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The Making and Marrying of Modern Egyptians

Social crises are just as important and dangerous as their political or economic counterparts, if not more so, because their repercussions can destroy the entire nation and foreshadow its annihilation. Is there anything more indicative of this than the marriage crisis that threatens the Egyptian nation at its core, erodes its backbone, and forewarns of its ruin? The government and people must urgently unite to solve this crisis.

William Gayyid

IN THIS 1929 LETTER TO THE EDITOR, the lawyer William Gayyid underscored the alarming anxieties that the Egyptian middle class shared about the marriage crisis and the fate of their fledgling nation.¹ Writers and readers deployed the term *marriage crisis* in the press to refer to a supposed rise in the number of middle-class men who were choosing bachelorhood over marriage in early twentieth-century urban Egypt. For many like Gayyid, the biggest problem facing Egypt was not British domination or the Great Depression but the marriage crisis, which demanded nothing short of government intervention because it signified the potential demise of the nation. When Egyptians were discussing this crisis in the press, they were not simply voicing their concerns about

the purported greater prevalence of bachelorhood. They were also using marriage as a metaphor to critique larger socioeconomic and political turmoil and to envision a postcolonial nation free of social ills. Marriage was not just a political act and a patriotic duty for these Egyptians; it was also a microcosm of their nation.

The marriage crisis was a middle-class urban phenomenon limited to the large cities of Egypt, most notably its capital, Cairo.² It was most clearly articulated by middle-class exponents for middle-class consumption and was said to affect middle-class bachelors. Egypt's Arabic-language press (as opposed to its upper-class French-language press) was a middle-class forum in which the founders, editors, and writers of the various newspapers and periodicals wrote in the language of the urban middle class.³ Although this group was a minority in Egypt, its domination of the press and its control of the struggle for national independence led it to claim middle-class perceptions as the norm in its attempts to define new hegemonic notions of marriage, law, gender, and nationalism in the early twentieth century.

Even though the middle-class writers and readers of the press represented a small portion of the population, they differed immensely in the plethora of reasons they offered to explain middle-class men's evasion of marriage. Some writers argued that these men could not afford the costs of marriage given the various economic crises sweeping early twentieth-century Egypt. Others faulted materialistic women and their parents for demanding extravagant dowers from their suitors. Still others blamed the bachelors themselves, accusing them of squandering their money and time in idle places, such as the coffeehouse, or on illicit diversions, such as prostitution and alcohol. Certain observers argued that the customs of arranged marriage and female seclusion deterred educated men from marrying women with whom they could not become acquainted before marriage. Some readers and writers claimed that middle-class men were repelled by uneducated women who could not provide stimulating companionship, run homes efficiently, and raise future citizens for the nation. Yet others contended that men were turned off by educated women, who were too immodest and liberal to make honorable obedient wives and mothers. Still others faulted the high divorce rate, evidenced in protracted disputes in the Islamic courts, for dis-

couraging single middle-class men from entering into unstable unions that would likely fall apart.

Cases from the Islamic courts, however, paint a different picture of marriage in early twentieth-century Cairo. They reveal the improvisations of couples from all social classes and their creative responses to the changing circumstances of early twentieth-century Egyptian life. Contrary to the portrayals by middle-class writers, couples of all classes used a variety of strategies to manipulate the courts to their advantage. Whereas the middle class conceptualized certain notions of marital rights and duties in the press, lower-class, middle-class, and elite couples in the courtrooms exercised and understood these rights and duties in different ways. Many litigants and judges did not necessarily subscribe to the new notions of marriage, masculinity, and femininity that were being disseminated in the press. Others, however, were influenced by ideas about the roles men and women should play in marriage and the nation. Although the middle-class press argued that marriage was supposed to be a permanent hierarchical relationship, various legal possibilities were available to both sexes to escape the institution. When husbands or wives divorced, when wives tried to force absent husbands to provide alimony, or when couples wrestled for custody over children, many turned to the legal system for redress. Egyptians petitioned judges to challenge apparently fixed doctrinal understandings because they viewed law as a crucial and flexible sociopolitical resource. Their extensive use of the Islamic courts suggests that they did not consider law a last resort. It also indicates that Egyptians of all classes were aware of their legal and socially acceptable options, even if they were not all aware of or influenced by the middle-class debates over marriage.

Marriage was a site of contested national identity formation that attracted the growing social attention of the middle-class press and the legal attention of the Egyptian administration under British rule. Egyptian men and women conceptualized the nation and understood their rights and duties through marriage in the early twentieth century. During this period, new ideas of marriage, law, nationalism, and gender were being shaped and redefined in an unprecedented manner. In this book, I examine a sample of marriage and divorce cases filed in Cairo's Islamic courts in order to situate them within the widespread press debates over the alleged marriage

crisis. By undertaking a discursive analysis of middle-class understandings of marriage in the press with those of the urban lower, middle, and upper classes in the courts, I demonstrate how marriage, law, nationalism, and gender were portrayed and practiced in a semicolonial context between 1898 and 1936.

The year 1898 marked the first year of the existence of the newly reorganized Islamic court system, and it roughly coincided with the controversial publication of Qasim Amin's *The Liberation of Women*.⁴ Amin, commonly if inaptly considered "the father of Arab feminism," was the first Egyptian to perceive a phenomenon of bachelorhood long before an ostensible marriage crisis riveted the nation in the 1920s and 1930s.⁵ The proposals set forth in Amin's book also served as the basis for marriage and divorce legislation in Egypt.

Although many writers and readers advanced similar arguments and explanations for bachelorhood during the first two decades of the twentieth century, the term *marriage crisis* was not coined until after the 1919 Egyptian revolution for independence began. 'Abdu al-Barquqi, a frequent contributor to the secular women's monthly *al-Mar'a al-Misriyya*, was the first writer to call the supposed rise in middle-class bachelorhood a marriage crisis in an article he penned in the magazine's February 1920 issue.⁶ Al-Barquqi argued that the problem of middle-class bachelorhood had come to constitute a full-fledged crisis that threatened the fledgling Egyptian nation amid its struggle for independence from the British. The failure to secure political and economic independence led many Egyptians to view their nation as being in turmoil and to imagine marriage—their microcosm of the nation and the locus of the ways and means for producing and reproducing—as being in crisis.

Debates over the marriage crisis started to fade by 1936, when national identity began to acquire new and different meanings in a more sovereign Egypt and when discussions of bachelorhood ceased to dominate the pages of the press. The assumption of power in 1936 by King Faruq, a new and different kind of royal ruler, upon the death of his father, King Fu'ad (r. 1917–1936); the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936, which granted Egypt more sovereignty; the end of the Great Depression; and the impending World War II all helped to distract the literate Egyptian public from a crisis in marriage at least for the next several decades.

Historical Background

Although Britain occupied Egypt militarily in 1882 and established a new colonial regime, Egypt nominally remained a province of the Ottoman Empire. At the onset of World War I in 1914, however, the British placed Egypt under a protectorate, ending its legal ties with the Ottoman Empire. When the British neglected to remove this protectorate status and grant Egypt political independence after World War I, Egyptian nationalists initiated an intense struggle for independence, beginning with the 1919 revolution. After three years of Anglo-Egyptian negotiations, the British unilaterally imposed a limited form of independence in 1922 by establishing a parliamentary monarchy. Egyptians assumed responsibility for their internal affairs, and the British retained a political and military presence to safeguard their interests and maintain influence over Egyptian and foreign affairs. As historian Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot puts it, "That independence was hedged by a number of restrictions that rendered it well nigh void."⁷ This status quo lasted until the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936. This treaty established Egypt as a sovereign nation but permitted Britain to maintain a military presence along the Suez Canal and impose martial law and censorship. The British finally evacuated Egypt after Gamal Abdel Nasser led a revolution that overthrew the pro-British monarchy in 1952 and declared Egypt independent in 1954.

Because of this unique but awkward relationship of quasi-independence and semicolonial rule, Egyptian experiences in marriage, law, nationalism, and gender in the early twentieth century differed from those of other European colonies in a number of ways. First, unlike in colonial India, British officials did not reform the Islamic legal system in Egypt, despite their frequent criticisms of its courts.⁸ The Egyptian administration reformed this system on its own accord and drafted, debated, and passed Islamic laws on marriage and divorce without any direct interference from the British.⁹ Second, the discourses on marriage and gender in the press were constructed by and for indigenous Egyptian subjects. Studies of colonialism tend to concentrate on colonizers' assumptions and perceptions of marriage and gender more than on those of the colonized.¹⁰ In contrast, the marriage crisis discussions were internal dialogues among Egyptians not steeped in debates on racial difference. Third, the Egyptian case does not compare with the Bengali one because Bengali nationalists began

to overlook women's issues in favor of political issues, seeking to situate women in an inner domain of spirituality, localized within the home and embodied by the feminine.¹¹ Egyptian discussions on marriage were very much about women's issues *and* political issues, and women's issues were characterized by attempts to advance and develop women as *both* an inner domain of culture and an outer domain of progress for the nation.

What the Egyptian case did share with its colonial counterparts was an obsession with modernity. New marital legislation that regulated the marriage of female minors in colonial India, for example, was more concerned with promoting modernity than with improving the status of women for their own sake, and this legislation marked a crucial turning point between the delegitimization of colonialism as the agent of modernity and the advent of a new nationalist Indian modernity.¹² Concerns over bachelorhood likewise provide evidence of the political and cultural anxieties that often underwrote experiments in colonial modernity. Paul Rabinow has argued that instead of attempting to define modernity, one must track the diverse ways in which claims to being modern are made.¹³ Egyptian claims to being modern can be examined through marriage, an arena in which notions of colonial modernity were produced and reproduced as a condition for the political independence of the emerging Egyptian nation and its national subjects. Male and female writers used marriage to critique Egyptian society and to construct visions of modern marriage and nation and of modern husbands, wives, and national subjects. At the same time, their constructions of modern marriage, nation, and subjects were also uniquely and authentically Egyptian and Islamic. Although Egyptians occasionally deployed Western models of marriage and nation as positive examples of modernity, they welcomed neither wholesale adoption nor complete rejection of them. Like early twentieth-century advocates of modernity elsewhere, they tailored their own visions of modernity to their individual political, class, religious, cultural, and economic situations.¹⁴

Parameters and Perceptions

Marriage crisis observers focused on a small and select subcategory of middle-class bachelors and constructed them as a distinct social group that aroused anxiety in contrast to other early twentieth-century Western

societies that reconstituted single women as such.¹⁵ The emerging middle class was an evolving and amorphous group in early twentieth-century Egypt. It was loosely composed of a lower middle class of government employees, merchants, and urban and agricultural workers; a rural petty bourgeoisie of small landowners; and an urban middle class of students, teachers, professionals, government bureaucrats, technocrats, and intellectuals who were educated in Egyptian state schools and universities.¹⁶ The bachelor of the marriage crisis was a member of this last subgroup: The educated urban professional male middle class that usually resided in the capital of Cairo, spoke a Western language, dressed in European attire, worked in a white-collar occupation, and regularly consumed and sometimes produced periodicals and books.¹⁷ A man who belonged to this small but powerful segment within the middle class and between the landless peasantry and the landowning elite minority assumed the title *effendi*, which connoted a somewhat bourgeois identity that most closely resembles a gentleman in English.¹⁸ These men were crucial to the development of Egyptian anticolonial nationalism, as their intellectual contributions and political activities proved central in urban culture and politics.¹⁹

Ahmad al-Sawi Muhammad, who often dedicated his column in the daily *al-Ahram* to marital issues, outlined the unique predicament of the middle-class bachelor.

You are the victims of this society that . . . gives you a paltry salary . . . and forces you at the same time to become an effendi, wear a fez and suit, . . . ride the tram, read the paper, and sit in a coffeehouse. But if you were, my brother, to wear a galabiya . . . you would find thousands . . . happy to marry you.²⁰

By highlighting the explicit urban-rural divide that marked early twentieth-century Egypt, al-Sawi distinguished between two types of Egyptian men: the urban educated effendi, visibly demarcated by his Western-style suit and fez, versus the rural illiterate peasant farmer, marked by his galabiya (a simple loose long dress).²¹ Both figures were commonly and perhaps contradictorily deployed as symbols of Egyptian nationalism during the struggle for complete independence: The effendi represented the modern Westernized Egyptian man, whereas the peasant symbolized his authentic traditional counterpart. According to al-Sawi, only the middle class fell victim to the trappings of Egyptian modernity

and materialism and, as a result, could not afford to marry. Although approximately 70 percent of the population was composed of peasants, who were the hardest hit by the various economic depressions, they were not facing a crisis in marriage because they continued to marry to reproduce children, who would help them work the fields, and because their class did not place outrageous financial demands on them in marriage.²²

Egypt's elite beys (an honorific title for distinguished professional men) and pashas (the highest honorific title reserved for prominent landowners and political officials) also were not facing a bachelorhood epidemic because they could afford to marry. Their urban members, however, frequented the Cairo Islamic courts just as often as their lower-class and middle-class counterparts did. They also occasionally took part in marriage crisis debates in the press as observers, and they formed the core of the Egyptian administration that passed marriage and divorce legislation in the 1920s.

Despite the repeated claims in the press that large numbers of middle-class men were shunning marriage, writers and readers rarely offered data to substantiate their arguments. Even those who mentioned that the Islamic courts were recording fewer marriages annually did not cite statistics. Because the registration of marriage was not required before a 1931 law mandated it, it is impossible to ascertain whether or not middle-class men were avoiding marriage.²³ Ironically, a comparison of the percentage of never-married Cairene men during the height of the crisis reveals a sharp drop: 57 percent had never married in 1927 versus 34 percent in 1937.²⁴ These figures, however, are unreliable because they come from problematic census registers that included males of all ages, did not distinguish between classes, and were accurate only at the moment the census was conducted.²⁵

More significant is the widespread *perception* that middle-class bachelorhood was on the rise: the reasons offered to explain this purported phenomenon, why it caused such alarm, and what those apprehensions said about Egyptian men, women, their economy, their society, and their political situation. The marriage crisis reflected escalating anxieties about the political, social, and economic state of the fragile nation more than realities of widespread bachelorhood. Specifically, middle-class Egyptians worried about whether and when they would achieve full independence

from the British. They were concerned about what role Islamic and secular law, education, and culture would play and what kind of government would rule in a postcolonial Egypt. They fretted over foreign economic domination, middle-class materialism, low salaries, unemployment rates, periods of inflation, and cycles of depression at various points during the early decades of the twentieth century. Perhaps most of all, the writers and readers in the press were anxious about how all these factors would affect their own gendered, marital, and national identities as well as those of middle-class men and women like themselves.

A few scholars have mentioned the growing concerns over Egyptian bachelorhood in the 1930s. According to Margot Badran, journalists and social reformers blamed spousal incompatibility in age and education as well as economic problems that made it difficult for middle-class men to marry.²⁶ Bruce Dunne and Laura Bier, on the other hand, attribute the marriage crisis to social reformers who blamed widespread bachelorhood on the easily accessible outlet of prostitution, which made sex available without the responsibilities of marriage.²⁷ Their focus on sexuality and prostitution oversimplifies the multiple manifestations of the marriage crisis. Although the 1930s were characterized by campaigns to end official prostitution, there was nothing new about prostitution or calls for its eradication. Prostitution had been regulated by the British until the postcolonial government outlawed state-regulated prostitution in 1953.²⁸ Nor were the early 1930s concerns that middle-class men preferred bachelorhood to marriage new. As early as 1899, social reformers such as Qasim Amin lamented the supposed rise in bachelorhood and the decline in marriage rates. Although the 1930s debates were connected to the 1929–1933 economic depression and high levels of unemployment, this economic crisis was not the first that early twentieth-century Egypt had experienced. The country had also faced one in 1907, which led many in the press to bemoan the financial preoccupations behind marriage because they deterred men from marriage.

Marriage, Nationalism, and Gender

Theorists of nationalism have underscored the utility of examining the family because it is often viewed as the basic building block of a nation.²⁹ Recent works have been instrumental in establishing a solid

foundation for this sort of research on Egyptian nationalism. Beth Baron has demonstrated how the nation has invariably been imagined by means of metaphors of the family, and Marilyn Booth has shown how women found it difficult to escape the nationalist ideal of the nuclear family.³⁰ Lisa Pollard further illustrated the extent to which the home served as an arena where Egyptian men and women learned to be modern nationalists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³¹ These scholars have interrogated the rigid divide traditionally posited by scholars of nationalism between the public nationalist domain of men and the private cultural sphere of women and the family, revealing that women and the family were fundamental to the constitution of Egyptian national identity.³²

I largely draw on and seek to contribute to this pioneering body of scholarship. Rather than women or the family, however, I use marriage as the central lens for studying anticolonial nationalism. We must first examine marriage in order to better understand the production of the family, the nation, and gender.³³ My focus on marriage, however, does not mean that I do not consider the family. On the contrary, the two are inextricably linked: Marriage is the fundamental foundation of the Egyptian family and, by extension, the nation because it is the institution that makes and breaks families. Because the ultimate goal of Egyptian marriage was to produce offspring, a study of marriage is also a study of the family. Marriage, however, is more significant for a variety of reasons.

The Egyptian middle class often constructed marriage as a fundamental national duty. As a result, conjugal ties and identities provide a useful way to examine how men and women were turned into husbands and wives and how both were made into modern national subjects. Egyptian legislators also viewed marriage as paramount to the nation because the bulk of state intervention into the so-called private sphere focused on marriage and divorce laws in order to secure their public objectives of political independence and national modernity. By focusing on marriage, we can better grasp the competing articulations of the nation that reveal the nuanced and polycentric variants of nationalism.

Marriage is also important because it serves as one of the most effective, yet largely ignored, ways of studying gender in normative heterosexual contexts because “the whole system of attribution and meaning that we call gender relies on and to a great extent derives from the struc-

turing provided by marriage. Turning men and women into husbands and wives, marriage has designated the way both sexes act in the world.”³⁴ Rather than a parallel women’s history that marginalizes men, in this book I offer a national history that uses gender instead of women as both a primary tool and an object of analysis.³⁵ Because notions of masculinity and femininity are constantly being redeployed and renegotiated in relation to one another, we cannot begin to understand how one is being reworked without considering the other.

I do not mean to suggest that marriage played the only role in the construction of gender in early twentieth-century Egypt. Gender is constructed by a variety of institutions, discourses, and processes, as the aforementioned scholars have shown. Marriage remains pivotal, however, because gender identities and marital identities are mutually constitutive. Likewise, gender is a useful tool for studying marriage and nationalism.³⁶ Although consideration of the gendered connotations of nationalist discourse can take a variety of scholarly routes, I am most interested in how national identity was constructed differently for men and for women and how notions of femininity and masculinity were deployed in the formation of national identity.

In using gender as a category of analysis, I employ an understanding of gender similar to that of historian Mary H. Blewett, who characterizes it as the “appropriate masculine and feminine behaviors that are worked out in political controversy and become socially established as expressions of the fundamental ‘natures’ of men and women.”³⁷ Building on Blewett’s definition, I investigate the ways in which men and women manipulated constantly changing notions of manhood and womanhood to better suit their interests as husbands, wives, and Egyptian national subjects. Although constructions of manhood and womanhood were indeed shaped and reshaped by a variety of socioeconomic and political forces, I focus on the contradictory ways in which Egyptians in the press and in the courtrooms understood and used their gender identity to affect their marital and national identities and vice versa. This does not mean, however, that these Egyptians were completely free to create, assert, and manipulate their individual gender, marital, and national identities. They were constrained by larger religious, political, and socioeconomic processes, such as Islamic law, British rule, and foreign economic domination, as