

Re-reading Huda Shaarawi's "Harem Years" – Bargaining with the Patriarchy in the Changing Egypt

Julia Lisiecka

Abstract: This paper re-examines the legacy of influential Egyptian feminist Huda Shaarawi; in particular, the uneasy relationship between feminism, nationalism and Islam. The research focuses on Shaarawi's memoirs, which challenge both the patriarchal structure in Egypt as well as the Western orientalist imaginary of harem life. The paper aims at contributing to a better understanding of these issues by examining Shaarawi's relationship to Islam. In her view, Islam has been falsely portrayed as the source of gender inequality, while Shaarawi traces it rather to class divisions and elitist practices of exclusion. Furthermore, the paper explores the evolution of feminism in the context of the emergence of a national movement in colonized Egypt in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The paper argues that those transformative decades were characterized by a reversed social order in which, as in Bakhtin's carnival, the oppressed temporarily gained voice. Yet, their demands were soon marginalized. The national movement demanded women return to the patriarchal structure as an act of decolonisation. The circumstances and other sources of Shaarawi's activism, such as Woolf's symbolic "room of her own" and her cultural and social capital allowed her to manoeuvre between nationalism, feminism and Islam and to "bargain with patriarchy."

The Harem and the Transition Times

Huda Shaarawi, daughter of a wealthy provincial administrator from Upper Egypt and a Circassian mother, grew up in Cairo in an isolating surrounding of high-class women from an aristocratic milieu. Her life reflected the experience of the last generation of aristocratic Egyptian women who were brought up in the segregating reality of harem, and thus she was both an object and a subject of a social transition. In her childhood and early adulthood, Huda Shaarawi experienced a rapid expansion of Cairo and growing European, particularly English and French, political and cultural influences in Egypt. While Cairo witnessed a growing trend of migration, many of the new and rich inhabitants of the city kept their ties with their rural estates becoming absentee landlords. As in the case of Shaarawi's father, the landlords created ties with the Turco-Circassian ruling class through marriage. Thus, Huda Shaarawi's identity was a patchwork of the Egyptian landlord tradition, the Turco-Circassian heritage, and European influences. Shaarawi's interaction with this multicultural and multilingual milieu most likely prepared her for a more independent, critical perspective on each of these cultures, and opened her up to thinking out of accepted schemes.

The harem, as experienced by Huda Shaarawi, has been distorted in Western historiography and literature, where it was portrayed as a place of complete isolation of passive and childlike women, who were kept there to fulfil the desires of rich men. In the book "Unveiling the Harem,"

Mary Ann Fay, following the steps of Edward Said, deconstructs the Western orientalist image of the harem (Fay 2012, 23-44). Fay, as well as Margot Badran (1987, 7) underlines the fact that most of the narrators who created the image of harem had no direct contact with women who lived in them, nor where they ever inside buildings or parts of houses defined for women. Rather, they were rich Western travellers, usually male, while first-hand accounts from harem, like that of Huda Shaarawi were very rare. A much more nuanced and authentic perspective, such as is provided by Huda Shaarawi, can thus challenge the sexualized and primitive image of harem. In this sense Shaarawi's account constitutes a testimony of a person who experienced harem, but also seemingly liberated herself from its patriarchal framework.

Shaarawi depicts harem both as a physical sphere of women and children within a household, as well as a metonymy charged with meanings such as privacy, honour, and respect. As Badran noted (1987, 7), harem was an area designated for women, a private part; when they left the harem they veiled their faces, "thus taking their seclusion with them." For Shaarawi, harem became a place of seclusion but also of female bonding and feminists would later call this "sisterhood" - the type of gender solidarity that empowers women within the patriarchal system. Within the harem, eunuchs played the role of guards and transmitters of information between the secluded women and the outside world. All Shaarawi's surroundings, except for the hagiographic image of her father, her growing brother, and eunuchs, were filled with women. Those included women peddlers, family friends, other girls in the harem, and maids. They were not only the natural environment, but also the source of all knowledge, since they projected their understanding of the world to her. Thus, gaining a distance from the customary, ceremonial life demanded independence, which Huda Shaarawi reached many years later and finally expressed in the memoirs written by the end of her life. In this sense, Shaarawi's story is one of growing consciousness of the rules in her environment and of slowly adopting a questioning and doubting attitude, while leaving the naive adolescence. On the other hand, growing up in female-dominated surroundings also likely contributed to Huda Shaarawi sense of female solidarity with women in search of various strategies for adapting to the patriarchal system.

Although, since 1870, the secular education system introduced by Muhammad Ali was extended to girls, it was not yet popular among the Egyptian elite, when Huda Shaarawi was growing up. Rather, young girls from aristocratic families were educated by tutors within the harem (Russel 2004, 103). Thus, even though Huda Shaarawi grew up in the closed reality of the harem, her consciousness seemed to exceed far beyond its imposed borders. While she seemingly followed the path prescribed for aristocratic daughters, in her memoirs she underscores the first signs of a

resistance to the patriarchal structure during that time. In fact, the frustration resulting from limitations to her studies, along with a constant sense of inequality in the comparison with her brother became the first trigger for her awareness of the gender discrimination in her society. Huda Shaarawi wrote that when she was not allowed to take classes in Arabic grammar, as it was a subject not appropriate for a female, she began to hate being a girl since this limited her education. She noted in her memoirs: “later, being a female became a barrier between me and the freedom for which I yearned” (Shaarawi 1987, 40). Thus, Shaarawi focused on education, the only discipline in which she was able to gain applause of the milieu and the family.

When talking about life in the harem, Huda Shaarawi used a plural narration, signalling a feeling of community, but also a departure from individuality. The life of harem in Shaarawi’s narration is filled with feasts, servant women’s stories, food, smells and celebrations. It seems that Huda Shaarawi’s young life was indeed relatively carefree compared to the lifestyle of the majority of the Egyptian population at that time. Thus, her self-confidence and growing consciousness of gender issues was largely facilitated by the conditions in which she lived. Moreover, Shaarawi’s social status defined the level on which she took her first feminist steps. For instance, Huda Shaarawi mentioned how she was forbidden to ride a horse, even though her brother was encouraged to do so. Her mother asked her to choose between a new piano and a pony and concluded, “she won because I chose the piano but I said to myself, ‘I shall get a new piano and ride my brother’s pony’” (Shaarawi 1987, 46). One can ask a rhetorical question: how many girls in Egypt could at that time find consolation on such a note? With this in mind, in her memoirs Shaarawi gives her younger self an extensive level of gender awareness, and melancholy, as if in her early resistance and solicitude she discovered the first signs of an independent feminist thinking.

The culmination of harem life was reached at the age of thirteen, when Huda Shaarawi was forced into an arranged early marriage with her elder cousin and legal guardian, Ali Shaarawi. Huda Shaarawi describes in her memoirs how she was not only excluded from decision making on her marriage, but was also one of the last to know and understand that the marriage would actually take place. When describing this period, Shaarawi underlines her feeling of powerlessness, since she was treated more as an ignorant child and an object of the contract and not its subject. Although she could not object to the marriage, the denial displayed in the lack of interest and disregard to the matter was clearly her strategy of resistance. Although being “deeply troubled” by the marriage, Huda Shaarawi noted that “the dressmaker had begun work on my wedding gown but I did not let her try it on me. I ignored the other endless preparations right up to the wedding day (...)” (Shaarawi 1987, 55).

The description of the wedding in her memoirs provides a fascinating, complex image of the relations between Huda Shaarawi, her family, and the Egyptian society. It could be read as a rite of passage, since it reflects the process of gaining awareness but also surrendering to the patriarchal structure. Shaarawi confessed that the wedding ceremony at first brought her pleasure, since it put her for the first time at the centre of everyone's attention and admiration. However, this feeling soon transformed into a fear of isolation through the symbolic act of veiling: "then a woman came and lowered a veil of silver thread over my head like a mask concealing the face of a condemned person approaching execution" (Shaarawi 1987, 57). This notion of seclusion of women within marriage echoed the discourse of intellectuals such as Qasim Amin who contrasted his understanding of a marriage in Muslim culture with idealized and romanticized Western idea of love, viewing the practice of veiling as a symbol of social backwardness (Abu-Lughod 1998, 257).

From Private to Public Feminism: The Problem of Representation

The last decades of the nineteenth century in Egypt were a period when the discussion over women's status had just begun within the Egyptian society and was still limited mainly to the upper-class women themselves. The discourse concentrated mainly on the issues of women's education and was embodied in the first women's journals, as well as writings of several male intellectuals such as Murqus Fahmi or Qasim Amin who wrote his famous "The Liberation of Women" published in 1899. As Abu-Lughod underscored (1998, 256), the focus on education was a consequence of a belief that educated women could better serve as mothers and wives and consequently, support "the progress of the nation." Although this debate can be seen as an initiation to later feminist discourse and it became an important reading for the elite, it did not initially reach mainstream readership and was later criticized for using the language of colonial discourse (Ahmed 1992, 162).

Reaching for the support of her brother, Huda Shaarawi managed to gain limited freedoms, when after one year of marriage she asked for seven years of separation from her husband. In her memoirs Shaarawi later considered this period as the most formative for her feminist consciousness. It was during this time when Huda Shaarawi met and came under influence of Eugenie Le Brun, a Frenchwoman married to Husayn Rushdi, who held the first women's salon in Egypt. Le Brun became Huda Shaarawi's mentor and introduced her to politics and social activity.

Eugenie Le Brun's salon was unique not only because it was organised by women, but also because the women who attended discussed social practices, such as veiling. While Le Brun criticised veiling as limiting for women, she also distanced herself from fantasized and sexualized orientalist

European visions of the veil as a curtain covering immorality or uncurbed sexuality. The polemics with both patriarchal and colonial orientalist discourses at the same time were also endorsed in Le Brun's writings under pseudonym Niya Salima, particularly in "The Harem and Muslim women" ("Harem et les musulmanes"). Le Brun, similarly to Huda Shaarawi, challenged the patriarchal practices in Egyptian society claiming that their origins could be found in the society, and not in Islam, which she actually considered freeing for women.

Most likely fearing that she might be misunderstood by her readership, and in order not to repudiate her heritage, Huda Shaarawi strongly emphasized in her memoirs that the source of the gender oppression was not Islam itself, but rather the patriarchal nature of the society. As Shaarawi noted, "I decided to attack the problem of the backwardness of Egyptian women, demonstrating it arose from the persistence of certain social customs, but not from Islam, as many Europeans believe" (1987, 81). Particularly, Shaarawi criticised the gender divisions within the urban upper class, which, according to her, were imposed much more strictly than in other groups. Indeed, veiling and high seclusion were symbols of a high social status and thus were often displayed in sophisticated architectonic solutions, which allowed for a full seclusion of the harem within a household through *mashrabiyya* - wooden screens allowing for women to see and not be seen. Thus, in Shaarawi's perspective all the traditions excluding women from the public space were connected to the financial and social status of the family and not to Islam.

In the following years Huda Shaarawi engaged in organising public lectures for women – both from the upper class, as well as middle class progressive households, including personalities such as Bahithat al-Badiyya. Her engagement in the female intellectual movement further evinced itself in the establishment of the first female philanthropic society *Mabarrat Muhammad Ali*, which granted women a new space outside the harem where they could gain experience in public diplomacy and fundraising. The idea of such a society was initiated firstly by Frenchwoman, Marguerite Clement, and soon adopted by Huda Shaarawi. Shaarawi suggested that the first subject of the meeting should revolve around differences between the "lives of oriental women and western women and (...) social practices such as veiling" (Shaarawi 1987, 93). The lecture was so successful that it initiated a series of similar events legitimized through the authority of Princess Ain al-Hayat and the support of Prince Ahmad Fuad.

Besides lectures, the second project of the female activists was the establishment of a dispensary for women. Interestingly, the project was both a female and nationalist initiative since it was created by Princess Ain al-Hayat as an alternative to British institutions. Thus, for the first time,

nationalism and feminism took on the same direction, with the patronage of the Egyptian royal family. The charitable work, especially in the spheres of healthcare and education allowed Egyptian activist women to create a network of contacts and cooperation, which would later promote both feminism and nationalism. Besides her work in the executive committee of the *Mabarrat*, Shaarawi was engaged in the organization of charity feasts for the aristocracy.

As Huda Shaarawi consciously mentions in her memoirs, all the actions, including the foundation of the Intellectual Association of Egyptian Women established in 1914, came on the wave of a female intellectual awakening, which was limited to the upper class and under the patronage of Egyptian princesses. These elitist initiatives did however create a lively milieu, which encouraged women such as Mai Ziyada, or Labiba Hashim to pursue an intellectual career. Although Huda Shaarawi had already used Woolf's symbolic "room of her own," she concluded that "at that time it was still not acceptable for women to have a place of their own outside private houses" (1987, 100). Thus, arranging a house that could serve as a locale for the women association became a major challenge for the feminist circles.

Following Ali Shaarawi's active participation in establishing the Egyptian nationalist Wafd party, Huda Shaarawi co-created the Wafdist Women's Central Committee. This moment could be seen as a transition from private feminism, expressed in daily choices, to a public and political activism. As a person of high social position, Shaarawi possessed the resources and cultural capital that allowed her to represent those women who could not speak out. In this sense, Huda Shaarawi might have not been representative of an average Egyptian woman, but as a person with broader opportunities, she spoke out against both gender and social inequalities. According to Bardan (1987, 21), early Egyptian feminism challenged both patriarchy and class divisions, since it fought against the seclusion of elite women from lower classes and initiated cooperation between women from different social backgrounds.

Yet, the question remains: did Huda Shaarawi represent and voice the problems and issues of all Egyptian women, or did her activism only influence women of a similar social background? On the one side, Huda Shaarawi was able to capitalise on her husband's position to become a prominent figure in the national movement, and she gained financial independence when she was freed from family ties when her husband died. In other words, she was in possession of financial and social resources, and had access to knowledge that allowed her to concentrate her activity on the social and political scene. In this sense, she did not directly challenge the structure, but was rather an exception confirming the rule and highlighting the limitations imposed on women. Such a Marxist

criticism was expressed by the next generation of the Egyptian feminists, particularly by Nawal el Saadawi (Amireh 2002). El Saadawi criticized Shaarawi as elitist, representing only a small minority of women who had opportunities to act against the oppressing tradition, but not challenging broader unequal social structures. However, the high social position of Huda Shaarawi can be seen both as a chance and limitation. While social and financial status granted women like Shaarawi relatively big independence in actions, the seclusion and social conveyances that were much stronger among aristocratic families, imposed additional barriers on the upper class women, such as a stronger veiling imperative.

The Double Unveiling

Although Shaarawi's memoirs underscore her long transformation and intellectual growth over the years towards her feminist and nationalist activism, one of her acts caught the attention of the public opinion and has been often over-interpreted by international audience as a symbol of feminism. The mythicized act of unveiling at the Cairo railway station in 1923, when Huda Shaarawi returned from an International Women Suffrage Alliance Congress in Rome, became a centre of interest and a foundation for the veiling discourse within Middle Eastern and Muslim feminist movements. The drawing back of the veil from Shaarawi's face has been interpreted as a symbolic transition from harem years of seclusion to conscious and public feminism. Yet, little emphasis has been put on the fact that Huda Shaarawi could make a decision on unveiling consciously since she was already a widow and thus possessed full control over her finances and behaviour. Similarly, both of the women who accompanied Huda Shaarawi to the conference, Saiza Nabarawi and Nabawiyya Musa were single. Moreover, at the moment of the "unveiling" Shaarawi was already greatly known and could leverage her nationalist engagement to gain more acceptance for her actions.

Although overtime the act of unveiling became the most recognizable action of Huda Shaarawi, the discourse on the veil was later criticized by feminists who saw in it the reflection of Western erroneous image of the Middle East. Among them was Leila Ahmed, who claimed that Western feminism falsely chose veiling as a main issue and the symbol of oppression in the Muslim culture (Ahmed 1992, 154; Ahmed 2011). According to Ahmed, the discourse on veiling grew in the colonialist context, especially in Egypt, and as a result the veil was later adopted by nationalism, which portrayed it as symbol against colonialism. According to some feminist scholars who followed Ahmed's reasoning, the veil can actually serve as the antithesis of oppression, since it can be used as a tool allowing women to enter the public sphere and as a way of excluding sexual perceptions of women (Mahmood 2004, 16). In this sense, the act of veiling can be seen as a formation of feminist

and egalitarian agency. Thus, Huda Shaarawi's act of unveiling could be interpreted both as freeing and oppressive.

While the unveiling of the face was rather a symbolic act of reaching for freedom against the traditional patriarchy, Shaarawi's memoirs, published first in Arabic in 1981, and later translated to English by Margot Badran and republished in 1987, can be seen as a second act of unveiling. Badran concluded, "Writing about her life during the harem years was a final unveiling. It can be seen as Huda Shaarawi's final feminist act" (1987, 1). Indeed, Huda Shaarawi, through her memoirs, provided the first account of harem life from within and showed the way she took towards feminism and nationalism. Although "Harem years" was published long after her death, she consciously kept records of important events in her life and her memoirs are composed so that one can assume they were meant to be published. In the memoirs, she exposed the harem's private sphere, revealed an intimate picture of her family life and inner feelings, and touched on subjects that were considered sacrosanct. Thus, she unveiled the life of harem-educated women, breaking the silence from within for the first time. The writing of her memoirs liberated Shaarawi both from the patriarchal world of harem, and from the harem as a construct of Western imagination, giving the readers insight into its reality.

Feminism and Nationalism

As Badran notes, the last part of Shaarawi's life as portrayed in her memoirs was devoted to a double struggle for national and feminist liberation. The fact that her husband was deeply engaged in the national movement as treasurer of the Wafd party further boosted her strong political consciousness.

The events of the 1919 revolution in Egypt against British occupation proved to be the first occasion for awakened female activists to take part in the nationalist struggle.¹ Yet, the women who took part in this first women's protest on March 16, 1919 were obviously limited to the aristocracy, since they were contacted by phone to attend, and made their way to and from the demonstration in private carriages. It seems, however, that later demonstrations became more inclusive, with women and men of different social status taking to the streets to protest the British occupation. The upper class background of the women who led the revolt gave them additional tools to put pressure on the authorities. As Shaarawi noted, women had for instance attempted to stop public servants

¹ The 1919 revolution was a series of protests led by the Wafd party headed by Egyptian statesman Saad Zaghloul and was directed against the British occupation of Egypt. It resulted in the recognition of Egyptian independence in 1922 and the creation of the new Egyptian constitution in 1923.

from breaking the strike by offering them their jewellery as compensation for not returning to their work. Although the aristocracy initiated the protests, the casualties, including women, were largely from the working class. Additionally, Shaarawi's memoirs underline the intra-religious solidarity present in the Egyptian society, mentioning that Copts and Jews took part in the nationalist movement.

Huda Shaarawi's political activism echoed her long-lasting attachment to Egypt, but was also a sign of her maturity, and of following the path of liberation from patriarchy and family structures. As Shaarawi suggests, the time of the 1919 revolution and the national activism brought the highest level of cooperation between her and her husband since women became an important part of the resistance. It later manifested in a letter of protest she sent to Lady Brunyate, the wife of a British official in Egypt. Shaarawi portrays women as carrying responsibility for the nationalist movement, as the heiresses of the men if they were arrested. Indeed, from the end of 1921 and in 1922, following the arrest of nationalist activist and revolution leader Saad Zaghloul, the Wafdist Women Central Committee took an essential role within the national movement, issuing letters of protest to the British government, and organizing meetings and an economical boycott against the British occupation. Within the patriarchal context, women found ways to support the national struggle through the withdrawal of their (mainly inherited) money from British banks and the refusal to buy British products when responsible for household spending.

Following another protest, at the end of 1919 female activists gathered again and formed the first women's political body – Wafdist Women Central Committee, which was aimed at supporting Wafd. Shaarawi was selected as the President of the organization. Although supporting Wafd, the Committee aimed at expressing their separate views and thus harshly criticized Wafd for not consulting with women about the British proposal after negotiations in London in 1920. Shaarawi's letter stating "At this moment when the future of the Egypt is about to be decided, it is unjust that the Wafd, which stands for the rights of Egypt and struggles for its liberation, should deny half the nation its role in that liberation," prompted an apology from Saad Zaghloul, leader of Wafd (Shaarawi 1987, 122).

When Ali Shaarawi died in 1922, Shaarawi remained at the centre of the nationalist movement. In 1923, she became the first president of the Egyptian Feminist Union. In the same year, women were disillusioned when the new electoral law excluded women from political participation. In 1924, when Wafd came to power, women (except for the wives of officials) were banned from the official inauguration, and this sparked renewed protests demanding women's

participation. Following a disagreement between Wafd and Huda Shaarawi regarding Sudan, as well as disappointment with the approach of Wafd towards women, Shaarawi left the Wafdist Women's Central Committee in 1924. In the final line of her memoirs she reflected on her role within the nationalist movement: "men have singled out women of outstanding merit and put them on a pedestal to avoid recognizing the capabilities of all women" (Shaarawi 1987, 131).

Huda Shaarawi remained active in the Egyptian Feminist Union until her death in 1947. She was involved in the intellectual and cultural activities of upper class women within the Club of Women's Union, established in 1925. The relocation of the headquarters of the Feminist Union to central Cairo where it functioned under the name 'The House of the Women' proved that the establishment of a common, public space for women was already possible and harem conventions were slowly disintegrating. The activity of the Union, although led mainly by the upper class was also devoted to working women, since besides journals, it provided services such as a dispensary, craft workshops, and childcare facilities. The feminist movement lobbied for changes in law, broadening access to education, and better working conditions for women, and it reached several successes on all those fronts. Huda Shaarawi was also engaged in international feminist movements, being vice-president of International Alliance of Women and the president of the Arab Feminist Union established in 1944.

Paradox: From the Old to the New Patriarchy

Huda Shaarawi's engagement in the two struggles, for Egyptian women and for Egyptian independence, raised questions regarding priorities and the choice of allies. Badran suggests that Shaarawi used the gender divisions, which, although smaller, prevailed during the period of national movement, as a tool for balancing between different factions within Wafd and for keeping distance and an independence of opinion. With this in mind, Huda Shaarawi used her strengths to open the nationalist movement to greater plurality, while negotiating the place of women within the national struggle. Hence, Shaarawi was actually "bargaining with patriarchy," in the sense proposed by the Turkish feminist Deniz Kandiyoti. The patriarchal bargain, as a type of tactics adopted by women to maximise individual opportunities even if the action has its source in the patriarchal structure, can be adopted to understand Huda Shaarawi's actions as a conscious feminist strategy (Kandiyoti 1988, 275). This is further underscored by the role played by women during the martial law period, as transmitters of information between authorities and opposition leaders.

Following Shaarawi's initial enthusiasm towards the national movement, she soon became distant and critical, pointing to the exclusion of women in the new national order regardless of their contribution to the national cause. As Beth Baron noted (2005, 171), the final split from the nationalist movement came during the time of Saad Zaghloul's premiership, when "it was increasingly clear, to the more feminist-minded nationalists that women's progress was being sacrificed in the name of national solidarity." The conflict between the feminists and the Wafd party resulted in Shaarawi's resignation as head of the Wafdist Women's Central Committee, as mentioned above. Indeed, as pointed out scholars such as Baron (2005, 2-3), the women's story was ignored when creating the history of Egyptian nationalism. Although Benedict Anderson's "imagined community" built its identity on an imagined common past, "fathers" of the Egyptian nation were put on pedestals while "mothers" only became an object of the patriarchal national rhetoric.

Suad Joseph (2000, 3-30) described this paradox well when he pointed out the dichotomy between feminised nationhood and the masculinized state, and Badran (2005) further developed it in her book "Egypt as a Woman." Nationhood underwent a process of feminisation visible in the connotation between defending homeland and defending women. Joseph suggests that the notion of the family's honour depending on the sexual purity of women has been transferred onto the entire nation. Women's social behaviour was thus directly connected with 'honour of the nation' and was representing the collective, whereas men were perceived as only responsible for themselves. As Baron notes, "honour came to define the parameters of the collective and was at the core of its identity: those who shared honour belonged to the nation; those who did not or were not ready to defend and avenge national honour would be excluded" (2005, 7). With this notion in mind, the national movement demanded women's return to the patriarchal structure as an act of decolonization of the nation using the allegories taken from chauvinist and patriarchal discourse. Through this process, nationalism became a new source of oppression for Egyptian women, whose body and behaviour were appropriated for the national cause. In short, women were part of the Egyptian nationalist struggle, but when statehood was achieved they were pushed away by the masculine state, and a new national law reinforced the oppression of women (Hatem 2000).

The masculine nature of the Egyptian nation, as underscored by the 1923 Egyptian Constitution, which recognized only male citizens, was negating the feminist gains of the 1919 revolution (Hatem 2000, 35). Yet, as Hatem noted:

Active upper-class women accepted the claims and the terms of this early fraternal discourse that classified women as not yet worthy of membership in the nation. The

Egyptian Feminist Union also embraced the discursive view that domesticity and education constituted the bases for women's future citizenship rights. (2000, 44)

On the one hand, feminism became part of the nationalist agenda during the struggle, on the other, nationalism attempted to return to tradition, while treating feminism as an artificial, colonial, Western 'imported' construct. This ambiguous relation between nationalism and feminism is implicitly embodied in the life of Huda Shaarawi. Interestingly, in her memoirs Shaarawi seems to recreate this patriarchal notion, attributing love for the Arabic language and the Egyptian land as features inherited from her father, the male and patriarchal prototype of a patriot.

The transformative colonial decades in which Huda Shaarawi grew up, and the nationalist revolution which gave impetus to her actions, were both periods of reversed social order, or even disorder, which gave oppressed groups certain opportunities. As in Bakhtin's carnival, the oppressed gain voice, but no one treats them seriously when the order is returned. In Bakhtin's theory (1941), carnival is a unique moment of free interaction between usually separated groups and unusual behaviour is encouraged. Yet, the carnival is not revolutionary, but rather serves as an outlet that strengthens the structure itself. Indeed, in the context of the national struggle, the strict rules of harem life loosened, and "women's unprecedented acts were welcomed and justified by national needs" (Badran 1987, 112). Although carnival permeates both the private and public sphere, it is limited by time. In the moment when the order is brought back, the unequal structure is re-established. This metaphor might serve as description of the circumstances that first empowered Huda Shaarawi and other Egyptian feminists, but soon became the source of their oppression. Yet, Shaarawi was not only the object of this ironic history; over the years, thanks to her education and individualism, as well as the resources she possessed as a result of her social position, she was able to forward her agency, both as a feminist and as a nationalist.

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