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# A History Of Feminist Discourse And Arab Uprising In Egypt

**Nisha Praveen**, Research Scholar, Department of Law, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh  
[adv.nisha88@gmail.com](mailto:adv.nisha88@gmail.com)

**Zheer Ahmed**, Research Scholar, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi [ahmedzaheer615@gmail.com](mailto:ahmedzaheer615@gmail.com)

**Tahir Qureshi**, Research Scholar, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi [tahirqureshiadv@gmail.com](mailto:tahirqureshiadv@gmail.com)

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## Abstract

In the twenty-first century, there are a great deal of variations on the feminist ideology. It is important to note that Egyptian feminism is not the same as Western or secular feminism, nor is it the same as Islamic feminism. Egyptian feminism is its own unique brand of feminism. On the one hand, Egyptian feminism can be characterized as women's participation in nationalist movements against colonialism and imperialism, and on the other hand, Egyptian feminism can be defined as women raising their own voices inside nationalist organizations. After Egypt gained its independence, a new generation of feminists began their work, which lasted until 1939 when it was finally put to rest. In the 1940s, Egyptian feminism took a radical turn, leading to the dissolution of the Egyptian Feminist Union and the establishment of the Egyptian Feminism Party (1942) and Bint-al-Nile (1948), respectively. The idea of feminism in Egypt underwent yet another significant transformation during the beginning of the second half of the decade of the 1950s. In the late 1950s, the dictatorship of Nasser supported state-sponsored feminism, which looked to be a challenge to Egyptian feminism and was continued by his successor. Nasser's successor also continued the promotion of this ideology. It would appear that Islamism poses a challenge to Egyptian feminism as well. On the other hand, Egyptian feminism is still important in modern times, as seen by the role that women played in the Arab Spring and the demands that they make of Egyptian society.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Egypt, Arab Uprising, Discourse

## Introduction

The public-private (Boyd, B., 1997) split in society is a subject that is addressed by feminist movements generally. In spite of the fact that there are numerous varieties of feminism in

existence today, they all examine women's issues from a unique vantage point (ibid). In the Arab world, women played a significant part in the development of culture, which followed its own traditions. Although colonialism had an impact on Arab civilization and introduced fresh ideas that challenged the traditional role of women in society, this Arab culture nonetheless established a society that was separate from that of the West (Hollis, 2013). In this setting, Egyptian feminism emerged in the late nineteenth century (Torunoglu, 2014).

However, with the French Revolution and the French conquest of Egypt, the seeds of reform for women had already started to take root in Egyptian society. In the early stages of the Egyptian National Struggle against British rule, women had a dual role. On the one hand, they were resisting British rule due to women's biological ties to their native countries. The National Struggle Movement, on the other hand, saw them fighting for their own issues, such as women's education, dress standards, and ultimately, women's political rights as full citizens. As a result of the evolution of the early twentieth century, feminist movements formed in the 1920s. The first wave of Egyptian feminism was formally launched in 1923 with the establishment of the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU), which introduced the new idea of internationalism (Jeyawondena, 1986 and Kader, 1973).

In the EFU and during Egypt's first wave of feminism, women like Huda Shaarwi, CezaNawarwi, and Nabawiya Musa were significant figures. EFU lost relevance in the 1940s and throughout the second wave of Egyptian feminism as a result of the creation of the Egyptian Feminist Party in 1942 and Bint-Al-Nile in 1948. Egyptian feminism came to an end in Egypt's latter decades and was replaced by state feminism, in which the government promotes women's rights and takes affirmative action on their behalf. Women who challenge the state's absolute power, on the other hand, are suppressed by the state.

In this setting, the state adopted state feminism, which opposed Egyptian feminism. Islamism, which opposes all kinds of gender equality, arose as a threat after state feminism failed to manage the women who supported Egyptian feminism in the latter decades.

### **Role of the French revolution and French invasion in Egyptian Society**

Due to the quick infusion of European ideas into Egyptian culture after the French Revolution and French invasion of Egypt, Cairo evolved into a cosmopolitan hub of new movements and ideas. The beginnings of social transformation in Egypt, however, were affected by the French invasion, which started to alter the status of women in that society.

Therefore, marriages between Egyptian women and French officers who had converted to Islam occurred. Additionally, there were instance of Egyptian women mimicking the mannerisms and attire of the women of the expedition (Ramdani, 2013). However, not everyone in Egypt accepted these concepts and viewpoints. As a result, opposition to such western concepts began to grow. According to historians like Al-Jabarti, the French occupation perverted the Egyptian ladies.

## **Reformism in Egypt after Invasion**

Daughters of the upper classes in Egypt at the time were able to receive education at home, while poorer girls were able to attend Kuttabs, where the Koran was taught along with some reading and writing. Mohammed Ali came to power in 1805 and instituted some reforms related to modernization and education. Daughters of the upper classes in Egypt at the time were able to receive education at home (Salmoni, 2003).

Ismail Pasha's wife founded the Suyliyya Girls School in 1873, and it was under her leadership that further advancements were made to the position of women in Egyptian society. The school educated young women in a variety of areas, including history, religion, and mathematics (ibid). In the year 1875, the government opened a new school of this kind, which provided a primary education in the western style to young women. One of the criticisms that can be levelled at the reforms is that the only people who benefited from them were the daughters of wealthy bourgeois families.

## **The influence of male reformers**

Al-Afghani, who was influenced by the modernity and technological advancement of the western world, pushed for the purification of Islam and reform within Islam in order to compete with the effect of western ideology of supremacy, which was founded on contemporary science and technology. He was a prominent Arab scholar who had a significant impact on the development of nationalist ideas across the Arab region. And placed an emphasis on educational practices common in western countries (Golle Al-Hassan, 2004).

During the time that nationalism was on the rise in Egypt, discussions regarding education and the emancipation of women were also taking place. Some nationalists, such as Mustafa Kamal, were opposed to the concept of women's emancipation, while others, such as Ahmed Shidyak, were in favour of the idea. Ahmed Shidyak published a book in 1855 titled 'One Leg Crossed Over the Other', which is considered to be one of the first books to support women's emancipation. The other person was Riffa Al-Tahtawi, who wrote about the need of education for women. He authored a book titled 'A Guide to the Education of Girls and Boys', which discusses the situation of women's education in Egypt (Exeter, 2019).

Egyptian reformers such as Mohammed Abduh attempted to separate religion and women's rights also raised questions regarding the exploitation of women's rights in the name of religion. For example, Mohammed Abduh was criticised for polygamy and women's slavery because these practises were contrary to Islamic law. He advocated for the education of women and stated that the lack of education among Arab women was the primary cause of the region's backwardness (Quoted in Khreegi, 2014).

Kassim Amin was another influential male reformer who is known for writing influential works such as "Women's Emancipation in 1899" and "the Liberation of Women and the New

Women". He supported the rights of women by arguing that women should not be seen as the property of their husbands and should have their own identities. As a result, the nation remained in the dark due to the refusal of inherent right. He advocated for equal rights for men and women. By the beginning of the 20th century, the ideals of these reformers were permeating Egyptian culture. These concepts went on to play a significant part in the development of nationalist feminism as well as Egyptian feminism later on (Ahmed, 1982).

### **Nationalism and Feminism**

During the period of the Egyptian national liberation movement, women of Egypt worked toward achieving two different aims. They were fighting for their own right within the system and for the question of what would the status of women be in the independent state. This was done for two reasons: the first was related to nationalism, which they supported in order to end colonialism and free the country from foreign occupation. The second reason was related to the question of what would the status of women be in the independent state (Sharawi, 2012). In the context of these two ideals, the entire concept of nationalism as well as feminism can be traced back to its roots.

In Egyptian society, the latter half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century were defined by a growing concern for nationalism and reform, and an improvement in the position of women was a component of these reforms (Kumari, 1986). The Waft Organization, which was the first organised mass party, spearheaded the Egyptian nationalism movement. Its male leaders, such as Saad Zaghlul and Ali Saadawi, were prominent figures in the party. But, the British Authority exiled Wafd leader Saad Zaghlul in April 1919, which led to Egypt's first modern revolution in 1919, in which women played an important role, which ultimately led to Egypt's independence in 1922 (Booth, 1995). Women's participation in the revolution was one of the main factors that contributed to Egypt's independence (Sharawi, 2012).

### **From 1919 Revolution to EFU**

Women were taking part in the revolution and participating in street protests for the first time in Egypt. They were yelling pro-independence and anti-foreign rule chants. They were taking part in the revolution through planned protests and strikes, a boycott of British products, and the creation of petitions in opposition to British policies in Egypt (Elasadda, 2006). Huda Sharawi was one of the most active women throughout the revolution, in the expansion of Egyptian protest against colonial rule, and in women's militancy challenges to the British police commandment (ibid).

However, a crucial aspect of the involvement was that, although lower-class women were protesting with their male partners, only upper-class women were doing so alone. Even though there existed national unity, the opposition to colonial control was much more hierarchical in form. For instance, at the 1919 rally to celebrate the release of Saad Zaghlul,

males marched in front of upper-class ladies in vehicles, followed by lower-class women pulling carts (Saskia and Amy, 2006). Women gathered to protest Milner-Mission. However, Egyptian feminism did not follow an extremely radical course until 1923, and women identified themselves by the name of their husband. The Egyptian feminism's nationalist or feminist nature, which should emphasise issues pertaining to women, caused disagreements among the female activists. For instance, Nabawiyah Musa emphasised the importance of women's education and advised them not to take part in protests but rather to concentrate on their education. Huda Sharawi, on the other hand, advocated for female education as well as female participation in the national liberation movement (Elasadda, 2006).

Women's organizations such as the New Women Society, which was founded in 1919, the Wafdist Women Central Committee, which was founded in 1920, the Society of the Renaissance of Egyptian Women, which was founded in 1921, and the Society of the Mothers of the Future, which was founded in 1921, existed prior to the founding of the Egyptian Women's Union (EFU). These women's organizations worked to bring attention to the issues that affect women (Pamela and Melanie, 2014). However, when Egypt finally gained its independence through the Curzon Plan, women were not consulted, and their involvement in the campaign for independence was not acknowledged. This action taken by the leader of the WAFD paved the stage for the formation of the EFU.

### **Egyptian Feminist Union**

The founding of EFU was an indication of the separation of Egyptian feminism from the national movement, and it is generally seen as the beginning of the feminist movement in Egypt from 1923 through 1939. This movement lasted from 1923 until 1939. It was founded by HodaShaarawi and others like Nabawiya Musa and CezaNabarwi, and it led to their participation in an international Feminist Conference in Rome, which transformed Egyptian feminism in a very radical way (Ramakrishnan, 2014). Now, they were openly condemned for the Egyptian society's traditional veiling system, the backwardness of education for women, and the dominance of men over women. In order to realize its goal of achieving gender parity in Egyptian society, the Egyptian Freedom Union (EFU) focused its efforts on the areas of education, social assistance, and changes in private law.

EFU said that rather than being a result of a particular socioeconomic system, Egypt's social problems, such as poverty, prostitution, illiteracy, and poor health conditions are a result of the state's abandonment of its obligations to its citizens. The movement thus held that both the welfare and morality of the country were the responsibility of the state. But it limited the definition of women's issues to upper class women's restricted and class-based viewpoints. This is especially clear in the feminist publication *L'Egyptienne* from the EFU. Zeinab al-Ghazali, an early member of the EFU, quit this group to create her own "Islamic Women's Association" in 1936 since the journal was only available to French-speaking Egyptians, who

were largely members of the higher classes. She argued that the EFU's ethos was too Western and not authentic enough (Shawawi, 2012).

However, Turkish changes concerning women were among the topics covered in the magazine, and these reforms had an impact on Egyptian women and Islam. However, despite all of this, they opposed feminism as it is practised in the West and instead sought to apply Islam in its purest form, as noted by journal editor CezaNebarawi in 1927 “We feminists in Egypt have a tremendous deal of respect for our faith. In wishing to see it applied in line with its original intent” (Ramakrishnan, 2014). 1937 saw the release of another journal by the name of el-Masreyyah (The Egyptian Woman).

Even though the new Constitution of 1924 increased the marriage age for girls to sixteen, it did not address the issue of women’s political rights, including the ability to vote, the right to divorce, or the outlawing of polygamy. Finally, Egyptian feminism was elitist in nature and dominated by upper-class women during its initial wave. Following the Second World War, a second, more radical wave of feminism emerged in Egypt. It posed a challenge to the EFU status quo and was influenced by younger women, students, and the labour movement. It was believed that the EFU’s strategies needed to be updated and were out of date. The Egyptian Feminist Party was established in 1942. The party, chaired by Fatma Neamat Rashed, demanded complete parity for men and women in terms of rights, representation in politics, work, and education. Additionally, it demanded that working women have the right to paid leave. Another feminism group founded in 1948 was called Bint El-Nil (daughter of the Nile). Its main objective was to demand complete political rights for women. Another female leader, Doia Shafiq, publicly argued for complete political rights and equal compensation for equal effort in this sector (Nabila, 2013).

### **Rise of state feminism and Egyptian feminism**

Following the 1952 revolution, all political parties were outlawed. As a result, all women's movements were outlawed as well, and the political parties of the ruling dictatorship took their place. The phrase ‘state feminism’ was really created during the Nasser era in reference to his efforts in support of increasing female educational attainment and integrating women into the employment. As a result, the new system gave the impression of being a welfare state dedicated to gender equality. Women were granted the ability to vote as well as salary and job equality under the 1956 constitution. In addition, Nasser made education for six years mandatory and promised graduates of high school and colleges positions in the government bureaucracy as well as free health care (Ahmed, 1982). However, despite the system's progressive ideals, the conservative ideas of women's roles in the home and in politics were not challenged by the government. In other words, he simply made no reforms to the private sphere (Julia and Beth, 1996).

In order to combat Egyptian feminism, Anwar Sadat introduced 'Jehan's Law', which called for reform in the sectors that Nasser had left undisturbed. However, the law was never put into effect. But his time was also notable for the resurgence of religious extremism and the radicalization of Egyptian feminism. It was shown in 'Women and Sex', a 1972 publication by Nawal Sadawi. In which she criticized social customs that utilized religion to support the oppression of women and fought against religious extremism. The 'Infitah' (open door) economic strategy of Sadat had raised the unemployment rate for women, thereby excluding them from the private sphere. But in the 1980s, fresh feminist organizations emerged to challenge religious fanaticism. The New Woman Group was founded in Cairo with the primary goal of researching the nation's feminism history. The Committee for the Defense of Women and Family Rights was a different organization that was established in 1985. This Committee was created to aid in the effort to change the Person Status Code.

A 'National Committee for Women' was founded in 1993, and Suzzane Mubarak served as its head until the National Council of Women (NCW) took its place in 2000. However, it was a good representation of the government's official position on feminism in general and in Egypt in particular. Working for women's rights, NCW has brought about a number of profound changes in Egyptian society that are regarded as the demise of Egyptian feminism. These accomplishments can be interpreted as a challenge from state-sponsored feminism to Egyptian feminism because they addressed the majority of the demands made by feminists, such as the amendment of article 62 in 2007 to ensure a minimum representation of women in parliament, the amendment of the nationality law in 2008 to allow children of non-Egyptian fathers to acquire Egyptian citizenship, and the amendment of article 20 of the child law to now allow illegitimate children to receive biracial recognition.

However, Egyptian feminism is still significant and still reacts to state feminism led by the NCW. The rise of Islamism is also significant to Egyptian feminists who view it as a kind of colonialism and who support the idea that gender inequality is normal. The outcome of this Islamism's influence has been an increase in the popularity of veiling among Egyptian women, particularly in the middle and higher classes. The majority of women also aspired to be good wives or moms. However, this does not imply that feminism in Egypt has disappeared. In the wake of the 'Arab Uprising' and 'The Girl in Blue Bra', in which Egyptian women demonstrated against governmental treatment of women, it is trying to counteract both state feminism and Islamic fundamentalism (Maravankin, 2017).

## **Conclusion**

The feminism that exists in Egypt is not a recent phenomenon. It progressed during the course of its history and underwent alterations at various points. It is not an imitation of feminism practiced in the west and is distinct from Islamic feminism in some way. During

the time of the movement of the national fight, it had performed dual roles: the first was for the nation, and the second was for society. Despite this, there was not a single female political figure speaking up on behalf of women to address the issues that they face. Therefore, once Egypt gained its independence, Egyptian feminism began to express its concerns independently from those of the nation. To put it another way, following the country's independence, Egyptian feminism shifted its focus to be more on women than the national movement. In subsequent decades, it developed into a nature that was extremely powerful and radical. When Nasser took power at the beginning of the 1950s, he initiated a new type of feminism that can be summed up as state-sponsored feminism. This type of feminism would eventually be referred to as state feminism in the 1980s or 1990s. Egyptian feminism seems to have become irrelevant since the 'National Council of Women' was established in the year 2000, and if we look at its accomplishments, we can see why. But this is the kind of feminism that has its own historical roots and developments, and those are things that we just can not forget just because Islamism and state-sponsored feminism pose a threat to us. On the one hand, state-sponsored feminism. On the other hand, Islamism. Therefore, if we take a look at the phenomenon of the Arab Uprising, we can see that women contributed equally as much as males and brought up the issues that they required to address.

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