down and Out) which exposes the plight of the oppressed and down trodden in the country. Finally,

190 Rowbotham, Women’s Consciousness, Man’s World, 32.

191 Gilligan, 134.

192 Naoum, Bint Ismaha Dhat.

193 The title, “il-Nas il-i-Taht” alludes to a 1957 play that carries the same title. The play was written by Egyptian playwright N’uman ‘Ashur and tells the tale of a building’s basement where a number of poor and destitute families reside segregated from the affluent families in the top floors, and the dynamics of these relationships. The play was adapted to film in 1960.
it is also Ibtihal that emerges at the front and center of the youth movements in the days leading up to the uprising. With camera in hand, she boldly joins the protests and documents State Security transgressions on the youth, a fact that leads to her arrest. In coming head to head with the ultimate figure of patriarchal authority, the state, she does not retreat. On the contrary, she attacks these men with all the courage and authority of someone who stands on the side of truth, neither hindered by their verbal nor physical abuse.

Naoum also creates the character of Saad, the grandson who carries the legacy of his late grandfather into the future. Indeed, just like we see in Ibtihal the image of ‘The New Woman,’ we see in Saad, the image of ‘The New Man.’ Born in America, Saad takes pride in being Egyptian and in speaking Arabic, and much to his grandfather’s appreciation, if he were still alive, he decides to move back to Egypt right around when the 2011 uprising breaks out. Nationalistic, progressive, courageous and dignified, just like his grandfather before him, he becomes an updated and modernized version of the nation’s leader. In revising the role of the male in such a way, Naoum revises the gender dynamic between woman and man. Together with Ibtihal, they form a team and a partnership based on love, respect and equality. When the family stand in opposition to Ibtihal’s participation in the youth movement, Saad delivers his most telling statement in this respect: “Ibtihal is worth a thousand men.”

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194 The New Woman here is inspired by a contemporary of Saad Zaghlul, Egyptian lawyer Qasim Amin who wrote the famous document, *The Liberation of Women and The New Woman*, 1899. The premise of the document was that the liberation of women was an essential prerequisite for the liberation of Egyptian society from foreign domination. Amin used arguments based on Islam to call for an improvement in the status of women.

195 Naoum, *Bint Ismaha Dhat*. 
WRITING THE NATION

In creating Ibtihal in her own image, the female screenwriter turns women into the writers of the national narrative. Indeed, the question of who writes the nation, and how is a central concern in *Dhat*. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson, historicizes the origins and development of nations as imagined political communities. In the process, the development of print-as-commodity directly contributed to the rise of national-consciousness first in Europe, then eventually, the rest of the world. Sure enough, Ibrahim makes out of *Dhat* an employee in the archives of a daily paper to fire another attack on the nation’s narrators. Here, the memory of the nation, the archives, is a neglected space where piles of files are scattered carelessly on the desks and allowed to gather dust. As for *Dhat*, her task is to proof-read the published material and compare the content across several dailies, then submit a report to the Editor-in-Chief, who in turn crumples the report and tosses it in the bin without a second glance. The reason being that the “Chief” is too busy with his own “grand” national project- a compilation of ‘encyclopedic proportions’ of all the important celebrities and media personalities that have visited Egypt in recent years. So ridiculous is the *Iniftah* narrative for Ibrahim, so intent on severing ties with the nation’s recent past in the pursuit of its own delusions of future grandness, that the employees use the newspaper as a tablecloth to serve their

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197 Refer to the chapter entitled, “The Origins of National Consciousness” for more.

198 Ibrahim, *Dhat*, 22
sandwiches and collect their crumbs during meal times.\textsuperscript{199} Meal times are always accompanied with a ‘broadcast.’ The broadcast here is the \textit{Infitah}’s substitute for the written word: The nation as constructed and captured on television, and received, regurgitated, and emulated by millions of Egyptians. Typically, television, also dubbed by Ibrahim, “a box full of lies”\textsuperscript{200} transmits pre-packaged, mass produced and glamorized ‘broadcasts’ to an undifferentiating and undifferentiated consumer base. In this new world order, no one is spared. The writer, who in a better life fulfilled the role of the “conscience of the nation,” the citizen, and the national project itself are all readily assimilated into this vacuous consumer mix.

In \textit{Bint Ismaha Dhat} on the other hand, it is the women who write and thereby, save the national narrative. “A daughter of the revolution,” a film student, and a writer who “supplies the hidden truths about the complaints of the oppressed.”\textsuperscript{201} Ibtihal comes to embody the screenwriter in many more ways than one. Through Ibtihal, Naoum builds herself into the very fabric of the narrative. In doing so, she effectively deposes the father author(ity) of Ibrahim and plants herself in his place as the writer of the nation. Moreover, in making Ibtihal “a daughter” of the revolution,” she also writes the everyday woman, who indeed could be any woman, back into the historical narrative of the uprising and asserts their presence despite all efforts to erase their participation and contribution.

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\textsuperscript{199} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{200} Mehrez, \textit{Egypt’s Culture Wars}, 74.
\textsuperscript{201} Ibid., 42.
\end{flushleft}
Finally, one of the most interesting aspects of this take over is that Naoum delegates the responsibility of narrating the nation to the screenwriter rather than the novelist. Indeed, in moving Dhat from the archives of a daily paper and into Maspero, and in making Ibtihal’s project, “il-Nas il-i-Taht” a television program rather than a novel, Naoum turns television from “a box full of lies” into the medium for those (screen)writers who “supply the hidden truths about the complaints of the oppressed.” In doing so, it is not only the screenwriter who seizes authorial power, but also her chosen medium, television.

CONCLUSION
This chapter examined how the moment of uprising empowered Mariam Naoum to turn a story about repression and dispossession into a story about freedom and ownership. In turning this story around, Naoum had to challenge one of the most powerful male figures of authority in the literary field. She also had to stand against a long literary tradition of patriarchy and sexism, which typically relegates both women and translators to a position of double inferiority. Yet, Naoum was able to overturn these hierarchies of power to assert herself, both as a woman and a translator. To use Sherry Simon’s words, in “affirming her critical difference, her delight in interminable re-reading and re-writing,” Naoum has “womanhandled” the text in a way that succeeded in replacing both the absent female character and the self-effacing translator with visible and powerful agents of change. In 2013, the constitution was being drafted by the conservative powers

202 Simon, 2.

203 Ibid., 13.
in the country that threatened to isolate women from public life. As such, there was no better time for Naoum to break through these female images of confinement that were about to be written into the nation’s constitution. There was also no better time to intervene through adaptation so as to contest and construct different versions of national identity.

From “Sign al-Nisa’” to Sign al-Nisa
Mariam Naoum’s adaptation of Fathiyya al-Assal’s play *Sign al-Nisa’* is a unique case amongst her other adaptations in more ways than one. First, here we encounter two women writing through and against a male-dominated writing establishment and literary tradition to produce gendered agency; Second, demoralizing historical moments, especially with regards to women, influence both text and screenplay; and third, unlike the previous adaptations, this time the ‘original’ text is a stage play and the ‘original’ author is a playwright.204

As women writers, Assal and Naoum have had to fight many of the same battles within the literary establishment. In “Towards a Feminist Poetics,” Elaine Showalter recalls the history of women writing to provide new models for understanding feminist poetics. Showalter maintains that while women should not be studied as a distinct group, they do share a special history. “Women do have a special history susceptible to analysis,” writes Showalter, “which includes such complex considerations as the economics of their relation to the literary market place; the effects of social and political

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204 See Thesis Introduction, section entitled “Breaking Out of Sign aL-Nisa’” for more on the characteristics of playwriting in contrast to screenwriting, 33.
changes in women’s status upon individuals, and the implications of stereotypes of the woman writer and restrictions of her artistic autonomy.”

There is also the fact that both women write within the throes of defining historical moments that were particularly threatening to women. While Assal wrote against the rise of Islamist powers during Sadat’s rule, Naoum wrote against a military regime that overthrew a democratically elected government in 2103. In “The Politics of Translation,” Gayatri Spivak describes the feminist translator’s work as an intimate act of reading that should advance gendered agency and reinforce women’s solidarity. Spivak explains, “to decide whether you are prepared enough to start translating, it might be helpful if you have graduated into speaking of intimate matters in the language of the original.”

Indeed, if we consider the play’s central themes and core meanings, we would find that its essence still held true in the year 2014. Women were still being marginalized by an autocratic regime and a patriarchal society that was adamant on preserving the old status quo, and they were still suffering from unequal opportunities whether in education,


206 In “al-Malamih al-Assassiyya lil-Haraka al-Nasawiyya fi Misr” Thana’ Sadiq explains that the seventies was a time of warring ideologies between Nasser’s secularists and Sadat’s Islamists. Women’s status in society was the contested site upon which this war played out. On the level of government, the regime played the women’s card to appease Islamists at times and attack them at others, all while trying to pit different factions against each other to weaken the spirit of resistance. In universities, the Islamists managed to penetrate the student body, lead student movements, and dismiss women’s liberation as a suspicious idea created by the colonizing West. The literary scene was not spared either. The seventies were a time when the value of women’s literary production declined. Claiming that women’s literature was not up to standards, male critics refused to review the works. There was also an effort to try to separate women’s literature from men’s, so as to ask the question, “is there such a thing as women’s literature in the first place?” Thana’ Munir Sadiq. “Al-Malamih al-Assassiyya lil-Haraka al-Nasawiyya fi Misr” Accessed March 14, 2017. http://www.alfalq.com/?p=1509


208 Ibid., 404
economic welfare or political agency. These shared grievances are what make the playwright and screenwriter share a common language, preparing the terrain for what Spivak calls, “an intimate act of writing.”

While both Assal and Naoum are interested in gendered agency, they set about to define gender and gender politics in distinctly different ways. As both Showalter and Spivak point out, women should not write with the assumption that they belong to one distinct group. On the contrary, it is in highlighting their critical differences that gendered agency is achieved. If they do not highlight these differences, Spivak warns, they run the risk of reproducing the same old essentializing labels that have historically produced them. One must remember that Assal was denied an access to education by her father for the simple reason that she was female. This defining moment in her life informs her whole body of work. As such, the uncompromisingly feminist position that she adopts is somewhat understandable, and could provide clues as to why she produces these static labels and clear-cut categorizations of men and women in her play. Naoum, on the other hand, is deeply influenced by her experience during the 2011 Egyptian uprising and the calls in Tahrir Square for social justice, which by definition maintains the “view that

209 With respect to women, 2014 was dubbed “the year of unfulfilled promises.” According to a women’s status report prepared by the Egyptian Centre for Women’s Rights, 2014 marked a decline in female leadership positions, educational opportunities, and according to the Global Gender Index, a drop in Egyptian women’s political empowerment ranking. When it came to building the ‘new’ nation, the state over-represented men across the board. In the Advisory Council of Experts for example, only one woman was appointed, while the High Committee for Legislative Reform had none at all.


210 Ibid., 407.
everyone deserves equal economic, political and social rights and opportunities.”\(^{211}\) It is here that Naoum finds an opportunity to construct new meanings for gender, which assert critical difference and thrust the play into new and relatable social and political contexts.

There is also the fact that Fathiyya al-Assal passed away in the year 2014. “The death of the author,” so to speak, coincidentally occurred as Mariam Naoum was working on her most independent adaptation yet. Here, Naoum diverges from the original text in unprecedented ways to create new worlds, characters, plots and meanings. For the first time here, we experience the full meaning of “adaptation as a point of departure.”\(^{212}\) So much so that one could regard the adaptation as an homage to the playwright at best.

Indeed, \textit{Sign al-Nisa} is the only adaptation that pays its respects to the author in the credits. “To the esteemed author and activist, Fathiyya al-Assal,” it reads, “you lived to fight for the dream of freedom for all women, so they can break out of ‘women’s prison.’ Into a freer world.”\(^{213}\) Indeed, it is in breaking with the play that Naoum allows Assal’s narrative to “to break out of women’s prison.” Dedicating the television drama to Assal proves that this adaptation stands apart from the rest in that rather than taking the form of a “\textit{power over}” it takes on the form of “\textit{more power to}” the female playwright and her project.

This chapter will analyze Fathiyya al-Assal’s play, \textit{Sign al-Nisa’}, (\textit{Women’s Prison, 1982}) in relation to its television adaptation by Mariam Naoum. In doing so, it


\(^{212}\)Mariam Naoum, “From Text to Screenplay: Literary Adaptation as a Point of Departure.”

will focus on how Naoum breaks free from many of Assal’s gender labels to construct a more fluid, inter-subjective and nuanced narrative that involves, and engages, both women and men. This will be achieved by looking at multiple representations of women and men as national tropes, with a special focus on how rigid constructs such as ‘honor’ and ‘madness’ are deconstructed to produce gendered agency.

“SIGN AL-NISA’”

While Sign al-Nisa’ is the title of both text and screenplay, the playwright and the screenwriter use it as a point of departure, or a premise from which they construct very different prisons. Before contrasting these different prisons, it is important to first reflect on the common grounds. In both works, the prison is used as a trope for the nation as a power system that passes down gender inequalities as age-old laws. To claim the prison as a space of one’s own then is by extension to claim the nation as one’s own as well. As such, both the prison and the nation become interchangeable spaces that belong to and yet bind women. In defining one’s relationship to the nation, Raymond Williams explains, “nation is a term radically connected with ‘natives.’ We are born into relationships that are typically settled in a place. This form of primary and ‘placeable’ bonding is of quite fundamental human and natural importance.”214 This bonding and sense of belonging to an oppressive space then, automatically implicates women in the very acts that bind them. More than a physical space, the prison in both text and screenplay functions as a

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metaphor that carries wider moral and political implications. As one prisoner puts it in the play, “prison is the darkness surrounding women like us dear. It’s heartbreak, the betrayal of time. Prison is confusion and oppression.”

Naoum’s use of ‘ammiiyya rather than fusha in the title is the first sign of her intention to anchor the narrative in an Egyptian colloquial-ness that is accessible to all Egyptians. Foregoing the hamza in “al-Nisa’” is an indication that the narrative will break away from the elevated language of the play and reach out to the street. Indeed, as we shall see, Naoum’s adaptation is a rigorous examination of people, which moves beyond gender constructs to explore reality first-hand, with all its contradictions and multi-layered meanings. In accessing the street and its diverse and intimate spaces, the adaptation places greater emphasis on social rather than the complex feminist ideals of the play. In fact, it is through the exploration of the social issues that plague the nation that oppression in all forms and of all subjects, women and men, comes to life and achieves the highest impact.

One such social space is the prison. While Assal binds her women characters to the prison as a physical space from start to finish, Naoum moves them, and it, into the world so as to explore its different manifestations. This is facilitated by the fact that Naoum’s medium, the small screen, is not restricted by the fixed stage set-up of Assal’s play, in as much as it is informed by Naoum’s broader social interests in exploring prison life. The first step in this process is to transform the prison itself into a living and

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breathing world. Far from the non-descript and inanimate stage that Assal sets up, the moving picture walks us through the prison’s bakery and kitchen, its nurseries and literacy classes, and its laundromats and library to reveal a space that is able to interact with the inmates and inform their relations to one another. Not only does this journey into its depths reinforce the ‘bond’ and ‘sense of belonging’ to the space, but it also highlights these women’s critical differences as they interact with the space in different, new and personal ways. The next step in this process is to construct various ‘prisons’ outside the prison walls, from the economic destitution of Egypt’s remote villages, to the social bubble of Cairo’s uber-rich, and from the oppressive slum walls, to the stifled aspirations of men, and naïve romantic ideals of women.

**BREAKING WITH THE “ISM”**

While the play constructs gender identities through a rigorous feminist lens, the adaptation develops gender within ongoing social realities. The play begins with a performance between two groups of actors who represent the forces of good and evil, justice and injustice, light and dark which immediately sets the play’s polarizing tone. Then the cast of female characters appears and claims the stage. However, this is not where Assal stops. In this play, women take over the stage, and appropriate the structure and the language as distinctly female sites from start to finish.

Through structure, Assal goes against the traditional Aristotelian play to build a story that reflects the experience of women. According to theatre critic Nehad Saleiha, the Aristotelian dramatic structure reflects the life experience of man alone. While men can organize their world in a linear, climactic way that has a clear point of departure, middle
and end, Saleiha explains, women’s experience is based on plurality, intersection and collision.\(^{217}\) Indeed, in un-following the European theatrical model, Assal reprises indigenous popular theatrical forms, appropriating the labyrinthine structure of *The Thousand and One Nights* which features the same kind of plurality, intersection and collision. This enables Assal to turn every female inmate into Shahrazade, who can tell her story and echo the stories of other women. These stories are often told in the form of monologues that reveal internal struggles and function individually and collectively as therapeutic outlets for these women. Through calculated interruptions, digressions, and the accumulation of fragments that reflect the female experience,\(^{218}\) these stories eventually converge into one: a story about one woman in all, implicated in the patriarchal acts that bind her, oppressive to herself as much as she is oppressed by “Man,” and who must revolt against herself first by tapping into a different level of consciousness, into an inner truth that is distinctly female.

Naoum’s adaptation breaks away from this theoretical stronghold to construct a very different world from the beginning. The first episode begins with a Western band’s concert by the pyramids and then moves into the slums where a funeral is being held for Ghalya, the central female protagonist’s mother. Inside the funeral, women refer to Ghalya as “Ghalya bint al-Ghalya” meaning “dear one, daughter of the dear one.” “The dear one” is a reference to Ghalya’s deceased mother, but also an allusion to the nation itself. As such, the extravagant Western concert that is taking place at the foot of a

\(^{217}\) Saleiha, 272.

historical Egyptian landmark could be seen as a death as well, the death of national and cultural identity. Indeed, in killing off the mother, the one who is “ascribed the role of biologically and culturally reproducing the nation,”219 “the daughter of the nation” becomes an orphan, a broken national and cultural image.

Then there is the second major digression from the play, the introduction of the male protagonist, Saber, a microbus driver who is also Ghalya’s lover. As such, from the onset, Naoum radically departs from the play in more ways than one. On the one hand, there is a clear starting point, a beginning. On the other, there is a main story, set against a social backdrop, about a woman and a man.

**FROM POLARITY TO PLURALITY**

The idea that women perpetuate the very patriarchal notions that control and oppress them is one that both women writers believe in. However, while Assal places women in two clear-cut categories, there are those who succumb to this idea and those who reject it, Naoum on the other hand, is more interested in the multiple shadings of women and the plurality of their differences. To begin with, Assal represents us with the woman warden who is essentially the gatekeeper of the “male-state.” An oppressive and even violent character, she denies the women inmates even the rights granted them within prison. Time and again, she has a one-word answer to their every request: “Prohibited;” and whenever they question her authority, she has a single reaction as well: Violence. Finally, when it is actually time to lock them up for the night, she makes it a point to use force

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219 Baron, 5.
with one of the inmates: "She pushes Mona in and slams the door violently." Then there are the prison inmates themselves who are either helpless by-products of the patriarchal system or fierce advocates against it. Indeed, the play opens on two polar opposite women characters. There is Salwa, the progressive political activist, and there is Laila, the submissive trophy wife. While Salwa is being chased by the authorities for her involvement in the “Bread Riots,” Laila is seeking refuge in Salwa’s apartment from her physically abusive husband, Selim. Completely unaware of the protests that have taken over the streets, Laila’s only concern is her husband and what he will do once he finds out that she has left the house. Entering in a blonde wig, smudged make-up and tattered designer clothes, she cries out to Salwa, "if he finds out I came to you he will kill me." Indeed, as Laila herself aptly puts it, "my world is as big as the stone on my ring." These neatly formed female molds are disrupted in the adaptation to produce multiple shadings and assimilations of meaning. Again here, the idea that women perpetuate the patriarchal notions that oppress them serves as “a point of departure.” However, in rethinking this idea, Naoum presents us with three-dimensional female images that are more engaging for the simple reason that they are contradictory. The jail warden, Ihsan for example is positioned as a substitute mother figure in Ghalya’s life and a conspirator against her. The story goes as follows: Ihsan’s daughter, Nawara and Ghalya are best friends and in love with the same man, Saber. The plot takes an unexpected turn when Saber, whose ultimate dream is to own a microbus, ditches Ghalya

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221 Ibid., 33

222 Assal, 33.
for the daughter of a car dealer in the hope that he could secure a new microbus for free. Saber’s wife dies shortly after their wedding and he, rather unexpectedly, dodges his father-in-law’s pleas to pay the remaining installments. In the meantime, Saber woos Ghalya back. When the two men come head to head in Ghalya’s home, Saber ends up stabbing the man and fleeing the murder scene, leaving Ghalya, now pregnant with his child, as the scapegoat. As this scene unfolds, we see Nawara spying on the altercation and bearing witness to Saber’s crime. Yet, to have Saber for herself, Nawara testifies against her childhood friend. Ghalya ends up spending seven years in jail for a murder she did not commit. Fully aware of her daughter’s scheme, Ihsan never speaks out to defend Ghalya. As her jail warden, Ihsan continues to act as a mother figure to Ghalya without ever speaking the truth. As such, our judgment of Ihsan remains suspended and she remains a deeply conflicted figure torn between her desire to stay loyal and protective of her daughter and her sense of duty towards Ghalya.

**ON “HONOR”**

Naoum continues to elaborate on Assal’s gender representations in her approach to the notion of “honor.” In “The Politics of Honor,” Manar Hassan argues that the patriarchal politics of honor are bound up with the interests of the state. “The maintenance of honor is the perpetuation of male control;” she explains, “an assault on that honor undermines that system of domination.”223 The problem with this notion is the problem with all other patriarchal notions: It is so deeply entrenched within the system that women come to

assimilate it as their own, and in turn start feeling shame and embarrassment when their honor is compromised. While Assal takes this hypothesis and applies it to all female characters, Naoum decentralizes it to question its validity and reason. Indeed, all female characters in Assal’s play uphold honor as the highest virtue and its sacrifice as the biggest crime. When Lawahiz, for example, is caught stealing in a whorehouse, she hides the stolen jewelry in her private parts to prove to her husband that she was not there as a whore. “I am a thief, but I have honor,” she argues. Honor is such a topic of contention amongst the women prisoners, that they taunt each other over it and define and redefine each other through it over and over again. When Saniyyah is bad-mouthed for her penchant for dancing naked before older men, she is fast to note, “but I am still a virgin.” Even Salwa, one of the most progressive characters in the play is not spared. Salwa’s double standards are revealed when she learns that her daughter frequents the apartment of a male friend, a fact that enrages her. So much so, that she storms his apartment and humiliates her daughter by dragging her out. That is despite the fact that this friend’s mother opens the door and welcomes Salwa into what is revealed to be an innocent gathering of friends. At the center of this subplot is once again the idea of honor, and how it is deeply entrenched in the psyches of women, where even the most progressive are not spared.

In contrast to Assal, Naoum deconstructs this notion and its application in more ways than one to produce radically different images of women and men. To begin with,

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224Assal, 63.

225Ibid., 38.
there is her depiction of the seldom seen Hangaraniyyah tribe. A group of outlaws who earn their living through stealing, the Hangaraniyyah are known to place women on the top of the power hierarchy and men at the bottom.²²⁶ Women are the ones who go out and steal to provide for their families, while men stay at home to cook, clean and receive pocket money from their wives at the end of the day. Stealing is not only a way of life for the Hangaraniyyah, more importantly it is a matter of honor. So much so that the girl who does not steal does not deserve to live amongst them. Women are held in such high regard that the tribe mourns the birth of a boy, and celebrates the birth of the girl. Stealing is such an honorable cause to live by, that the childrens’ education is solely dedicated to its ‘art.’²²⁷ It is here that Naoum creates the most subversive images of women, lawless, yet and it is also here that honor becomes a mere matter of perspective.

Indeed, while the women in Naoum’s adaptation are non-plussed by the idea of honor, it is the men who are left confused and burdened by it. Here, Ghalya sleeps with Saber out of wedlock without once expressing any sort of fear or anxiety. There is also Dalal and Karam, the prostitute and the bartender. Karam falls in love with Dalal knowing she is a prostitute and initially it does not seem to pose a problem. On the contrary, Karam initially sees Dalal as his equal. “I am not like the men you spend the night with,” he says to her, “I’m not rotten. I love you. I am just like you. Burdened all my life and I want to be happy.” Yet when they do get engaged, Karam’s language changes, he becomes controlling, and Dalal’s line of work becomes a deal breaker. So

²²⁶ Mariam Naoum, interview by May N. Serhan, Cairo, September, 2015.

much so, that when she gets arrested, he turns into a ruthless and judgmental man. “This job runs in her blood,” he tells her mother, before breaking off the engagement never to look back. Here again, we find Naoum breaking away from Assal’s generalizations in order to construct more nuanced and multi-layered characters, only to come back to reach the same verdict at the end. However, it is in only through this detour that she is able to develop these characters further as fluid and multi-layered entities filled with all the contradictions that make them human.

ON “FEMALE MADNESS”

Next, there is the theme of ‘female madness.’ While both Assal and Naoum use female madness as a means by which to protest man’s “meaning, reason, science and law,” Naoum manages to create out of it one of the darkest and most indelible female images in television history. In “Madness as a Textual Strategy,” Dina Manisty writes that, “women within our dualistic systems of language and representation are typically situated on the side of irrationality, silence, nature and the body, while men are situated on the side of reason, discourse, culture and the mind.” She continues to explain that women are conditioned to think that to be healthy is to ‘adjust’ to the behavioral norms set by ‘reason,’ ‘discourse’ and ‘culture.’ The ‘mad woman’ or the ‘monster’ in Assal’s play is Shafiqa. Shafiqa remains an enigmatic character, presented only through what appears to be the feverish ravings of a mad woman until the end of the play. “Loved, was deceived,

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228 Barthes, 142.

killed, relieved” are the four words that she repeats over and over again without offering any further explanation. Indeed, Assal upholds Shafiqa’s story for a long time, and in doing so allows the reader to pass judgment on the character and dismiss her as ‘mad.’ Shafiqa however gets to tell her story at the end. We learn that she killed her husband when she found him cheating with no one other than her daughter-in-law. “The monster woman is the woman who refuses to be selfless, acts on her own initiative, who has a story to tell- in short a woman who rejects the submissive role patriarchy has reserved for her,” writes Manisty. Indeed, we learn that Shafiqa “acts on her own initiative” when she says she knew her son would kill them both if he found out, so she decides to take matters into her own hands. We also learn that “she rejects the submissive role patriarchy has reserved for her” when she tells of how she grew old and watched him dye his hair and eyebrows black while she was left behind to age and waste on him everything she owns. When it comes to Shafiqa’s story, no one tells it but herself. In *On Madness*, Michel Foucault provides a detailed history of madness through different discourses, from culture and law to politics and philosophy. In it, he describes psychiatry as a monologue by reason about madness, a kind of monologue that imprisons every discourse beyond it. This is a fate that Assal reverses in Shafiqa’s story. When she does finally deliver the monologue that tells her story, she is asked, "are you relieved?";

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230 Assal, 44.

231 Manisty, 152.

232 Assal, 107.

to which she responds with, “When you release the worry from your heart, when you wash away your disgrace with your own hands, when you take your revenge, then you can be happy anywhere, inside prison or outside it.”

While the theme of ‘female madness’ takes on a social dimension in the play, Naoum packs it with strong political connotations. As Spivak puts it, “the politics of translation takes on a massive life of its own if you see language as a process of meaning construction.” Indeed, nowhere is this “massive life” more felt that in the story of Hayat. Hayat, whose name means, ‘life,’ is an example of how the oppressive social, economic and political conditions of the male-state can lead women to withdraw to the point of seeking self-annihilation. Hayat endures daily sexual harassment on public buses as she traverses the urban jungle from home to work and back. So depleted are her powers, that even when she is groped on the bus, she surrenders. Her only means of responding is by hiding under an isdal, a long veil that covers the head, shoulders, abdomen, hips and thighs. At home, Hayat collects newspaper clippings that chronicle the dehumanizing conditions under which Egyptians live; from the death of an entire neighborhood due to a sewage pipe explosion, to the life of an entire neighborhood lived under mounds of garbage. In doing so, Hayat tries to compensate for the chaos inside her mind by putting the material world around her in order. In Women and Madness, Phyllis Chesler addresses the critical question of women and mental health. “Madness,” writes

234 Assal, 107.

235 Spivak, 397.

236 The Arabic word Isdal is most often used in the context of “a curtain call.”
Chesler, “a peculiar disease of our civilization in which others are elected to live out the chaos that we refuse to confront in ourselves.” The fear becomes so real, so palpable for Hayat that the cracks in her psyche start to show. As she shuts off from the world, she starts to have imaginary arguments with men who, from the broken mumbles that we hear, try to control her in one way or another. When she reads in a newspaper that even the fruits she feeds her children are contaminated with toxic pesticides, she decides that life itself has become life-threatening and kills her children to protect them. In “Suicide as Social Control,” Jason Manning defines ‘moralistic suicide’ as “any suicidal behavior that expresses or handles a grievance, whether the act is one of protest, punishment, appeal, atonement or avoidance.” Indeed, by trying to kill her whole family, including herself, Hayat performs the one act of protest available to her. However, when Hayat wakes up to find her whole family dead, leaving her as the only survivor of a failed suicide attempt, we realize that even this act of protest has been denied her. The last nail in the coffin comes when ultimately the state orders her execution. Her execution serves as a daunting reminder that she is not the author of her own narrative, and that it is the male-state that is the sole origin of “meaning, reason… and law.”

In the theme of “female madness,” both women writers find an autonomous space within the literary imaginary to assert their own creativity. Within the patriarchal literary


239 Barthes, 142.
tradition, female images have always been confined to male perceptions. Images of women are torn between the ideal woman, passive, docile and above all selfless, and the monster who refuses to be selfless, acts on her own initiative, who has a story to tell; in short “a woman who rejects the submissive patriarchal role patriarchy has reserved for her.” In their quest to create their own images, women writers have pounced on these dreaded and frightening figures to reflect their own anger, anxiety and fear. As Gilbert and Gubar aptly put it in Madwoman in the Attic, the mad woman functions as the author’s double, a way to come to terms with one’s own uniquely female feelings of fragmentation. It is through this fragmented self that both writers are able to construct different sides to their story and thereby find their own gendered agency. As she constructs new meanings out of madness, Naoum again succeeds in advancing Assal’s female project. It is in depicting a far harsher national image through a far more jarring “mad woman” that women find a space that is their own in the national landscape, and the author’s screams for acknowledgement are heard loud and clear.

**MANNING THE PRISON**

Whereas Assal produces an autonomous feminist site that is virtually unmanned, Naoum develops a gender-inclusive narrative that breaks away from static categories of men and women. Indeed, the only male representative in Assal’s play is Selim. An arms and drug dealer, wife beater, and a former police officer, he embodies the essential misogynist, capitalist and powerful patriarch, and by extension, the male-state during Sadat’s *Infitah*

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240 Moi, 58.

241 Gilbert and Gubar, 78.
era. Selim molds his wife Laila into ‘Every Man’s’ fantasy: a trophy wife, a prostitute and a slave. Her blonde wig, piles of make-up, and svelte body, which she maintains by depriving herself from food, are all examples of how men “fashion women out of masculine cloth.”\textsuperscript{242} As we come to learn, this is Selim’s preferred look when showing off his wife and trying to appeal to his foreign business associates. As the consummate child of the \textit{Infitah} era, Selim sees no point in having children. “Who needs children,” he tells his wife, “Since we don’t have children, our money is our children.”\textsuperscript{243} However, it is when Laila runs away to Salwa, after she crosses the borders he had set for her, that the full scope of Selim’s tyranny is revealed. Calling her escape, a terrible mistake\textsuperscript{244} and reminding her that, ”Obedience to the husband is part of obedience to God,”\textsuperscript{245} Selim uses Laila flight as grounds for divorce.

By depicting Selim as nothing more than a male stereotype, Assal engages in the same patriarchal literary practices that confine women. Indeed, by offering no male alternative, Selim comes to represent the sum total of evil in the world, and as such nothing more than a static label. In \textit{Feminist Discourse and its Discontents}, Jean Bethke Elshtain warns of these kinds of gender representations. “This hardline position leaves the receiver feeling suspicious of the message,” she writes, “that maybe the describer

\textsuperscript{242} Gilligan, 6.
\textsuperscript{243} Assal, 54.
\textsuperscript{244} Ibid., 68.
\textsuperscript{245} Ibid., 76.
“protests too much,” that things cannot be possibly be all that bad.” The suspicion also derives from the fact that these kinds of exclusory representations seek to advance particular interests over others, and thus fail to partake in any collective project on the national level. The irony here is that in doing so, Assal comes to reconstruct the very prison that she had hoped to escape.

Through Saber, Naoum gives a great example of how these ready-made categories and dualisms can be repudiated. True, Saber is horrible. He killed a man and left his pregnant wife to serve his sentence. Yet even so, Saber is still not detestable, because Naoum turns him into a real human being. Completely trampled by life, emasculated by the authorities, and dehumanized by impossible socio-economic conditions, she gives him a motive to be who he is. “When will we ever wake up and surface on the face of this earth,” he wonders, “But no! I swear by the God who created me, I will not give in. Let this life do whatever it wants to me. I will be as unjust to it has been to me.” Indeed, throughout the drama, Naoum keeps changing Sabers colors, giving him power and stripping it away from him, allowing for tender moments between him and Ghalya then turning him into a heartless misogynistic nightmare. For example, when Saber is arrested for not paying for his microbus installments, the implication is that the police have sexually abused him. As he cries on Ghalya’s lap, he says, “this world broke me... broke me and broke my back and I don’t complain. I keep to myself and try to get by, but it

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246 Elshtain, 612
247 Naoum, Sign al-Nisa.
seems like they think life is too much for us.” In constructing the main male character in such a way, Naoum disrupts the neatly formed gender molds constructed in the play in favor of multiple shadings and assimilations of meaning; the effect of which is female and male characters that are hard to pigeonhole.

In doing so, Naoum turns both women and men into culprits of the oppressive patriarchal state. Indeed, throughout the television drama, we find Saber looking for ways to reclaim his masculinity. To him, owning the microbus becomes the means to achieving this goal. In On Man and Cars, Dag Balkmar links performative practices to the construction of feminine and masculine identities. He explains that gender identity is a continuously enacted activity that strives to embody and achieve what in specific contexts is considered desirable ways of being man and woman. In Saber’s case, the microbus is what contributes to his production of a sense of manhood.

Indeed, as a microbus driver, Saber emerges as a trope for a degenerative nation. The microbus culture in Egypt is exclusively male and highly reflective of the state’s inability to exert any semblance of control or order. Rather tellingly, amongst microbus drivers, the microbus is referred to as “al-Mashrūṭa” “meaning “the project.” As any Egyptian would tell you, the microbus phenomenon is one that is exacerbated by the

248 Ibid.


state’s failure to reestablish law and order in the city. In the absence of law, these unregulated vehicles force their way around the city by the sheer force of coercion and intimidation. As a “mashrū‘ watani” then, or a ‘national project,’ Saber, the consummate “microbus driver” is a reflection of a nation-state that is socially degenerate and institutionally dysfunctional.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has argued that the adaptation of *Sign al-Nisa’* is a unique case amongst Naoum’s adaptation in that it expands and elaborates on the meanings of the ‘original text.’ This writing process has been facilitated by moving to a different medium as much as it has been facilitated by moving into a different context. One must remember that Assal wrote *Sign al-Nisa’* for the stage. Theatre allows a playwright to base his/her play on an intellectual premise in a way that television does not. One must also remember that the play was performed in the Egyptian National Theatre, which generally is expected to attract a crowd of intellectual elites. There is also the fact that theatre is restricted by time and space. A stage play fixes the action, and the audience in place, and as such is bound to create smaller worlds. With television, we witness the opposite, especially if we speak of television in Ramadan, when scripts are geared towards extended sagas and collective viewership.

Nevertheless, there is a persistent question waiting for answer. How can such a demoralizing and defeating narrative produce gendered agency? It is in constructing a gender-inclusive rather than exclusive site, in providing balanced representations of both
women and men, rather than shun one group altogether, in turning female and male subjects into human subjects rather than mold them into fixed gender constructs, in allowing them to just be, un-dominated and uncensored, rather than act as God, the sole origin of meaning, and in moving them into the real world rather than build around them an ideological prison. The manner of representation is key here. Assal’s gender representations reproduce the same gender constructs that have come to dominate women within the patriarchal literary tradition. It is only in moving away from these models of representation that gendered agency could be achieved. “One could not say no to the law, to requirement, to history, to power, without being committed at the same time to the affirmation of precisely that which one wished to deny,” argues Derrida. Indeed, by operating from a reactionary position, Assal, just like her characters, perpetuates the very patriarchal values that have come to control and dominate women. It is only in “fraying” writes Spivak, that the sense of solidarity with the original author and her text are facilitated to produce gendered agency. When women marched out into the streets in 2011, they marched alongside men, calling for the same demands. Social justice was one of the main demands of the uprising. Carrying this value across, at a time when a reminder was most urgent, writes women back into the narrative effortlessly, without the need to resort to literary practices that dominate, censor and coerce.

\[251\text{Holland, 96}\]

\[252\text{Spivak, 398.}\]
Conclusion
This thesis has been a journey into how adaptation can partake in the process of gender, cultural and national production, and the wider political and literary implications of such a project when a woman is at its helm. More so, it has been an exposé of the multiple determinants of the nation once liberated from the monopoly of a single point of view. In “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” American literary critic Frederic Jameson argues that the Western canon needs to expand and reach out to other non-Western literatures, to move away from the idea of the “centered subject” and the unified personal identity, if Western readers were to really enrich their view of themselves.253 Indeed, as he aptly adds, democracy cannot afford to support a narcissistic minority so transfixed on its own image.254 One finds this argument particularly compelling when addressing the literary canon in Egypt, fixated as it is with the national allegory seen through the lens of man alone. As Mariam Naoum breaks out of the mold of this national allegory, to showcase a multiplicity of intersecting points of view and conflicts that cut across class, language, gender and the nation, she moves away from the idea of identity as an object of history into a much more fluid domain that probes deeper


254 Ibid.
into the dark, shifting and multifarious corners of culture so as to acknowledge the subtleties of individual and collective experience. Adaptation is key to achieving this feat. By revisiting these texts, not only does she open the gates to new writers and new readers who are free to find their place within the nation at different points in time, but she also provides what Aijaz Ahmed describes as “an antidote against the general ethnocentricity and culture myopia of the humanities.”

Adaptation thrives in times of social and political upheaval, when warring ideologies compete for the national narrative. It is then that the nation as an idea, a meaning and an image becomes caught up in the network of becoming. In Nation and Narration, Homi K. Bhabha argues that nations are by nature ambivalent since they are always caught up in shifting and ongoing historical and cultural arrangements. “Nation as narration,” writes Bhabha, “will establish the cultural boundaries of a nation so that they may be acknowledged as ‘containing’ thresholds of meaning that must be crossed, erased, and translated in the process of cultural production.” The 2011 Egyptian uprising presented Naoum with such a moment, where she was able to intervene, reinterpret, and thus partake in this process of production.

The idea of “crossing, erasing and translating” meaning presents us with boundless future opportunities to continue to redefine ourselves. In that light, one must wonder, how would these literary texts translate in the future to produce new gender,


\[\text{\textsuperscript{256}}\] Bhabha, 2.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{257}}\] Ibid., 4
cultural and national identities? As we have seen, the historical context is one factor that informs the moment of writing, placing a different set of challenges before the writer with every adaptation. In the heels of the Egyptian uprising, the overriding challenge in all three adaptations was to safeguard its demands and to ‘carry’ them ‘across’ a very unsettling transitional period. Yet much has changed since 2014. As of the moment of writing these lines, the Muslim Brotherhood are back to being a shunned underground organization, and the military regime has made it clear that “dissenting opinions will be crushed, whether by threats or force.” 258 As for the status of women, one case in a Human Rights Watch ‘status’ report sums it up: In 2016, women’s rights defender, Hind Nafe’s was handed down a life sentence for participating in a December 2011 protest. 259 In light of these events, what new meanings would these literary texts yield? Would the absent patriarch make a comeback in his most tyrannical role yet? Would Nabil still be the catalyst for change in Muga Harra? Would Dhat ever break free? Would Hayat replace Ghalya as the protagonist in Sign al-Nisa? and would Mariam Naoum even be allowed to continue to write and include other writers in producing bold social narratives that disrupt the dominant patriarchal discourse? The answers to these questions are again entangled in a web of multiple meanings and subject to different interpretations. That said, one of the most effective ways of entangling them and granting them a safe passage into a public platform is to ensure that they are “carried across.”


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