

## The Leader as Groom, the Nation as Bride: Patriarchal Nationalism under Nasser and Sisi

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This article surveys and analyzes the gendered symbols and imageries in the hegemonic nationalist discourse in Egypt under Nasser and under Sisi. It asserts that gender binaries are projected onto the relation between ruler and ruled, state and nation, military and civilian, as a means to demobilize and subordinate *the people* following coups d'état. The article also analyzes the negative feminization of

the Egyptian populace under Sisi, which serves to discredit demands for political participation and social justice and to legitimate their suppression, especially following the mass mobilizations of January 25, 2011.

**Keywords:** Nationalism; Gender; Nasser; Sisi; Coup d'état; 25th January Revolution

In the aftermath of the mass mobilizations of January 25, 2011, a notable surge in nationalist discourse took place in Egypt. The media, the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces,<sup>1</sup> the military-appointed interim government, and various public figures all engaged in producing a discourse that defined what is good for Egypt, who is a real patriot, and who is an enemy of Egypt. This discourse intensified around June 30, 2013, when state institutions and the military, through the mainstream media, urged people to go to the streets to topple the elected President Mohamed Morsi and to mandate the military to carry out this purpose.<sup>2</sup> The nationalist narrative that ensued—and continued after the military coup on July 3, 2013—was based on a highly gendered conception of patriotism and the nation. In this discourse, the military epitomized masculinist, patriotic self-sacrifice and contrasted with a feminized people. A cult of the military leader—the then-Minister of Defense Abdel Fattah al-Sisi—emerged, and several commentators noted its likeness to that cultivated around the figure of President Gamal Abdel Nasser (1954–1970)—who had also been among a group of officers staging a military coup in 1952.<sup>3</sup> This article analyzes Egyptian hegemonic nationalist discourses under Nasser and under Sisi in their commonality and differ-

ence, using a selection of Nasser-era films and songs and, for the contemporary period, a selection of songs, cartoons, newspaper columns, and public statements that circulated before and following the military coup of July 3, 2013. The choice of different forms of cultural products to analyze the hegemonic nationalist discourse in the two eras is dictated by transformations both in the social context and in state propaganda strategies; under Nasser, low literacy rates and the state's policy of using mass media to carry out *citizen education* meant that radio and TV played a central role in producing a popular political narrative by broadcasting Nasser's speeches, as well as nationalist songs and operettas (Abu-Lughod 10). The film industry also became an important tool of political propaganda and ideological production. Contemporary political culture, on the other hand, is produced in a context where the mass media are relatively less centralized and largely Internet-based, thus the use of online newspaper pieces, social-media-circulated cartoons and posters, and YouTube-broadcasted songs and talk shows.

I argue that highly gendered imageries and symbols have legitimized and reinforced autocratic military rule. I outline, however, an important difference in Sisi-era nationalist discourse: that is the nega-

tive, misogynist, feminization of the people, as a means to justify further political and economic exclusion. This study thus places itself in the Gramscian and Althusserian traditions, treating culture and ideology as important sites for creating consent, legitimizing repressive rule, and establishing hegemony.

### Gendered Post-Military-Coup Nationalisms

The gendered character of nationalism has drawn the attention of historians and gender and post-colonial scholars since the 1980s.<sup>4</sup> A substantial corpus of literature treating cases from various geographic and historical contexts has gone to show that “all nationalisms are gendered” (McClintock 61). On the one hand, nationalism invokes existing forms of gender power relations, which become its most powerful symbols, and, on the other hand, it creates and reinforces gender difference in the social realm.

Imagining and constructing the Egyptian nation as a woman and the use of family metaphors in Egyptian nationalist discourse are not new. Beth Baron shows that it began with the first manifestations of an Egyptian territorial sense of nationhood in the late nineteenth century. Nor is it unique to Egypt. However, as Baron remarks, “the prevalence of familial metaphors in



Fig. 1: Sisi has been likened to Nasser as the savior of the Egyptian nation, through his military coup. Source: Al-Akhbar.

nationalist rhetoric inside and outside Egypt should not obscure their different uses, particular resonances, and varied receptions” (Baron 6) and thus our need to explore the various ways in which nationalism invokes gender difference and to what ends.

The mobilizing functions of highly gendered and sexual nationalist metaphors—especially activated in time of war—have been noted in the literature. Men have been mobilized for fighting and self-sacrifice, to fulfill their masculine role as protectors, and to defend their honor, embodied in (female) national integrity. This article, however, suggests that highly gendered

nationalist repertoires may be employed for an opposite end: as a means to demobilize a population and to subordinate it to autocratic rule, especially in cases where a military regime succeeds in a moment of revolutionary mass mobilization, through the projection of gender binaries onto the relation between state and society.

Post-colonial scholarship has analyzed gendered nationalism as a hegemonic project by the colonized intelligentsia, aimed at subordinating the local masses (Chatterjee 36). As colonial domination was legitimated by orientalism's set of gender binaries, which contrasted a masculine virile West with a degenerate and feminine East (Said 206-208) and a manly Englishman with an effeminate colonized man (Sinha 1-25), so has the colonized intelligentsia projected such paternalist binaries onto their relation to the local masses as they sought to prove that they were masculine enough to be the ideal modern national subjects and, thus, fit for self-government (Jacob 46).

Anti-colonial formulations of Egyptian nationhood were indeed marked by masculinist imageries and values. Throughout the interwar and postwar years, the educated male youth were depicted as the masculine, initiative-taking patriotic agents, as opposed to the vain (feminine) partisanship of the older generation and

the *servility* of the destitute uneducated population.<sup>5</sup> Masculinist formulations of patriotism went hand in hand with the patriarchal imagining of the nation as a family, as a biological unit in which gender difference functioned to advance the interests of the whole. This meant that speaking of internal forms of exploitation was naturally perceived as divisive and unpatriotic: the young nationalist intelligentsia of the era expressed aversion to parliamentary politics and the multi-party system and favor for militarism as the true form of patriotism<sup>6</sup> (Gershoni and Jankowski 4; Younis, *Nidā' al-Sha'b* 679-681).

The roots of Nasser-era state ideology have been traced back to the ethos and worldview of the pre-1952 *effendiyya*<sup>7</sup> (Shechter 574; Younis, *Nidā' al-Sha'b* 667).<sup>8</sup> But the particularly gendered nature of the nationalist narrative under the Free Officers and its political implications in terms of legitimating power hierarchies<sup>9</sup> remain unexplored,<sup>10</sup> despite renewed interest in analyzing the ideological foundations of the Nasserist regime and the cult of Nasser.<sup>11</sup> To a certain extent, we may treat the gendered nature of Nasser-era nationalism, in its paternalism towards both women and subaltern men, as a continuation of the socio-political ethos of the liberal-nationalist political order (Bier 30).

Nevertheless, I assert that the specifics of the gendered discourse of Nasser-era nationalism should be analyzed in their own right, as a repertoire of images and symbols that legitimated the eradication of political pluralism and reinforced autocratic rule by the post-colonial regime, while it fostered a cult of the military leader, which was so powerful and left such long-lasting effects on collective memory and the national imagination that it could be reinvented six decades later, under Sisi (Mostafa 23).

In both periods, highly gendered nationalist narratives—depicting the military leader as masculine and virile and, anti-thetically, the nation as feminine and dependent, as the passive object of the masculine patriotic act of salvation and leadership—served to subordinate the local population, putting an end to various forms of socio-political mobilizations and muting demands for political participation and social justice that preceded military coups d'état.

I suggest that, furthermore, post-2011 nationalist discourse was based on additional patriarchal binaries, namely those juxtaposing a pure, loyal, feminine, abstract nation with a selfish, infertile, untamed, and degenerate feminine populace. On the one hand, the feminization of the nation is intrinsic to nationalism's logic

of masculinist protection,<sup>12</sup> and, I contend, becomes accentuated in the attempt to legitimate military dictatorships; the nation is depicted *positively* as a generous, wise, and self-sacrificing mother and a chaste beloved. On the other hand, the enemy is also feminized, albeit in a negative, misogynist sense; insubordinate women and men are debased, depicted as promiscuous sexual objects or, in the case of enemy men, as incompetent in the protection of their women's honor.<sup>13</sup>

In the interregnum of both post-military-coup regimes, masculinist nationalist discourse subsided, and instead, post-1973 Sadat- and Mubarak-era nationalisms centered on issues of authenticity, modernity, and national culture. Economic liberalization (*infitāh*) and its adverse effect on the relative status of the intelligentsia led the latter to highlight its exclusive cultural capital and to disapprove of various models of upward mobility among the poor and the *uneducated*. The latter came to be perceived as a threat to Egyptian nationhood, both to its *traditions* and to its prospects for modernization (Abu-Lughod 60; Armbrust 21-34; Saad 407; Shechter 572). Thus, the process of divorcing Egypt from the Egyptians, which will be manifested in gendered misogynous terms around the military coup of July 2013, may be said to

have originated in the cultural nationalism of the *infitāh* era.

### From Humiliated Nation to Happy Bride

As a group of army officers, self-named the Free Officers, established a new regime following their coup d'état in 1952, they moved to eradicate political pluralism; they abrogated the multi-party system, cracked down on the Muslim Brothers and the communists, and suppressed independent student and labor organizations. The practice of stripping the people of its agency was legitimated by the discursive projection of positive femininity onto *the people*, in contrast to the masculine agency of the military leadership; only the latter was entitled to interpret and practice the agency and will of the people. Any attempt to exercise the new *revolutionary*<sup>14</sup> agency from outside the military leadership was portrayed as treason against the people, which was assumed to have entrusted the leader to act on its behalf. The people were reduced to loving supporters in a monogamous relationship. They came to be defined in opposition to the masculinist military leadership, i.e., feminized, not just in regime discourse and propaganda, but also in mass culture and public discourse.

Popular songs and films of the era reveal the conception of the nation as wholly

dependent on the military and having no agency except through it. One of the early songs was *'al-Dawār (To the Dawār*<sup>15</sup>) (1952), sung by popular singer Mohamed Qandil; it celebrated the Free Officers' assumption of power as good news coming through the radio, indicating that the event became known to people, the subject of this *blessed movement*, in their total absence. The words depict this event as good fortune for the nation and as the work of the military, the agent. The military saves the nation, moves her from an era of *darkness, slavery, and humiliation* to an era of *freedom, independence, and dignity*. The nation is the object of salvation and may only express her gratefulness to the military leadership.

Another song by the prominent singer and composer Mohamed 'Abd al-Wahhab, *Ya Maṣr Tamm al-Hanā (O Egypt, Everlasting Happiness is Reached)* (1954) likens the Free Officers' rise to power to a marriage concluded between the military leadership and Egypt, which will bring about everlasting happiness to the latter. The words depict the people as having *waited long nights* for the savior/groom, who finally came in the form of the Free Officers and whose initiative and agency are contrasted with the passive state of the object of salvation: the *fortunate* people.

In the discursive performance of this masculinist nationalism, the language of honor, shame, rape, and revenge is central. The integrity of the nation is designated as *'ird*: literally, body; in common usage, it means the physical (sexual) integrity of a woman, on whom the honor of the community's males depends. 'Abd al-Wahhab's song, *Nashīd al-Ḥurriyya (Hymn to Freedom)* (1952), which was the national anthem from 1952 to 1960, is filled with these sexual metaphors, as it narrates the shame and humiliation in which the nation had existed before the military patriot redeemed her. The song addresses the male whose honor lies in the complete possession of Egypt and the safeguarding of her physical/sexual integrity: "Your precious *'ird* was violated by the unjust, and shame was brought to you and to your *'ird*." ('Abd al-Wahhab, "Nashīd al-Ḥurriyya").

Many Nasser-era movies, such as *La Waqt Li-l Ḥubb (No Time for Love)* (1963), *Fī Baytinā Rajul (A Man in our House)* (1961), and *Al-Bāb al-Maftūḥ (The Open Door)* (1963) associate militarism with masculinity and construct the figure of the military patriot as the desired male. In these films, the female protagonist falls in love with a *fidā'ī* (freedom fighter in the popular armed resistance movement of the late '40s early '50s), who is contrasted with



Fig. 2: A scene from *No Time For Love*: Bedeir unable to obtain Fawziyya's love. Source: Youtube.

other men, those who are not ready to take up arms against the British occupation. The *fidā'ī* is always depicted as young and educated and usually organizes and guides patriots from among the poorer classes. Most importantly, militarism and patriotic self-sacrifice are constitutive of his masculinity and sex appeal. In *No Time for Love*, the *fidā'ī*, Hamza, is an attractive man with whom the female protagonist, Fawziyya, falls in love, although he does not try to obtain her love, because he is

too busy with the patriotic cause, as stated in the film's title. The *fidā'ī* is contrasted, both physically and morally, with other males who are not willing to fight or sacrifice their comfort and *selfish* interests. Hamza's friend, Bedeir, is a homey, chubby man, preoccupied with household chores, who even likes to bake cookies. He is shown to be selfish, unable to appreciate the importance of the *fidā'ī*'s self-sacrifice. But most importantly, he is depicted as lacking in masculinity. His love for the



**Fig. 3:** A scene from *No Time For Love*: Fawziyya promises Hamza that their eventual marriage will help him fulfill, rather than hinder, his patriotic duties. Source: Youtube.

female protagonist is not reciprocated. Bedeir embodies the non-masculine man, while Hamza, the *fidā'ī*, is the ideal masculine patriot, and these contrasts are made to stand out throughout the film. On the other hand, Fawziyya discovers the meaning of patriotism by falling in love with Hamza and in her determination to support him in his militarist plans, which, significantly, are kept secret from her. Her patriotism is manifested only through her unconditional support for the proactive

military patriot, who is also evidently her groom.

These gendered constructions produce a fetish of the military leader. He personifies masculinity; he is the real and only initiative-taker, and, most importantly, he is desired by the female nation; hence the emergence of the cult of Nasser, who was depicted as the ultimate *fidā'ī*. His charisma and qualities were constructed through the

ideal-type of the masculine self-sacrificing patriot, to whom the feminized people owe their love and support. The assassination attempt against Nasser in 1954—known as the Manshiyya incident—gave rise to a series of songs cultivating this cult of the leader as the savior who sacrificed his personal life and comfort for the sake of the nation. One of these was 'Abd al-Wahhab's song *Tislam ya Ghālī* (*God Bless You Dear*) (1954):

You have awakened your nation from a long sleep,  
and your fight was unprecedented  
You longed to see none humiliated  
Our hearts will protect you, as you are our beloved...

You have endured infinite pains and did not complain...

The entire valley is happy with the military,

after it had been humiliated...<sup>16</sup>

The relationship between the ruler and ruled is constructed as an organic relation of protection and loyalty. In his song *Iḥna al-Sha'b* (*We are the People*) (1956), the popular singer 'Abd al-Halim Hafiz describes this relation in terms of conjugal love, "Congratulations, O people, happiness will be your lot", and he thanks Nasser for "staying awake so that the sun of our happiness

rises". The love and marriage metaphor is taken further in 'Abd al-Wahhab's 1966 song *Wāllā w 'irifnā al-ḥubb* (*We have truly known love*), as he sings:

A bigger love does not exist, except,  
the love of God and his prophet...

With you, we have learned the revolution  
of love...

a love for the military that watches over  
us...

This is a new meaning of love, O my  
country,

that we have long striven to find...

The nation's existence becomes dependent on that of the leader, as expressed in the verses addressing Nasser, "we have no existence if you had not existed" and "O you whose life is our life", in 'Abd al-Wahhab's songs, demonstrating that the leader embodies the nation; without him, it is devoid of agency and even of existence.

The 1967 defeat in the war against Israel also reinforced the metaphors that feminized the people and depicted Nasser as the wanted groom, which served to reaffirm that this conjugal loyalty was *for better or for worse* in the context of the defeat. 'Abd al-Halim Hafiz sang in his famous song after the defeat, "our country is standing by the canal, washing her hair. As morning came as groom, he could not pay her dowry" (Hafiz, "Adda al-Nahār"). This

feminization again reduced the role of the people to that of supporting the leader, like a woman who loves a man and yearns for him to take her as a bride, even as he is incapacitated by a temporary difficulty. When Nasser announced his decision to step down following the military defeat, thousands of people went out to the streets to press him to reverse this decision. The prominent singer Umm Kulthūm sang, addressing Nasser in protest, I am the people saying, stay! ...

You are the remaining hope for the  
people's tomorrow...

You are the people's beloved, and the  
people's blood...

The mass protests against Nasser's resignation, according to Sherif Younis, demonstrate the extent to which the existence of the Egyptian nation was imagined as dependent on the leader, and its dignity and well-being as a gift from the leader (*Al-Zahf al-Muqaddas*). I argue, furthermore, that it is the gendered ways in which the relation of the feminine nation to its masculine leader has been imagined that normalized the imperative of loyalty to and love for the patriarch/leader, regardless of failures. The novelist Latifa al-Zayyat would write in her memoir that, at the sight of Nasser's funeral, she wept and cried: "No one has the right to turn a

nation into an orphan" (68). The nation felt like an orphan without its patriarch, and perhaps it also felt like a *widow* without Nasser.

Sisi-era Nationalism: A Nation Too Good  
For its People

Following the military coup against elected President Mohamed Morsi, the military leadership posed as the savior of Egypt against a global conspiracy and called on all Egyptians to unite under its leadership. Political opposition and criticism came to be considered unpatriotic, irresponsible, and selfish, considering the magnitude of the world conspiracy against Egypt and the importance of the efforts undertaken by the military to abort the plan to *make Egypt kneel*.<sup>17</sup> The military is again depicted as the only patriotic, selfless, and apolitical entity, in contrast to unpatriotic and opportunistic civilian political forces, which are likened to a woman who jeopardizes her integrity and needs constant guardianship and disciplining.

Once again, gender binaries served to maintain and reinforce power relations between military and civilian, and the imperative of total subordination of the latter to the former: the military is the only way the feminized civilian nation can have an agency and its only barrier against internal and external enemies. Songs and press columns described the toppling of



Fig. 4: Five years since Sisi's statement on July 3. Source: Al-Yawm al-Sabi'.

President Morsi as a courageous military achievement to save the nation from chaos induced by self-interested civilians. The nationalist operetta that has been most widely played following the coup, *Tislam el-Ayādī*, *Tislam ya Geish Bilady* (*Bless the Hands of my Nation's Army*), sung collectively by several well-known singers, puts "the great Egyptian military" at the center of the definition of patriotism

and nationhood. It thanks the military for having come to the aid of the nation and for having "brought dignity back" to the Egyptians (Kamel, "Tislam el-Ayādī"). In contrast, the mainstream media and official discourse gradually came to depict the uprising of January 2011 as a moment of chaos and lawlessness that jeopardized national security and sovereignty. Its

actors and supporters would gradually personify negative femininity. The cult/fetish of the military leader of Nasser's era was conjured up, more or less successfully. In the aforementioned song, General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi is referred to as "the hero who sacrificed himself" to save the nation; he "carried her (Egypt)", he "knew her real value and paid a high price for her", again likening the act of saving the nation and ruling it to the one-sided decision of a man to take a spouse, to pay a high dowry, and to make her happy (Kamel, "Tislam el-Ayādī"). The song describes him as "a man and son of a man" (Kamel, "Tislam el-Ayādī").<sup>18</sup>

Sisi's patriotic masculine act is juxtaposed with Egypt's femininity, which is described as "the mother of all" (*sitt al-kull*), "the sister", "the womb that carried a heart stronger than iron", "the pure heart", and "the weeping mother of the martyr" (Kamel, "Tislam el-Ayādī"). The nation becomes the feminine object of political agency, whose highest value lies in her role as the biological reproducer of the patriotic Egyptian man and in her unconditional loyalty to the patriarch. Mostafa Hussein's cartoons, published in the widely read governmental *al-Akhbar* newspaper, demonstrate these gendered perceptions. In one cartoon, Sisi is



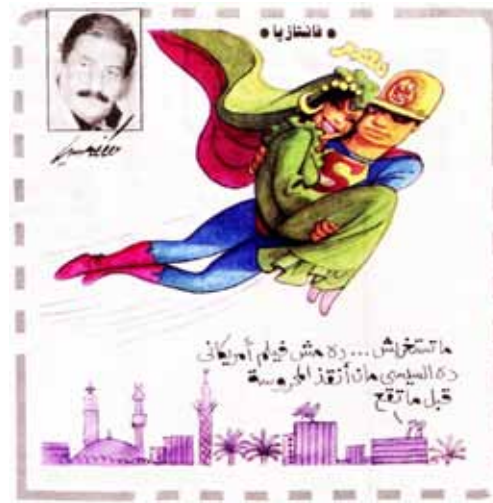


Fig. 5: Mostafa Hussein's cartoon in *al-Akhbar*. The caption reads, "Don't be surprised. This is not an American movie. It's Sisi man saving Egypt before she falls."

depicted as Superman with a military cap, carrying a laughing woman in a green rural outfit, who represents Egypt (see fig. 5). Other cartoons depict Egypt as a woman in love with Sisi; in one of them, she is sitting and waiting for the ballot boxes so she can vote for Sisi; in another, she is recounting to a TV presenter that she could not bear living with her former husband, Morsi, and was able to divorce him on 30 June 2013, while seeming proud and happy that she was now chosen by a more worthy spouse (see fig. 6).

Outside of the official press and mainstream media, Sisi is also spoken of in the vocabulary of manliness and physical attraction, and the nation is depicted as a bride, as a woman in love. Various poorly photoshopped posters, which could be seen hung by shopkeepers or circulated on social media platforms, reproduce these gendered metaphors and the cult of Sisi as the masculine leader. On one of them, Sisi is portrayed riding a horse and holding a woman, dressed as a bride in white, with a Tut Ankh Amun head. The caption reads "A manly president" (*rayyis dakar*) and "A moon-like bride" (*'arūsa amar*).<sup>19</sup>

But the Sisi-era post-coup nationalist narrative differs from its Nasser-era predecessor in one important way; having forcefully replaced the first democratically elected president, two years after the largest mass mobilizations for democracy in the country's history, the military-backed regime has sought legitimacy by portraying its opponents as the enemies of the nation, as the agents of an outside conspiracy against Egypt. Moreover, the regime's adoption of economic policies that have exacerbated social inequalities and impoverished much of the population<sup>20</sup> has induced it to also vilify demands for social justice that were at the heart of the January 25 mobilizations. Critics of the



Fig. 6: Mostafa Hussein's cartoon in *al-Akhbar*. Egypt: "I could not stand living with him [...] on June 30 I got a divorce [...]"

regime and its economic policies would gradually be depicted as unpatriotic, greedy, and ungrateful, using misogynist metaphors of femininity.

Egypt, the good mother and wife of the patriarch, becomes an abstract entity devoid of people; an ancient, glorious, and unique nation whose current state is deplorable, mainly because of the greed and foolishness of *the Egyptians* (Sisi's frequent use of the latter term replaces Nasser's favorite *al-sha'b* (*the people*) with its socialist undertones); Sisi would state on several occasions that Egyptians are making too many demands on Egypt, urging them to *give to Egypt* instead, thereby



Fig. 7: “Al-maṭālib al-fi’awiyya” (*sectoral demands*). Source: Al-Akhbar.

constructing a personified depiction of Egypt, in which Egyptians exist outside it and abuse it. Speaking on TV as a presidential nominee in 2014, responding to a question about difficult economic conditions, he asked the Egyptians in reproach, “Are you going to eat Egypt? Do you want to kill her?” (Al-Hadidi and ‘Issa, 00:48-00:54). When the state engaged in 2017 in a campaign of confiscating land deemed to be the land of the state unlawfully occupied by individuals, Sisi proclaimed, “this [land] does not belong to you. It belongs to Egypt. It is not ours. I am not authorized to give it to you” (dmc, 0:43-0:51). *Egypt* becomes divorced from its current population, and Sisi’s love for her becomes a

private matter, in which unsupportive Egyptians figure as greedy and ungrateful and as draining their mother Egypt’s resources. One of Mostafa Hussein’s cartoons expressed this perception of the people as a burden on Egypt; in it, Egypt was depicted as an emaciated weeping cow and the people as hands holding bowls, greedily demanding more of her milk (see fig. 7).

Gender and sexual metaphors contrasted a good military with a bad people. Those who refused to unquestionably support the military and the leader were denigrated and portrayed either as unmasculine men, unable and unwilling to protect their women, or as a dishonorable woman: untamed, disgraceful, and infertile. One poem by the poet Mokhtar ‘Issa addressing Sisi included the following verses: “Our women are impregnated by your rising star/their men have menstruated, but failed to deliver/their politicians engaged in politics but failed to achieve.” (“Nisa’una ḥubla bi-najmik”) The poem juxtaposes a manly savior against a failing, shameful, and lowly feminized people, who not only are so effeminate as to menstruate, but even fail at being a fertile female. The poet then apologetically addresses Sisi, “Don’t be sad, if you called out to them and found them to be rags with which they wipe the

faces of their failures” (‘Issa, “Nisa’una ḥubla bi-najmik”).

Newspaper columns and op-eds praising Sisi’s manly act of toppling the civilian president simultaneously vilified a passive, ungrateful, feminized people. The writer Mahmud al-Kerdosi’s columns in *al-Watan* newspaper asserted that the Egyptian people were not worthy of Sisi’s self-sacrifice; the Egyptian people were not just an unacceptable people to rule over; to make things worse, they also are not grateful enough to the savior. Al-Kerdosi accused *January 25* of exposing the genitals (*al-‘awra*) of the Egyptian citizen, which consist of all the shameful traits of this people, making the people undeserving of the rule of a patriotic man such as Sisi, that is, “the chaos (*al-fawḍa*), the disorderliness (*al-infilāt*), the laziness (*al-tanbala*), and the impoliteness (*qellat al-adab*)” (“Al-Sisi Mgawwa’ak?”). Al-Kerdosi states in one of his columns that he does not trust “the people” anymore and expresses his puzzle over “why the elite turns this mysterious, wild, unleashed entity into an absolute entity whose will should not be violated!” (“Koll ‘25 Yanāyir”) He concludes, “The people will always be a ride for the ruler, a business for the elite, and the enemy of itself” (“Koll ‘25 Yanāyir”). While Egyptians are depicted as the reason behind Egypt’s malaise, the abstract



Fig. 8: Cartoon by Mostafa Hussein commenting on clashes between protesters and the police in 2012. Egypt to protester: "You are not a revolutionary. What takes you there, you coward! You deserve to be shot." Source: Akhbar al-Yawm.

mother Egypt is glorified as a superior unique nation, the best that ever existed. The preamble to the 2014 constitution, drafted soon after the July 2013 coup, described Egypt as "the gift of Egyptians to humanity", "the heart of the whole world [...] the meeting point of world civilizations and cultures", "the most amazing wonder of civilization" (3), etc. This national self-glorification is coupled with a disdain for lay Egyptians, particularly towards insubordinate civilians, who now have all the traits of a woman degenerating into resisting her patriarch's authority. A state-

ment by Sisi in a speech addressing the military on the anniversary of the October War epitomizes this negative feminization; commenting on the difficulties Egypt was now facing in reaching an agreement with Ethiopia on building a dam that could compromise Egypt's water supply, he blamed the uprising of January 25, proclaiming that, "in 2011 [...] because the country revealed her back and stripped her shoulders, anything could now be done to her" (eXtra news, 0:51-1:13), portraying the revolutionary movement for democracy and social justice as an invitation by a promiscuous woman to be penetrated by outsiders. Similarly, one cartoon by Mostafa Hussein depicted the street rallies (*al-waqafāt al-ihtijājiyya*) as a



Fig. 9: Man: "Oh no! Too many 'rallies' these days." Source: Al-Akhbar



Fig. 10: "The Scandal": sectoral demands stripping "Egypt's economy" of her clothes. Source: Al-Akhbar.

woman protesting to her sleeping husband, while her appearance insinuates that she is demanding sexual intercourse (see fig. 9). On the other hand, those men making what came to be termed *sectoral demands* on Egypt, i.e., demands for economic rights, are depicted as stripping Egypt of her clothes, exposing her and making her vulnerable to rape, rather than fulfilling their masculine role of defending and protecting her *ird*, as depicted in one of Mostafa Hussein's cartoons (see fig. 10).

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It remains to explore how the gendered and patriarchal framework through which Egyptian nationhood has been repeatedly imagined, and especially as it has been particularly narrated under Sisi, has nurtured household patriarchy and everyday masculinism. It is no surprise that with the increasing defeat and silencing of the revolutionary tide of January 2011 in favor of a hegemonic patriarchal nationalism, sexual harassment peaked and became particularly violent against activist women on Tahrir Square.<sup>21</sup> Significantly, the military also conducted *virginity* tests on female activists detained at a protest in March 2011.<sup>22</sup> The targets of this masculine violence were the very women who claimed political agency and presence in public space, challenging both the premises of patriarchal nationalism and the everyday exercise of patriarchy.<sup>23</sup>

### Conclusion

Nationalist narratives under Nasser and under Sisi have been highly gendered; the nation is modeled after the family, and the masculine qualities of the military leader are contrasted with the femininity of a dependent nation, imagined as the passive object of the masculine patriotic act of salvation and protection. Patriarchal binaries are projected onto the relation between state and nation, military and

civilian, thereby demobilizing and subordinating the people to autocratic military rule.

Despite similarities between the two nationalist narratives, I have highlighted an important transformation in the depiction of *the people*, which comes to be negatively feminized under Sisi: it is depicted as opportunistic, ungrateful, and irresponsible, in contrast with the positive representation of a courageous, self-sacrificing, and achieving military leader. I have argued that this negative feminization stems from the regime's need to discredit its opponents. A new dualism is thus constructed between the abstract nation as a mother, as a pure female figure that naturally obeys and loves the patriarch, and the protesting people as an untamed, infertile, dishonorable, and oversexed woman, as an enemy of itself.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) assumed power in the period that began when President Hosni Mubarak stepped down on February 11, 2011 and ended on June 30, 2012 upon the start of Mohamed Morsi's term as president.

<sup>2</sup> I refer to this discourse as *Sisi-era* and *post-2011* nationalism, interchangeably. It emerged with SCAF rule on February 11, 2011, peaked around the large state-backed demonstrations of June 30 2013 and the toppling of President Mohamed Morsi by the military on July 3, 2013, and continued to be hegemonic into Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's presidency. During the period in question, it was adopted by the official and mainstream media, the military leadership, and state institutions and officials.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Dunne, Michele. "Egypt's Nationalists Dominate in a Politics-Free Zone." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, www.carnegieendowment.org/2015/04/15/egypt-nationalists-dominate-in-politics-free-zone-pub-59764. Accessed 8 Oct. 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Founding works include Yuval-Davis, Nira and Floya Anthias. *Woman, Nation, State*. Macmillan, 1989; Nagel, Joane. "Masculinity and Nationalism: Gender and Sexuality in the Making of Nations." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2, Jan. 1998, pp. 242-69; Mosse, George L. *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe*. Howard Fertig Pub, 1985; Enloe, Cynthia. *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*. University of California Press, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> See, as an example, *al-Risāl's* issue on "The Homeland's Economic Day" (*al-Risāla*, Nov. 15, 1933).

<sup>6</sup> The formation of militia groups spanned the different *effendi* groups: from the *Wafd* (the Blue Shirts) to Young Egypt (the Green Shirts) and the Muslim Brothers Society (the Battalions and the Secret Apparatus), fashioned after the Fascist Italian Blackshirts.

<sup>7</sup> The term *effendi* (plural *effendiyya*), is originally an Ottoman honorific title. In the 19th century, it was increasingly associated with Western education. By the interwar period, it referred to the educated middle-class youth and came to connote a distinctly modern identity. See Ryzova, Lucie. *The Age of the Efendiyya: Passages to Modernity in National-Colonial Egypt*. First edition, Oxford University Press, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Most of the Free Officers came from the ranks of the *effendiyya*. The pre-1952 *effendiyya's* economic nationalism and aversion to political pluralism dictated the Free Officers regime's import-substitution and industrialization policies and the eradication of political pluralism and parliamentary democracy.

<sup>9</sup> For one of the few explorations of the legitimating function of gendered nationalist symbols, see Riabov, Oleg and Tatiana Riabova. "The Remasculinization of Russia?: Gender, Nationalism, and the Legitimation of Power Under Vladimir Putin." *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 61, no. 2, Mar. 2014, pp. 23-35.

<sup>10</sup> Nasser era nationalism, as an *engendering* force, in its attempt to transform *the Egyptian woman* into a national subject, has been the focus of several studies looking at the intersection of gender and nationalism in Egyptian history. See Bier, Laura. *Revolutionary Womanhood: Feminisms, Modernity, and the State in Nasser's Egypt*. Stanford University Press, 2011 and Botman, Selma. *Engendering Citizenship in Egypt*. Columbia University Press, 1999.

<sup>11</sup> See the two in-depth analyses by Sherif Younis: *Al-Zaḥf al Muqaddas: Moḏāharāt al-Tanaḥḥī wa Tashakkul 'ibādat Nasser*. Dār al-Fikr al-Islāmī al Hadīth, 2005 and *Nidā' al-Sha' b: Tārīkh Naqdī lil-Aydiūlūjiyā al-Nāṣiriyyah*. Al-Ṭab'ah 1, Dār al-Shurūq, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> See for example Nagel, Joane. "Masculinity and Nationalism: Gender and Sexuality in the Making of Nations." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2, Jan. 1998, pp. 242-69 and Young, Iris Marion. "The Logic of Masculinist Protection: Reflections on the Current Security State." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 29, no. 1, Sept. 2003, pp. 1-25.

<sup>13</sup> See for example Corcoran, Erin. "The Construction of the Ultimate Other: Nationalism and Manifestations of Misogyny and Patriarchy in U.S Immigration Law and Policy." *Georgetown Journal of Gender and the Law*, vol. 20, no. 3, Spring 2019, pp. 541-77 and Ng, Jason Q. and Eileen Le Han. "Slogans and Slurs, Misogyny and Nationalism: A Case Study of Anti-Japanese Sentiment by Chinese Netizens in Contentious Social Media Comments." *International Journal of Communication*, May 2018.

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<sup>15</sup> Literal meaning: *to the village head's house*; where the only radio in a village was usually found.

<sup>16</sup> All translations of song lyrics, poetry, cartoon captions, and newspaper columns from Arabic are the author's.

<sup>17</sup> The expression was repeatedly used by various state and media figures since 2013. For a survey of the different occasions on which it was used, see Nadi, Moataz. "Masr lan tarqa'. ' afrīt lafzī yaḥdar ba'd thawratayn" ("Egypt will not kneel", an expression invoked following two revolutions). *Al-Masry al-Yawm*, 16 Oct. 2016. [almasryalyoum.com](http://almasryalyoum.com), [www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/1025184](http://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/1025184). Accessed 12 Oct. 2019. Also, on October 14, 2016, almost all newspapers' headlines quoted Sisi: "Egypt will not kneel to anyone but God."

<sup>18</sup> Several other songs reiterated this characterization of Sisi, such as pop singer Sha'bān 'Abd al-Rihīm's song "Sisi ragil dakar" (Sisi is a manly man) (2013).

<sup>19</sup> A picture of this poster was circulated on social media and blogs. See Kolb, Justin. "Sovereign Creature." *Justin Kolb*, 12 Nov. 2013, [justinbkolb.com/2013/11/12/sovereign/](http://justinbkolb.com/2013/11/12/sovereign/).

<sup>20</sup> State economic policy under Sisi has led to a rapid increase in poverty and inequality rates. See The World Bank. *Egypt, Arab Republic of - Performance and Learning Review of the Country Partnership Framework for the Period of FY15-FY19*. 135709, The World Bank, 3 Apr. 2019, pp. 1-75. [documents.worldbank.org](http://documents.worldbank.org), [www.documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/631951556806695755/Egypt-Arab-Republic-of-Performance-and-Learning-Review-of-the-Country-Partnership-Framework-for-the-Period-of-FY15-FY19](http://www.documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/631951556806695755/Egypt-Arab-Republic-of-Performance-and-Learning-Review-of-the-Country-Partnership-Framework-for-the-Period-of-FY15-FY19).

<sup>21</sup> Violent group harassment of women protesters in 2011 has been covered by the international press and was described as *epidemic* in Egypt. See Eltahawy, Mona. "Opinion | Egypt Has a Sexual Violence Problem." *The New York Times*, 20 June 2014. [www.nytimes.com/2014/06/21/opinion/mona-eltahawy-egypts-sexual-violence.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/21/opinion/mona-eltahawy-egypts-sexual-violence.html) and "Egypt's Sexual Harassment 'Epidemic.'" *BBC News*, 3 Sept. 2012. [www.bbc.com/world-middle-east-19440656](http://www.bbc.com/world-middle-east-19440656). For reports that have linked the phenomenon to state patriarchy, see "The Common Factor: Sexual Violence and the Egyptian State, 2011-2014." *OpenDemocracy*, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/common-factor-sexual-violence-and-egyptian-state-20112014/>. Accessed 11 Oct. 2019; and "Patriarchy and Militarism in Egypt: From the Street to the Government." *OpenDemocracy*, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/patriarchy-and-militarism-in-egypt-from-street-to-government/>. Accessed 11 Oct. 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Sisi was then the head of Military Intelligence; see Shafy, Samiha. "Horribly Humiliating': Egyptian Woman Tells of 'Virginity Tests.'" *Spiegel Online*, 10 June 2011. [www.spiegel.de/international/world/horribly-humiliating-egyptian-woman-tells-of-virginity-tests-a-767365.html](http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/horribly-humiliating-egyptian-woman-tells-of-virginity-tests-a-767365.html).

<sup>23</sup> See Deniz Kandiyoti's reading of post-revolutionary violence against women as an example of "masculinist restoration": Kandiyoti, Deniz. "Fear and fury: Women and post-revolutionary violence." *OpenDemocracy*. Jan. 10, 2013, [www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/fear-and-fury-women-and-post-revolutionary-violence/](http://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/fear-and-fury-women-and-post-revolutionary-violence/). Accessed 3 Febr. 2020.

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