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MALAK HIFNI NASIF: NEGOTIATIONS OF A FEMINIST AGENDA BETWEEN THE EUROPEAN AND THE COLONIAL

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ABSTRACT

Malak Hifni Nasif (1886-1918), one of Egypt's early feminist writers, stood at the crossroads of many political and social tensions of her day. Situated between the potential contradictions of Egyptian nationalism, Islamic reform, and Westernization, Nasif provides an important lens through which to examine the relationship between feminism and colonial enterprise in the tumultuous milieu of the early twentieth century. This paper contends that, in order to understand Nasif's construction of her own feminist agenda, one must first examine the pervasive presence of the "colonial" as a distinct site of inquiry—one that must be extracted from the larger and more ambiguous category of "European." By teasing out the difference between European versus colonial interactions with feminism, we get a clearer view of the process by which Nasif was able to negotiate an indigenous feminist agenda within and against the power structures of both Egyptian society and colonial rule.

Two contentious issues of Egyptian public discourse in the early twentieth century were inextricably linked. On one hand, there emerged the "women question," with elite men and women of various political stripes rethinking questions of culture, religion, and politics vis-à-vis the negotiated gender roles of society. On the other hand, a "colonial question" developed as resistance to the British colonial presence escalated and as Egyptians increasingly sought opportunities to redefine the polit-

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ical system. With the explosion of the public press in these early decades, questions concerning the British occupation and women's rights were widely discussed across the political and ideological spectrum.[1] Nationalists, pro-British imperialists, Khedival royalists, Islamic modernists, traditionalists, and Westernized elites all weighed in on questions of how civil and political life was to be organized and what role, if any, women should have in this changing order.

As an early feminist writer who stood at the crossroads of many of these tensions, Malak Hifni Nasif (1886-1918) provides an interesting lens through which to examine the relationship between two interrelated concerns: feminism and the colonial enterprise in the tumultuous milieu of the early twentieth century. An activist, lecturer, and writer, Nasif was one of the first local women to articulate feminist ideas about issues of import to Egyptian women. A frequent commentator on the social norms and interactions of both Egyptians and Europeans, like many of her contemporaries, Nasif was acutely aware of the colonial question. However, in order to understand Nasif's construction of an indigenous feminist agenda, one must first examine the pervasive presence of the "colonial" as a distinct site of inquiry—one that must be extracted from the larger and more ambiguous category of the "European."[2]

The influx of European ideas, people, and technologies made an indelible impression on the nascent feminist movement in Egypt. Huda al-Sha'rawi, one of the founders of the Egyptian Feminist Union in 1923, would trace her earliest exposure to feminism to her friend and mentor Eugenie Le Brun (Badran 1995, 37). Similarly, Qasim Amin, an Egyptian writer and commentator on women's issues, in all likelihood, could not have written his 1899 work, *Tahrir al-Mar'a* (The Liberation of Women), had it not been for his experiences abroad in Europe. Meanwhile in Egypt, the number of foreign nationals rose from 10,000 in 1848 to 112,574 in 1897 (Cole 1981, 389).[3] The royal family, the elite classes, and a burgeoning middle class—comprised of both men and women—were adopting European languages, clothing, and ideas. As future nationalists, imperialists, Islamic modernists, and the like, many of these same elites would come to hold very strong opinions in favor of and against the agenda of Egypt's first feminists.

With this discernible European influence, neither the European nor the colonial could remain a neutral presence in feminist discourses.

Rather, the reality of the power relationship implicit in colonialism became yet another field of negotiation and contestation for a feminist movement that was defining itself as the champion of a disempowered segment of society. How did these early feminists confront local patriarchal practices in an authentically "Egyptian" way? How did they benefit from the trappings of modernity without implicitly accepting European norms and (perhaps by extension) colonial authority? How does the colonial presence complicate an already contentious agenda to reformulate the social norms of Egyptian society?[4]

In examining these questions in the works of a feminist like Malak Hifni Nasif, the distinction between the European and the colonial becomes instructive on several levels. First, it highlights how these two very different elements were utilized and deployed in the discourse of a colonial feminist experience. For Nasif, while the European serves as a useful site of inspiration, competition, comparison, and, when necessary, rejection, of the colonial casts a far more powerful (and thus potentially dangerous) shadow on feminist reforms. Second, it demonstrates that the central problem facing feminist reformers was never really Westernization or an unqualified acceptance of modernity per se, but rather the imposition of power by the "patriarchal other"—whether indigenous or colonial (Badran 1988, 24). Lastly, by extension, this differentiation between the European and the colonial helps to explain what are perceived as contradictions in the feminist ideology of someone like Nasif and why certain elements of her feminist agenda faded into the background, while others came to the fore. As we shall see, for Nasif, local issues of education, family law, and political/social domination—as linked to various patriarchal authorities—held more urgency than those that she deemed European cultural imports and thus subject to acceptance or rejection by an indigenous culture. Ultimately, Nasif came to represent an "alternative voice, wary of and eventually even opposed to Western ways [that] searched a way to articulate female subjectivity and affirmation within a native, vernacular, Islamic discourse—typically in terms of a general social, cultural, and religious renovation" (Ahmed 1992, 174 – 5). By teasing out the difference between European interactions with feminism (as cultural other) and with colonialism (as patriarchal other), we get a clearer view of the process by which Nasif was able to negotiate an

indigenous feminist agenda within and against the power structures of both Egyptian society and colonial rule.

SITUATING MALAK HIFNI NASIF

Malak Hifni Nasif was born in 1886, the first of seven children, to a middle-class Egyptian family.[5] Her father, Hifni Nasif, was an Azhari graduate and a student of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, with close ties to some of the Islamic reformers of his age. As a life-long educator and judge, Hifni Nasif took his dedication to universal education seriously, making sure to inculcate his children with a love of learning. While Malak's mother, Saniyya Abd al-Karim Jalal (a voracious reader with a sharp intellect), had received a more traditional in-home education, Malak was enrolled in a newly inaugurated women's school, the Saniyya School of Cairo. In 1900, she became one of the school's first graduates, receiving a teaching degree in 1903. Malak later returned to her alma mater as a teacher until her marriage in 1907.[6] Her marriage, unbeknownst to even many of her closest family members, was not a happy one. In what undoubtedly colored her views on polygyny and marriage practices, she belatedly discovered that her husband already had a wife and child.

Around the time of her marriage in 1907, Nasif began writing for the liberal/nationalist paper *al-Jarida*, a new publication headed by Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid, one of the founders of the Umma Party.[7] For Lutfi al-Sayyid and his party, "feminism was an essential part of true nationalism" (Hourani 1983, 182). This combination of nationalist fervor and feminism was consistent with Nasif's own thinking; she took the pseudonym *Bahithat al-Badiya* (The Searcher of the Desert) and began regularly contributing with outspoken commentaries on a variety of women's issues, including education, labor, female seclusion, marriage, and polygamy. In 1909 Nasif was invited to become one of the first women to speak at a series of all-women lectures hosted at the Umma Party headquarters. The following year, that lecture, some letters, and a series of her columns from *al-Jarida* appeared in a collected work entitled *al-Nisa'iyat* (The Feminist/Feminine Discourses).[8] In 1911, Nasif submitted a speech to the nationalist gathering of the Egyptian Congress in Heliopolis, which included demands for wider opportunities for fe-

male education and work, the reform of marriage and divorce practices, and other social and religious reform.[9] She engaged in public exchanges with Mayy Ziyada and Nabawiyya Musa, leading figures in the nascent feminist movement. Nasif personally knew many of the leading female and male nationalists of her era, and, upon her death of influenza in 1918, she was publicly eulogized by the young Huda al-Sha'rawi.

Nasif embodied many of the contradictions and tensions of her time. As a nationalist, she strongly advocated the return of Egypt to Egyptian hands, urging her audience to keep the best interests of the nation in mind and to "dispense with foreign goods and people as much as possible" (Nasif 1998, 145).[10] As Margot Badran (1995, 24) noted, "Egyptian feminism was not a subtext of colonialism or 'Western discourse,' but an independent discourse that simultaneously engaged indigenous patriarchy and patriarchal colonial domination." Nasif was one of the earliest examples of this independent strain of feminist thought.

However, Nasif's hostility to foreign intervention did not preclude her advocacy of educational and social changes along European lines with its implicit (and often explicit) acceptance of "modernity" and European preeminence. In her analysis of Nasif, Omnia Shakry (1998, 147 – 8) has highlighted this incongruity as "the double bind in which anti-colonial nationalist thought finds itself…. [E]ven as it challenged the colonial claim to political domination, it also accepted the very intellectual premises of 'modernity' [i.e., the theoretical framework of post-enlightenment rational thought] on which colonial domination was based." In other words, nationalists consistently had to assert their own ability and readiness for self-rule in colonial terms. Even the most radical feminists of that generation could not completely escape the taint of the "prism of modernity," with its essentialist and stratified assumptions about culture and superiority as they relate to gender (Brown 1996, 3).[11]

Likewise, the Islamic reformism upon which Nasif also relied to articulate her feminism was equally beholden to "modern" assumptions about society. By accepting Western, middle-class notions of womanhood, motherhood, education, and to limited degrees, freedom, Nasif often came to conclusions that traditionalists found shocking. However, she was no secularist.[12] Nasif consciously rooted herself in Islamic principles of *adab* (manners) and *akhlaq* (morality), invoking the shari'a and Islamic authenticity in her call for women's liberation. In this regard, she

echoed the other Islamic modernists of her time who adopted overtly "modern" values from Europe (constitutionalism, freedom of religion, sciences, new educational models, women's rights, etc.), while fully embracing Islam's ability to incorporate these European ideals and derive strength from them. They "saw the tension between Islamic faith and modern values as a historical accident, not an inherent feature of Islam" (Kurzman 2002, 4). Likewise, Nasif saw no intrinsic contradiction in her calls for reform along Western lines and her deeply held religious beliefs or cultural pride, even as it put her in conflict with some local religious authorities.[13]

However, Nasif accepted Western culture selectively, which put her at odds with other prevailing strains of the feminist discourse of her time. For example, Nasif believed that dancing and acting were inappropriate activities for Egyptian girls. She also had a strong distaste for missionary schools that ignored Eastern history and the Arabic language, believing that in language and conduct, Egyptian girls should be well-grounded in their own cultural and national milieu. But Mayy Ziyada disagreed with elements of Nasif's outlook. For Ziyada (1975, 51 – 2, 57 – 9), dancing, acting, and learning in a foreign language were all trappings of modern life, and a conscientious family and strong sense of morality could mitigate whatever evils were associated with these European practices.

Likewise, in what Nasif described as the war between the "conservatives" and the "liberals" on the issue of face-veiling she adopted a decidedly nuanced view. While she considered many sides of the issue, she dismissed the idea that Egyptian women should unveil simply to be more like their European counterparts. She warns: "If we follow everything Western we will be destroying our own civilization, and a people without a civilization is weakened and will undoubtedly vanish…" (Nasif 1998, 144). As a result, "we will lose our sense of nationhood [*qawmiyya*] with the passing of time" (1998, 64). Nasif also believed that women should show their faces to potential marriage suitors but not in public, an opinion that earned her rebuke from Nabawiyya Musa, who commented, "I say either unveil completely or veil completely, even with suitors" (1962, 280).[14] Ultimately, for Nasif, the idea of taking European standards of female conduct uncritically struck her as the inverse extreme of those who would advocate the complete seclusion of women

from society. Western ideas informed, but did not dictate, her stance on the role of women in society.

Thus, Nasif's feminism was born of a complicated set of intellectual currents. Nasif's explicit rejection of unveiling stemmed from her nationalistic refusal to favor Westernized ideals over what she saw as indigenous Egyptian priorities. In turn, her nationalism did not preclude her promotion of a feminist agenda, be it indigenous or European-inspired. Moreover, Nasif's quest for certain women's rights did not stop her from co-opting the discourses of Islamic reform and its self-defined advocacy for only the highest ideals of religion. At the crossroads of nationalism, Islamic reform, and Westernization, Nasif's feminism embodied a myriad of tensions and potential contradictions. The colonial and the European helped her navigate this nexus of influences, leading her to her own indigenous feminist agenda.

THE "EUROPEAN" AS CULTURAL OTHER

With about one hundred years of academic perspective on our side, the figure of the European has become the natural symbol of colonialism and all the coercive power it implied. However, Egypt's engagement with the West long preceded the presence of a sustained foreign occupation. In particular, for much of the nineteenth century, Egyptians sought to reapply European expertise, ideas, and technologies in their own country without fear of colonial imposition. Educational missions to Europe, which had begun under Muhammad Ali, were redoubled under Khedive Ismail's rule (1863-1879) and became the vehicle through which some of the most influential reformers of the late nineteenth century, including Rifa'ah al-Tahtawi and Ali Mubarak, received their first exposure to European ideas. These early reformers saw Europe as a model to be emulated and, eventually, surpassed. In other words, for these Egyptians, the European represented a lofty, but not unattainable, civilizational ideal.[15]

The European figure as a cultural other unsurprisingly would continue to appear in the works of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly in the realm of women's issues. For Qasim Amin (2000, 58 – 9), if "women are the foundation of the towering construct of modern civilization," then Egyptians have much to gain by looking toward the Western example. Although not wishing to "imitate for the

sake of imitation Western nations and their traditions and conditions," Amin nevertheless points out that "we have experienced much in our time and have had a chance to become acquainted with Westerners and their way of life. Our overall assessment is that Westerners are stronger than we are and have a more advanced way of life" (45 – 6). Therefore, Muslims must learn from their cultural competitor, the West: the virtues of a middle-class Western home, the European values of real freedom, and the true nature of European intellectual and physical superiority (59, 71, 127). Amin's detractors would also frame the European as other. However, in their view, this cultural other represented an unmitigated threat to Muslim morals and traditions, particularly when it came to women in society.[16]

In Nasif's work, the European serves several functions: a model, a competitor, and a potential corruptor (although, instructively, seldom a patriarchal threat). In many ways, Nasif did indeed internalize aspects of European superiority, particularly when it came to family practices, *tarbiya* (child-rearing), and education—in the process, advocating a "bourgeois ideal of motherhood" (Shakry 1998, 139).[17] So for example, the European model of child-rearing is contrasted with the either extremely harsh or extremely lax Egyptian tarbiya:

> Their manner of raising children is many times better than ours. They punish a child who cries to get something by not giving them that very thing. The child learns that crying will not be rewarded and will then ask appropriately the next time. They keep their homes well stocked with candy and toys, so that their children do not become filthy by going out into the markets. This is also more economical and saves time (Nasif 1998, 152).

Nasif also believed that European women took greater care of their children in preparing them for education. In one of her pieces, an English teacher who is surprised by the number of Egyptian girls constantly being sent home from school because of their dirty appearance tells Nasif that an English mother would rather die than see her daughter sent back from school for such a base reason. Recounting the story, Nasif tells her audience that "this is certainly true since the English mother is educated and knows the proper manner of childrearing—what a difference there is between her and her Egyptian sister!" (71) In matters of tarbiya, the

European embodies many of the ideals that are important to Nasif: "The Westerners do not show any preference to the boy over the girl, giving each their due in tarbiya and care" (149).

In addition, the European figure also plays an important role as a competitor and instructive point of comparison—a sort of useful trope to counter what Nasif sees as undesirable aspects of Egyptian womanhood. Her detailed lecture on the "The Difference between Egyptian and Western Women" is explicitly meant to be instructive and actionable (*li na'mal biha*). By going through the various stages of life, from birth to motherhood, the contrast between the two types of women provides a framework that can benefit the Egyptian woman, "who must gather information and research in order to understand her own affairs" (147). Another example of Nasif's use of the European as a foil is found in her discussion of the ills of cosmetics. After mentioning its many downfalls (it makes women look purple, is not suited to the dark features of Egyptian women, clashes with the amount of kohl women tend to put on, is not really beautiful, etc.), Nasif relates a story about a French tourist's reaction to the sight of two highly made up Egyptian actresses. "I kept taking glances at the Frenchwoman and saw that she was on the verge of laughing aloud out of condescension and disdain at these two women. Is it not enough for us that we are being deemed ignorant and backwards by Westerners for us to then let them see such an embarrassment?" (84). By resorting to the condemnation of the sophisticated in order to make her more immediate point about cosmetics, Nasif explicitly evokes the power of the European figure in her discourse.

However, Nasif reserves the right to accept or reject certain aspects of the European other as she deems necessary. In general, she cautions against going to extremes, which she defines as strict traditionalism on one hand and blind imitation of the West on the other. In matters of social norms, Nasif advocates a selective appropriation: "Traditions should not be abandoned except when they are harmful. European customs should not be adopted until after we reckon them appropriate and necessary" (141). In particular, she bemoans the tendency of some Egyptian women "to not imitate the Western woman when it comes to her education in useful matters" (152). Rather, an exasperated Nasif explains, "they imitate her completely when it comes to learning to dance and play the piano" (152). In fact, the fascination with learning the piano

seems to her to be completely misplaced; it is after all a cacophonous instrument meant for dancehalls and churches, not Muslim homes (153). Meanwhile, "women and men dancing together and our daughters appearing on stage with bare bosoms acting out love scenes" is an obvious "affront to the religion of Islam, a moral threat, and a doorway through which the worst habits can be spread among us" (141). Although some of the freedoms that European girls enjoyed can be implemented in Muslim households (letting them go out and explore, etc.), it is still taken for granted that Europeans have taken this freedom too far, to the detriment of their own societies (154). The European, as such, can also be a site of rejection.

In the feminist commentary of someone like Nasif, the European plays an instructive role, provides a comparative framework, and serves as a source of both inspiration and caution. In this light, perhaps her simultaneous defense of face-veiling and rejection of seclusion (confusingly, both are referred to as hijab) can fully be understood. Nasif's position on face-veiling—as a valid practical and social norm for Egyptian women—has long been problematic for her feminist credentials, particularly when contrasted with the uncompromising stance of Qasim Amin.[18] Although seen as a clear leader in the early years of Egyptian feminism, her position on the hijab (with all its implications) is often the subject of discussion. In the introduction to the 1998 republication of *al-Nisa'iyat*, Hoda El Sadda notes that "the interpretation of her stance on hijab usually depends on the ideological slant of the commentator. Some accept it with accolades, others with criticism" (14). For at least one of Nasif's contemporaries, Mayy Ziyada, the discrepancy between Amin and Nasif's views was natural—simply due to a difference of style and (ironically) gender. Amin was, after all, known for his fiery disposition and uncompromising stances. Meanwhile, in Ziyada's words, "Bahithat al-Badiyya was an appropriate model of a woman, and women are said to be more connected to the past. As for Qasim Amin, he was an appropriate model of a man—ever forward-looking" (Ziyada 1975, 148). Although generally in less gendered terms, the issue of hijab remains a symbol of Nasif's inherent traditionalism. More recently, Margot Badran (1988, 15) has posited that in the early years of the feminist movement, hijab was simply not a strategic priority for feminist women who "set out more immediately to reclaim public duties and functions prescribed or allowed by Islam."[19]

However, an examination of the role of the European as a cultural other brings Nasif's stance on hijab into sharper relief. As a matter of cultural hegemony or influence, insofar as unveiling was European, Nasif felt absolutely no obligation to comply. In fact, to do so would be to succumb to the kind of blind imitation she so often criticized. Rather, her concerns were largely social and pragmatic, and, as such, highly attuned to the existing patriarchal power structures that women faced (Malak Hifni Nasif 1962, 278 – 9, 1998, 61).

With the issue of hijab, Nasif (1998, 63) was keenly aware of the legitimacy that Muslim dress conferred on women in her society, a legitimacy that was defined by indigenous patriarchal norms. She chides Egyptian men who subject even modest women to taunts, leers, and spitting. She asks, "Are these the men we are supposed to unveil before?" (63) Meanwhile, she strongly critiques the idea of complete seclusion, arguing that women should be able to enjoy nature, gardens, and fresh air since they had not been created by God with a label on them reading "exclusively for men." Rather, she calls for a hijab that "does not prevent us from breathing fresh air or going out to buy what we need if there is no one who can purchase it for us. The hijab should not prevent us from getting educated nor should it cause us to lose our health" (140). However, Nasif warns women to be cautious with their increased freedom, not to wear tight clothing, walk seductively, engage in gossip, or take unnecessary trips. Only the highest moral conduct, as defined by society, will prevent the "the road to reform from narrowing in front of us" (139). By accommodating the patriarchal rules of society and religion, Nasif claims the right to effectively redefine hijab. For Nasif, hijab did not imply the complete seclusion of women from public life; rather, it created the means by which women could legitimately engage and interact within the patriarchal public sphere.

Yet, Nasif equally loathed the advice of those who called on women to unveil in order to become truly cultured or European. In a clear reference to the many (men) who debated the issue on behalf of women, Nasif asserts: "We do not follow the opinion of a person who commands us to veil, nor the opinion of the one who tells us to unveil based on what one person wrote or the other said" (61). In fact she often questioned the intention of men who blamed all of Egypt backwardness on the hijab and were calling on women to unveil. These were after all the

same men who have been telling women what to wear for generations, and "just as they have erred in giving us our rights then, no doubt that they err in giving us our rights now" (1962, 278 – 9, 320). In the end: "I do not see that the time is right for unveiling. Rather, give women the best education, raise them well, teach the new generation, correct your own morals so the umma becomes better behaved. Then, leave women to choose what is best for them and the good of the umma" (1998, 64). For Nasif, her mission was not to overthrow patriarchal authority—she accepted it in marriage, family, and the like—but rather to challenge it in order to meet the needs of Egyptian women on their own terms. In this negotiation with the patriarchal authorities of society, the European was at times an important contrast, but not a sufficient reason to take or not to take a particular stance. This contestation of and accommodation with patriarchal structures shaped Nasif's view of the colonial, to which we now turn.

THE COLONIAL AS PATRIARCHAL OTHER

While much has been made of their difference on the hijab issue, perhaps the most fundamental difference between Nasif and Amin is illustrated by the ways in which they construct feminist agendas vis-à-vis a colonial power structure. For Amin, the colonial presence presents an opportunity for a country like Egypt to tread the path already laid out for them by colonial society. In this framework, the colonial presence in not a hindrance; rather, "today we enjoy a form of justice and freedom that I believe has never before been experienced by Egyptians" (Amin 2000, 64). It is simply up to the indigenous population to "discard all unacceptable habits and eliminate every undesirable trait that hinders their progress. They should depend upon themselves for any necessary reforms and should waste no time depending on worthless hopes that they petition the government to realize" (64). In Leila Ahmed's (1992, 160) deconstruction of Amin's *Tahrir al-Mar'a*, she finds that "his assault on the veil represented not the result of reasoned reflection and analysis but rather the internalization and replication of the colonialist perception." In the end, "women and their dress were important counters in the discourse concerning the relative merits of the societies and civilizations of men and their different styles of male domination; women

themselves and their liberation were no more important to Amin than to Cromer" (161 – 2). In Amin's writing, the European and colonial others merge into one seamless entity that can provide the model for Egyptian womanhood and thereby achieve civilizational excellence. Questions of colonial domination and power are masked by faulting indigenous backwardness—most often of the women themselves.[20]

The colonial presence pervades Nasif's work. The colonial, for the most part, is disembodied, abstract, but nevertheless present as an authority and a nexus of power. The European or foreigner can be blithely rejected, negotiated with, and used by the feminist discourse. However, because the colonial represents a patriarchal authority that holds the power to grant, deny, or distort the rights of Egyptians as a whole, it must be contested by indigenous nationalists and feminists alike. Nasif, as a nationalist speaking mostly to other nationalists, clarifies the connection between the struggles of women for their rights and the Egyptian nationalist cause. In a piece entitled "*Masawi' al-rijal*" ("The Faults of Men"), Nasif attacks her fellow patriots who do not value true education for women:

> I am shocked that an enlightened group of people, who have received the best higher education, can call for women to be taught only reading, writing, cooking, and washing. … It is as if they are publicly insulting us by saying, "We only want you to be house servants, not respectable women." How can they deny us our natural rights and go petition for a constitution?! (Nasif 1998, 103 – 4)

Nasif accuses many of her compatriots of seeing firsthand the respect accorded women in Europe, yet refusing to implement the same treatment in their daily interactions with Egyptian women. Given this context, for Nasif, the connection between the women's rights movement and the nationalist movement is unequivocal. "How can our men maintain this level of oppression towards us and still hope to imbue the nation's future generations with a love of independence and constitutionalism!" (105) Before gaining their rights from a colonial patriarchal authority, nationalists must confront their own patriarchal tendencies. In this regard, like many colonized women who participated in nationalist struggles, Nasif hoped to pit nationalist patriarchy against the colonial other.[21]

Meanwhile, in response to those who blamed Egyptian backward-

ness on hijab and the lack of Westernization among women, Nasif presents a rather scathing critique. For Malak Hifni Nasif (1962, 276), Egyptians who are enamored with all things European (complaining about the lack of unveiled women as poetic muses, for example) are not only incorrect, but also missing the larger point about the reality of the colonial presence. In one passage, Nasif invokes two pivotal moments of the British occupation of Egypt: "If we were unveiled [*safirat*] on the day that Alexandria was bombarded would the occupiers have retreated? Would the showing of our faces have helped bring about the acquittal of the oppressed of Dinshaway?" (277)[22] She then goes on to argue that women do influence the success or failure of a people, but that that success is due to their spiritual and physical tarbiya, their moral uprightness, and their *tarbiya qawmiyya* (nationalistic education). Women who are educated—but not necessarily unveiled—will produce the generation of soldiers and leaders who can "shake the hearts" of unjust authority (277). By referencing the "colonial" other, Nasif asserts her view that resisting colonial rule did not require Egyptian women to succumb to what she saw as the patriarchal demands of Westernized Egyptian men.

The colonial also emerges in Nasif's discussions on education in other ways, although much less explicitly. A product of one of the three Egyptian girls' schools open under British control, Nasif unabashedly advocates for a wider and more comprehensive school system for girls. The subtext for her demands was the Cromer colonial policy of consciously limiting educational expenditures. Under Khedive Ismail, the educational system grew exponentially. However, after 1882, British control over the finances of the country significantly slowed school openings, instituted tuition charges, and thereby cut enrollment. When, in 1907, Nabawiyya Musa became the first (and last) woman to sit and receive a baccalaureate degree under the British colonial authority, she did so in spite of the stringent objections of Douglas Dunlop, the British "consultant" to the Egyptian Ministry of Education (Badran 1995, 42 – 4). In 1897, 863 girls were enrolled in government schools; in spite of growing demand, by 1914 that number had dropped to 786 (Ahmed 1992, 138). Meanwhile, private and missionary schools were educating thousands more students than their government counterparts. As an educator and teacher, Nasif was unhappy with this trend. She claims that

"the most ignorant of girls are the graduates of the missionary schools and many of the private schools:"

> They learn by rote, without any measurable amount of explanation or discussion. If you ask them about French history, they are undoubtedly quick to answer. However, ask them about Umar ibn al-Khattab or Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi or Muhammad the Conqueror, or others from Islamic history, and they say: "I don't know." (Nasif 1998, 68)

In this context, by calling for the creation of a network of girls' schools throughout the country (which would be supervised specifically by Egyptian women), Nasif was issuing an appeal to colonial authority to grant Egyptians greater control over an expanded government educational system—one that would provide "better education than that given by foreign schools whose only goal is to spread their particular religion or to benefit their own population" (1998, 155).[23] In the realm of schooling, the colonial was an authority that needed to be contested in order for women to receive a truly useful, authentic indigenous education.

Moreover, in Nasif's discourse, the colonial's presence could distort or sidetrack her own feminist agenda in ways that the European could not. Her discussion of a reasonable marriage age for girls is particularly instructive.[24] Nasif begins with the authoritative voice of the colonial par excellence: Lord Cromer. According to Cromer, "in the East, everything reaches maturity faster" (79).[25] Initially, Nasif agrees with this "scientific and well-known" fact. She concedes that, as a biological matter, it would in fact seem logical that if Egyptian girls reach maturity at either twelve or thirteen, while European girls do so at sixteen or eighteen, then the age of marriage for both groups would be different (79). However, in the following discussion, Nasif outlines a myriad of problems—from health risks to social immaturity—associated with young girls getting married. In the end, Nasif comes to the conclusion that "a girl should not marry until she is prepared to face its difficulties, and that is not before the age of sixteen" (82). In her argument, the colonial presence, while authoritative, is ultimately wrong in its assessment of what is appropriate for Egyptian women. Meanwhile, the European provides a (potentially subconscious) model for a reasonable marriage age. In the end, however, Nasif's feminist agenda consciously rests upon what she sees as the psychological and physical needs of Egyptian women.

In a final example of the difference between the two others against which Nasif situates her own agenda, we can turn to a portion of her 1909 lecture. After begging the forgiveness of her "female Western friends," Nasif warns against the dangers of Egyptian men who have Western wives—wives who then come to dominate their husbands, spending their money and thinking themselves superior:

> If we do not work to solve this problem, we shall become occupied by Western women. We will be subject to two occupations, one by men and the other by women. The latter will be the worse—for although we have been occupied by men against our will, our own actions will have invited the second type of occupation (143).

The European, as such, was not the threat, particularly not the women who were sitting in her audience offering support to the fledgling feminist movement of Egypt. However, as a colonial, the paradigms of control and domination even made these women a threat to the well-being of the Egyptian woman.

CONCLUSION

When Edward Said made his seminal case that Orientalists used the power of authoritative discourse to remake and create the East, he did so based on an important assumption: European knowledge of the Orient could not be divorced from its hegemonic imperial power (Said 1979, 11 – 2). However, the interaction between Europe and the Arab world was never one-sided and, in the reverse gaze of Egyptians looking West, this power and influence was not received unconditionally. For an emerging feminist discourse, the European figure was not always hegemonic and, as such, could serve as an important cultural and social competitor. Meanwhile, in the struggle for social change, the uneven political power inherent in the colonial experience could not be ignored and indeed became a new type of threat to this indigenous feminism. As a result, for a thinker like Nasif, the European attenuated the indigenous practices that she deemed important to change. Meanwhile, the colonial presence emerged in conjunction with patriarchal nationalist tendencies, the unfulfilled educational needs of women, and the colonial administration's role in setting gender policy for the country.

In the final analysis, the gaze of an Egyptian woman looking to-

ward Europe was not without power. To create a feminist discourse on matters of importance to Egyptian women, Nasif articulated her agenda by appropriating aspects of the European (as cultural other) while simultaneously contesting aspects of the colonial (as patriarchal other). The resulting negotiation was complicated, messy, and not always consistent with what may be seen as standard ideological categories. However, only within and against the various power structures of her society and colonial rule could Nasif set a truly Egyptian feminist agenda—one that could fight its own battles from within its own indigenous milieu.

NOTES

1. For a sample of some of the stances that were taken in the local Egyptian press, see Ahmed (1992, 148 – 9) and Shakry (1998, 139 – 42).

2. Borrowing from Ann Laura Stoler's (2002, 203) idea of using the "colonial" as a problematic site of inquiry, one can make it "a subject rather than an assumed category of analysis."

3. In addition, by 1907 roughly one seventh of the privately owned land in Egypt was held by foreign landowners.

4. Similar questions about authenticity, modernity, nationalism, and feminism were brought up in a series of conference papers edited by Hoda El Sadda (2001, 9 – 10).

5. For biographical information see El Sadda (1998, 10 – 3), Majd al-Din Nasif (1962, 37 – 68), Early (1981, 339 – 41), and Badran and cooke (2004, 134, 227).

6. Nasif married 'Abd al-Sitar al-Basil from Fayyum. For one reading of her impression of Bedouin life, see Early (1981).

7. The Umma Party was heavily influenced by Muhammad Abduh and counted Sa'd Zaghloul among its ranks. They advocated for an Egyptian nation-state on European lines and gradually gaining independence. They supported the adoption of Western ideas, although within the framework of Islamic reform. See Ahmed (1992, 148 – 9).

8. For translated selections see Badran and cooke (2004, 135 – 6, 228 – 38) and Kurzman (2002, 70 – 6). A more extensive collection of Nasif's works appeared posthumously under the title *Athar Bahithat al-Badiya* (*The Legacy of the Searcher of the Desert*).

9. For a list of her demands, which ranged from large social projects (increased charitable hospitals) to specific administrative issues (greater involvement of women in running Egyptian schools), see Malak Hifni Nasif (1962, 159 – 65).

10. Unless otherwise noted, translations from Arabic to English were undertaken an provided by the author.

11. On modernity's pervasive impact on "tradition:" "Rather than viewing modernity as a source of light, dispelling the darkness of tradition, we should instead imagine tradition as a beam of light, refracted by the prism of modernity. A tradition emerges from the prism of modernity as a multi-colored spectrum of

responses. Some responses will show the effects of modernity much more dramatically than others, but none will be entirely untouched" (Brown 1996, 3).

12. Albert Hourani (1983, 71) sees, for example, Lutfi al-Sayyid as one of 'Abduh's disciples who were working "out the principles of a secular society in which Islam was honoured but was no longer the guide of law and policy." However, in Lutfi al-Sayyid's introduction to Nasif's *al-Nisa'iyat* he praised Nasif precisely because she advocated for women within the confines of Islamic principles (Nasif 1998).

13. See El Sadda's view that Nasif never really saw modernity in opposition to Islam (El Sadda 2001).

14. According to Badran (1995, 23), Nabawiyya Musa had indeed chosen to uncover her face around 1909.

15. This contrasts with the colonial narrative that "natives" could never become truly as civilized as their European masters. Hourani (1983, 67 – 8, 103) describes how the arrival of European armies at the end of the nineteenth century changed the view of Europe among many reformers.

16. See summary of Talat Harb's *Fasl al-khitab fi al-mar'a wa-l-hijab* (The decisive discourse on women and veiling) in Cole (1981, 402 – 4).

17. This idea "functioned as positive injections defining what a good Egyptian mother should be" (Shakry 1998, 139). For additional analysis of Nasif's views on tarbiya see Shakry (1998, 146 – 7).

18. Nasif often reiterated her stance that she was not against unveiling per se, but did not think that Egyptian society was ready. Her primary concern was the moral and intellectual development of women: Educate women, then let them chose. She saw her position as a "middle way" between those who want to seclude women and those who advocated Western style mixing of sexes. See Malak Hifni Nasif (1962, 282 – 3, 273 – 4). For a review of some of the more recent literature on Nasif's position see (Hatem 2001, 23 – 33).

19. See also Badran (1995, 22 – 4)

20. See Leila Ahmed's (1992, 157 – 60) critiques of Qasim Amin's position on Egyptian women.

21. "One of the major contributions of recent work on gender and Empire has been to draw lines of connection between the operations of patriarchal colonialism and those of patriarchal nationalism and, increasingly, to read the archives of elite colonized women's participation in nationalist struggles, at least, through that doubly critical lens" (Burton 2004, 288).

22. The Dinshaway Incident of 1906 became an important rallying cry for the Egyptian nationalist movement. It began when several colonial officers went to the town of Dinshaway to pigeon hunt and in the process wounded an Egyptian peasant woman. In the following uproar, the peasants attacked the soldiers who opened fire and fled. Two British officers were wounded; one later died from heatstroke. The British authorities decided to make an example of the village, finding thirty-two villagers guilty of premeditated murder, four of whom were executed.

23. For her initial demands see Malak Hifni Nasif (1962, 124 – 6). Interestingly this same idea is advanced by Talat Harb in his rebuttal of Qasim Amin's work. See Cole (1981, 403).

24. For information about how marital laws, and particularly marriage ages, developed over this period, see Kholoussy (2005).

25. This is a discourse that mirrors discussions of female maturity in other parts of the "tropical" colonial world. For a case-study in India see Bannerji (1998, 36).

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