MERIA

APPROVED IN ISLAM, DENOUNCED BY THE STATE: THE REPRESENTATION OF POLYGAMY IN EGYPTIAN POPULAR CINEMA, 1950s-1970s

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For many centuries, polygamy has been one of the pillars of Muslim patriarchal society, based on Koranic permission for men to be married to up to four women at the same time. In the last century, voices calling for reform in the Arab and Muslim world have been leading campaigns for the advancement of women's status; the call for a ban on polygamy is an integral part of this campaign. In Egypt, where reformists have been particularly prominent, the struggle between religion and modernity became more intense with the establishment of the Egyptian nation-state. The Nasserist revolutionary regime promoted social laws and reforms for the improvement of women's status in order to lead the state to social, economic, and cultural development. However, in the fight for changing personal status laws, the conservatives had the upper hand. Polygamy was never banned, although some procedural limitations have been instituted. Still, despite religious authorization and the state's incapability and unwillingness to confront the religious establishment on these matters, popular culture—with popular cinema in its lead—has chosen to deal with polygamy in several feature films, taking an unequivocal stand against it. The films claim that polygamy violates social and moral order, and furthermore, that it is inappropriate in a society striving for progress and development. In addition, these films echoed the reformists' voices, which maintained that polygamy was unacceptable even according to Islam. Cinematic representation thus sends a clear message, the likes of which has not been passed through legal and juridical means. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to assume that an anti-polygamy agenda is pro-feminist or revolutionary. On the contrary, it is a national message for the preservation of patriarchal stability in a society aiming at progress and development without breaking existing moral and cultural boundaries.

THE RELIGIOUS ASPECTS OF POLYGAMY IN THE MUSLIM WORLD: TRADITIONAL AND REFORMIST PERSPECTIVES

Polygamy has been considered one of the pillars of patriarchal society in the Arab and Muslim world for many centuries. During the pre-Islamic era (also known as the *jahiliyya*, polygamy was widespread and unlimited among Arabian Peninsula tribesmen. This was especially due to circumstances in which violence, murder, and revenge characterized that male-dominated society, thus creating a demographic imbalance in which women outnumbered men significantly. In its primary stages, Islam had to acknowledge that reality, and therefore polygamy as an institution was rehabilitated.[1] Still, the Koran made a particular reform by limiting to four the number of wives that men could be married to at the same time (in addition to an unlimited number of female slaves). According to Chapter 4 of the Koran (*Surat al-Nisa*, The Women), Verse 3:

> And if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with the orphan girls, then marry (other) women of

> your choice, two or three or four, but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one or (the captives and slaves) that your right hands possess. That is nearer to prevent you from doing injustice.

It seems that since its early days, Islam's treatment of polygamy has been cautious. However, the ambivalent wording of the Koranic law actually institutionalized the *status quo*, thus making a coincidental and circumstantial reality perennial, as Ahmed Souaiaia maintains.[2] According to the *hadith* (the sayings of Muhammad), Muhammad ordered all converts to Islam who were married to several women to keep only four. These traditions clarify the vagueness of Verse 3, in which there is no explicit ban on marrying more than four women simultaneously.[3] The Koran obliges men to treat their wives equally, but this restraint depends upon a man's conscience; therefore, it is not considered a prerequisite to polygamy, according to most commentators. All four schools of Islamic Law (*madhahib*)[4] unanimously agree that a man does not have to get anyone's permission to marry another wife (or wives). His right to do so, therefore, is absolutely legal—provided he does not violate the existing prohibitions.[5]

According to Verse 129 in the same chapter, "You will never be able to do perfect justice between wives even if it is your ardent desire." Most commentators (among them al-Ghazali, d. 1111) claim that since the Koran cannot contradict itself, this verse refers only to the amount of affection men can provide for their several wives. Therefore, they conclude that the principle of justice and equality in polygamous marriages can be understood only in material terms and not emotionally, because men cannot control their feelings. These commentators maintain that even if a man prefers one woman to the other, he should not neglect the latter; he must therefore spend equal time with her day and night and supply her with all her needs.[6]

Most arguments in favor of polygamy maintain that this practice protects sick, old, and barren women from divorce. Additionally, it guarantees that men have descendants and continuity. Both in urban and rural areas, sons are a symbol of wealth, social status, and prosperity.[7] Furthermore, polygamy solves demographic problems in times of war. Western monogamy, on the other hand, leads to social inequality and hypocrisy, according to traditional commentators.[8] In rural areas, polygamy is a means for providing a cheap labor force—through reproduction. In addition, wealthy villagers seek social leadership positions by allying themselves through marriage with other economically and politically powerful families.[9]

According to Islamic Law (*Shari'a*), a woman in a polygamous marriage has certain rights, the most important of which is the right to live separately from her co-wives and her husband's family. A woman who does not receive separate accommodation as she pleases may refuse to live with her husband until he provides her with these legally acceptable conditions. While the four Schools of Law in Sunni Islam disagree on whether or not a husband should provide his wives equal funding for their livelihood and day-to-day expenses,[10] all schools agree that a husband's financial responsibility to each wife includes food and money supply, as well as taking care of the children's future marriages.[11]

Despite all these deeply rooted beliefs and practices, towards the end of the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century, some Muslim scholars and intellectuals (especially from the elite

circles) began to voice different opinions on women's status in general and specifically on polygamy. They stressed that the Koran itself maintains that it is impossible for a man to treat all his wives equally in every sense. They therefore concluded that there was a Koranic prohibition on polygamy. According to these scholars, the permission to be to married to more than one woman simultaneously entailed conditions that could not be met (based upon the combined understanding of Verses 3 and 129 in Chapter 4, as quoted above). This thus made monogamy the only acceptable marital arrangement in Islam, both morally and legally.[12]

One of the first people to call for the adjustment of Islam to the modern era , and for a reform in the status of women was Muhammad Abdu (d. 1905), who became the Grand Mufti of Egypt. Abdu opposed polygamy. He said it might corrupt Muslim societies and should be allowed only under urgent social necessity, as in times of war, and even then tolerated only so long as the husband treated his wives equally. According to Abdu, the conditions that prevailed in the days of Muhammad were irrelevant in contemporary society. Thus any justification for polygamy is eliminated.[13] In addition to Abdu, there were other reformists such as Qasim Amin (d. 1908) and the feminist movement's leaders—headed by Huda Sha'rawi (d. 1947) and Durriyya Shafiq (d. 1975)—who claimed that polygamy was one of the most obvious characteristics of women's subordination; they viewed it as a sign of inequality, violating women's honor and ruining any chance of promoting human rights and equality in Arab and Muslim societies as a whole.[14]

POLYGAMY IN EGYPT: LEGAL, HISTORICAL, AND SOCIAL ASPECTS

Throughout the twentieth century, most Arab states enacted their own unique personal status legal codes (dealing with matters of marriage, divorce, and inheritance). Egypt was the first Arab nation to fight for the codification of personal status laws and it was there that the reform movement for the advancement of women originated. Despite this, however, the country's laws lagged behind other Arab states for decades. This was due to its reluctance to adopt a unified code of personal status laws. Thus, while other fields of law adopted the European Continental Law's shape and content, Egyptian personal status laws were founded upon Islamic Law. It is important, though, to note that since the Free Officers' Revolution (July 1952), there has been a certain process of codification, and these matters have been debated in national civil courts—not in religious *Shari'a* courts, which were abolished in January 1956 (according to the 1955 Law 462).[15]

Despite the enactment of social laws for the betterment of women's status and the regime's attempt (under Nasser and his successors) to marginalize the role of religion in state affairs, Islam was recognized as the state's religion. This thus acknowledged the immense power of Islamic religious and cultural discourse that has been so well entrenched in Egyptian patriarchal society. The state's surrender to and alliance with the religious establishment of al-Azhar and its scholars (*ulama*) made the reform movement's battles for change in the legal and social status of women, in particular concerning polygamy, almost impossible.[16]

In 1926, the government appointed a committee that recommended a change in the marriage and divorce laws that had been enacted at the end of the Ottoman era's reforms. This committee recommended a restriction on polygamy, maintaining that it constituted harm (*darar*) and discrimination—both forbidden by the Koran. Still, most of the clauses that were meant to limit polygamy were taken out of the final draft of the law by the order of King Fouad (ruled 1917-1936), who regarded polygamy as a means for improving birth rates and economic conditions in rural areas.[17]

Therefore, according to Clause 6 in the 1929 Personal Status Law (Law 25, which remained in force until the end of the 1970s), if a woman whose husband takes another wife (or wives) claims that he treats her discriminately, in a way that prevents her from staying married, she asks the court to grant her a divorce. If she can prove that the second marriage caused her husband to neglect her and treat her unequally, this is considered ill treatment and a sufficient condition for the judge to approve her appeal. If there is no proof of discrimination, the judge must appoint two arbitrators whose task is to reach rapprochement between the couple. If a settlement of the dispute is impossible, then divorce is declared (provided that either the husband or both sides are at fault, or it is impossible to determine fault).[18]

In 1979, President Sadat issued a presidential decree (also known as the "Jihan Laws," named after Sadat's highly influential wife) in which women were entitled to ask for divorce in the case of the husband marrying a second wife. However, due to immense pressure from al-Azhar and the Islamic movements, in 1985, the decree was declared unconstitutional. In the less liberal amendment to the Personal Status Law (the 1985 Law 100) the decision on whether or not a woman could file for divorce was once again placed in the judge's hands. In addition, the husband was obligated to declare his family status during marriage registration. In 1994, another amendment was added to the 1985 law, stressing that the judge would authorize divorce only if the wife proved her husband's second marriage caused economic harm. She had no right to file for divorce on psychological or moral grounds.[19]

In 2000, a new Personal Status Law was enacted after long deliberations between the People's Council (*Majlis al-Sha'b*) and the religious establishment of al-Azhar. According to the new law, polygamy is permitted only when the husband declares his family status in his new marriage certificate and signs it as a notary document, where the name(s) of his other wife (or wives) is written. This document must be sent to the existing wife (or wives). In this case, the first wife is entitled to file for divorce based on material or moral harm. The judge must try to reconcile the couple. The woman loses her right to file for divorce if over a year has passed since she was informed of her husband's second marriage.[20]

According to data collected by J. Chamie on polygamy in the Arab world, it turns out that the rate of Arab Muslim men who are married to more than one woman at the same time is rather low (between two and 12 percent in all Arab states). In Egypt, 3.8 percent of married men in 1960 had more than one wife, a rate that remained stable between 1947 and 1960. Between the years 1952 to 1978, the rate of polygamous marriages out of all marriage registrations in Egypt ranged between six to eight percent.[21] A decisive majority of polygamous married men had two wives

(for example, in 1960, the rate was 92 percent, while 6.8 percent had three wives, and 1.2 percent married four wives). A large percentage of the women who had wed already married men were previously divorced (about 45 percent) or widowed (11 to 12 percent), while surprisingly 43 to 44 percent are single. This belies the common belief that widows and divorced women would rather marry men who were already married since they find it harder to marry single men and out of fear for their social status as unmarried—and therefore unprotected—women in a traditional patriarchal society.[22] The older the man is, the greater his chances of marrying an additional wife.[23] The more educated a man is, the smaller the chances that he will marry more than one woman.[24]

HISTORIOGRAPHY AND POPULAR CULTURE

From the data that has been presented above, one may conclude that polygamy is a rather marginal phenomenon in Egyptian society, as well as in other Arab and Muslim countries. This is not only due to economic reasons (most men simply cannot afford spending the necessary expenses), but also due to cultural and social reasons. For example, since the beginning of the twentieth century, polygamy has become less popular in light of—among other things—the reformist discourse on this matter (which has gradually permeated larger segments of the society). As marginal as it may be, one must examine this phenomenon in the broader perspective of women's status in Egyptian society, which has always been considered a criterion for examining Egypt's success in its attempt to become a free, modern nation. It was particularly important under the Nasserist regime, which maintained that women's liberation was a prerequisite to Egypt's development and to the regime's nation-building project.[25]

As will be shown below, Egyptian popular (and public[26]) cinema found polygamy and its social and cultural consequences an important topic to deal with. Three films that were made between the end of the 1950s and the mid-1970s in which polygamy is discussed with a crystal clear unified message are discussed. These films state that polygamy is wrong and no longer acceptable in a society that strives for progress and modernity. In spite of religious permission, which itself remains rather vague and questionable, as explained above, the state expresses its utter disgust, denunciation, and disapproval of this long-lasting practice through the mediation of a powerful social agent such as the cinematic medium.

It is important to note here that up until the end of the 1990s, the dominant attitude toward Egyptian popular cinema was one of denigration: Both Western and Egyptian critics and researchers claimed it to be a cheap imitation of Hollywood, lacking any kind of sophistication.[27] However, since the late 1990s, a few Western researchers have been leading a new approach. They claim popular cinema provides essential information about a society undergoing changes and about the visual texts to which that society is attracted, taking into consideration the constant dialogue between filmmakers and audiences and the latter's gender conventions.[28] As Armbrust claims, Egyptian cinema was a vital ingredient in the construction of modernity and national identity in Egypt. He also claims it served as a powerful tool of indoctrinating the masses and promoting the bourgeois lifestyle.[29]

Based on this new approach, it shall be assumed that the Egyptian feature film is a

central medium of popular culture and a coherent tool for social expression that enables the understanding of how society deals with changes from within and explains to what extent it is willing to accept and internalize them. All cinematic genres, from melodramas to comedies, have been obsessed with women, including questions of morality, values, traditions, relations between the sexes, and other important issues stemming from women's entering the public sphere. This continuous treatment of women's issues in feature films may be the primary justification for the use of this medium as a tool for understanding social changes.

POLYGAMY IN CINEMATIC REPRESENTATION: IT MIGHT BE PERMISSIBLE, BUT STILL…

Forbidden Women (Nisa Muharramat)

The melodramatic feature film *Forbidden Women* (directed by Mahmoud Dhu al-Fiqar, 1959) deals with the causes that lead men to be married to more than one woman and the dangers that lie in wait for such families. This is the story of Tawfiq (Hussein Riyadh), a middle-aged wealthy businessman,[30] a pious Muslim, who has been married for the past 25 years to his beloved wife Hafiza (Amina Rizq). Yet their love is overshadowed by their inability to bear children. Tawfiq envies his friends and employees for having many children and directs his grievances to God. He asks why a wealthy man such as himself does not have descendents while poor men have so many children despite their economic difficulties.

During a conversation with his close friends, one of them suggests that Tawfiq marry a second wife. This suggestion arouses a lot of anger from Tawfiq's young assistant, Ahmad, who is like a son to the old man (and lives in the attic in the building that Tawfiq owns). Ahmad develops a theological debate, during which he maintains that God forbids polygamy. He brings forth the Divine stipulation from Chapter 4, Verses 3 and 129, in which God orders his believers to settle for one woman if they fear they will not be able to treat all wives equally. Representing the reformist-modernist perception of the Nasserist regime, young Ahmad, who belongs to the middle class that led the Free Officers' Revolution, declares, "Polygamy is forbidden!" However, he remains silent when one of Tawfiq's friends says that a wife's infertility is a justified enough reason for polygamy. When she hears about the idea, Hafiza, Tawfiq's wife, reluctantly and painfully gives her husband her approval, saying she is his wife, sister, and slave and thus will be pleased with everything he does.

Tawfiq's second wife, Mahasin (Huda Sultan), a widow and a mother to a 16-year-old daughter, turns out to be the antithesis of humble, dedicated Hafiza: She is a notorious woman, a cabaret performer who drinks alcohol and sleeps with men. The matchmaker, however, presents her as an ideal respectable woman in order to convince Tawfiq to marry her and provide for her. Mahasin refrains from telling her daughter about her marriage to an already married man out of shame. After a few months of cohabitation in constant tension, jealousy, anger, and hatred between the co-wives (*darra* in singular), it becomes impossible for Hafiza to continue living with Mahasin, who makes her life miserable. Consequently, Hafiza leaves her home and moves downstairs to live alone.[31] Tawfiq and his younger and more attractive new wife remain together, and Tawfiq continues his attempts to get Mahasin

pregnant in order for him to have an heir. However, his love for his first wife is still very strong. Tawfiq thus secretly (due to his second wife's pretence of objection) goes over to her apartment to spend time with her.[32] Meanwhile, Mahasin becomes acquainted with Ahmad, the fervent young assistant, and a love affair develops between the two, with Ahmad unaware that his lover is his boss's wife.

Despite the separation between the co-wives, the constant struggle continues, until at a certain point the fight reaches another peak. Hafiza decides to defend her honor and rights. She mocks her husband, wondering out loud why Mahasin does not get pregnant (thus hinting at Tawfiq's infertility). In the heat of the fight, Tawfiq slaps his beloved Hafiza, drives her out of the house, and divorces her, while Mahasin, of course, gloats. However, this is when things change for the worse for Mahasin, continuing until the tragic end. She gets pregnant with Ahmad's child, while Tawfiq thinks the child is his. When, at the end, Ahmad realizes that he had an affair with his boss's wife—which makes him an accomplice to this betrayal against his will—he wishes to go over to Tawfiq and tell him who his wife really is. As Ahmad is leaving the apartment, Mahasin stabs him in the back, but before he dies, he strangles her to death. Tawfiq, who had been eavesdropping all along, suffers a heart attack, but watches with gratitude, as he is thankful to Ahmad for wiping away the shame with Mahasin's murder. In the finale, Hafiza, the beloved first wife, returns home. The reunited couple decides to adopt Mahasin's daughter as their own.

In addition to the messages of the need to punish Mahasin (and Ahmad) for adultery, wickedness, and immoral behavior, the more important message for the sake of this paper is the objection to polygamy, as expressed by Ahmad at the beginning of the film. This also conveys the state's perception of this matter concerning all segments of Egyptian society. Quoting the Koranic verses on polygamy and interpreting them according to the reformist perception, Ahmad's words show that polygamy is unacceptable and unworthy. Furthermore, the film shows how a man's life changes for the worse when he chooses to marry an additional wife in order to have an heir. Thus, the message is by far pro-monogamy: A man should renounce the idea of marrying a second wife even if his wife is barren, since polygamy's social and moral damage is much worse. The film illustrates how a man cannot, in any way, treat his wives equally. Therefore, despite the possibility of interpreting the Koranic verses both ways, one should refrain from choosing the polygamous option.

The Second Wife (al-Zawja al-Thaniyya)

Famous director Salah abu Seif made the film *The Second Wife* in the genre of social realism in 1967 under the public cinema sector. The film portrays women's intolerable status in the villages of Upper Egypt and deals directly with polygamy and its moral and social faults. This is the story of Uthman (Salah Mansur), the village mayor (*umda*). He is a wealthy, cruel middle-aged man[33] who has been married for many years to Hafiza (San'a Jamil) without being able to bear children despite tremendous efforts. Just like Tawfiq in *Forbidden Women*, Uthman strives for male children and envies all the poor villagers for having so many sons. He fears he might die without leaving an heir to inherit his immense wealth. He blames his wife for being infertile and convinces her that he should take a second wife. He promises Hafiza that as soon as the child is born, he

will divorce the second wife, take her child, and give him to Hafiza as if he were her own.

Uthman decides that he wants to marry beautiful Fatima (Su'ad Husni, the Egyptian cinema's Cinderella), who is married to Abu al-Eila (Shukri Sarhan), a poor villager and the mother of his children. This fact does not prevent Uthman from forcing Abu al-Eila through threats and pressure to divorce his beloved wife in the presence of the religious clerics, who fear the village mayor and therefore support his immoral behavior. Immediately after the coerced signing of the divorce, Uthman makes the marriage registrar (*ma'dhun*) marry him and Fatima (who is not even present). Due to the fact that according to the Shari'a there has to be a period of three months of waiting before the divorce is final,[34] Uthman makes the *ma'dhun* change the dates on the marriage certificate in order to enable the marriage.

At the mosque, the imam tells sobbing Fatima that her marriage to Uthman is illegal since her husband was coerced to divorce her.[35] Still, the wedding takes place, and Hafiza, the first wife, fears for her position. She tries to prevent her husband from spending nights with his second wife. Fatima, for her part, does not even wish to compete with Hafiza and promises Abu al-Eila that she would not in any case give in to Uthman's attempts to have sex with her. She takes advantage of the nights her co-wife spends with Uthman to be with her beloved allegedly ex-husband. Fatima even gets pregnant while avoiding becoming intimate with Uthman several times. When the latter finds out that Fatima is pregnant, he realizes that it is not his child. Fatima takes advantage of the situation and starts behaving like the mother of the heir-to-be and even declares that she would return all the lands that Uthman has stolen from the villagers. A symbolic moment is when Fatima gives birth while Uthman dies after suffering a stroke. At the end, Fatima reunites with her husband, while Uthman's brother becomes the village mayor and promises to keep Fatima's promise to the villagers.

Like the first film, this one also shows how polygamy destroys familial stability and violates the moral, social, and religious values upon which communal life in the village are built. Uthman's desire to have an heir for his property, for his land, and—foremost—for his name caused him to ruin his marriage to a woman who loved him (she almost committed suicide during the wedding ceremony to the second wife). He also violated the moral and religious code of sacred matrimony by forcing Abu al-Eila to divorce Fatima. The film harshly criticizes the state's religious clerics, who succumbed to Uthman's orders without objection. The film was made in 1967, just after Egypt's defeat by Israel, when a wave of critical movies against the regime began.[36] Thus, one might conceptualize Uthman as the Nasserist tyrannical regime and the clerics as the religious establishment of al-Azhar (which had become a part of that regime back in 1961). These supposed men of faith had become spineless and therefore a part of the governmental corruption and decay.

I Shall Never Return (Abadan Lan A'ud)

This melodramatic love triangle, which was directed in 1975 by Hasan Ramzi, does not deal directly with polygamy, but interestingly enough, the issue does arise during the course of the film. This is the story of Dr. Ahmad (Rushdi Abaza), a modern, liberal, and wealthy businessman (previously a university professor). Dr. Ahmad is married to Huda (Nadia Lutfi), a

woman who is presented as the perfect role model for the Egyptian wife and who also volunteers in health and welfare organizations. She is a loving mother to Isam, their ten-year-old son. The family idyll is interrupted during summer vacation in Alexandria, when a young woman named Su'ad (Safia al-Umri) enters their lives after rescuing their son from drowning. The grateful couple lets Su'ad enter their lives, but very quickly she takes advantage of the situation and seduces Ahmad, who is fascinated by her charms. This fling soon becomes a complicated love affair, and Su'ad gets pregnant.

Ahmad rejects Su'ad's proposal that she have an abortion and confesses his new love to his wife Huda, who is deeply offended and demands a divorce. Ahmad refuses to grant her one, and she leaves home and goes to live with her uncle. From there, she plans to flee to Europe with her son, since otherwise Ahmad might take him away from her—after the age of ten the father becomes the guardian of the son in the case of divorce.[37] Ahmad, for his part, does not understand how his wife dared to leave their home, while his friend Salah (Salah Nazmi) tries to explain to Ahmad that he has been behaving in the worst possible way. In a very telling moment, Ahmad complains, saying that according to the *Shari'a*, it is a man's right to be married to more than one woman at the same time.[38] His friend explains to him that today, there is not a single modern educated woman who would agree to be a co-wife.[39] He reminds Ahmad of Huda's loyalty to him for many years and urges him to reconcile with her and end his relations with Su'ad.

Still, Huda continues to demand a divorce until Ahmad consents to grant her one. Ahmad then decides to marry Su'ad. However, on their wedding day, Su'ad falls down the stairs and miscarries. She thinks it is a Divine message, according to which the marriage cannot take place. She decides to let Ahmad go and urges him to reach reconciliation with Huda. Just before Huda's flight to Europe, Ahmad arrives at the airport, accompanied by friends and relatives who help him pressure Huda to return home with him. She is finally persuaded, and the group leaves the airport happily.

This film also expresses the modernist discourse that the state wishes to promote in light of religious and social ambivalence on the matter of polygamy. The episode during which Ahmad, who looks and behaves like a modern man, wonders why he cannot marry another wife despite religious approval, expresses most vividly the continuous struggle between Islam and modernity. Still, the plot develops in a way that signals to a male spectator that despite religious authorization, polygamy is not the right or respectable option. This is a clear triumph for monogamy and a total revocation of polygamy as a normative social solution. One should not conclude, however, that a liberal-feminist or a humanitarian discourse is the necessary basis for this anti-polygamy perception. Perhaps the more correct assumption would be the understanding that modern educated people do not behave this way anymore.

CONCLUSIONS

The establishment of nation-states in the Arab and Muslim world since the beginning of the Twentieth Century has provided new opportunities for the development of women's social, legal, and juridical status. However, the enactment of personal status and family laws in these states exemplifies the complex relationship between state and religion in Islam. Unlike other fields of law,

personal status laws are based on religious law and jurisprudence as the primary source of inspiration and interpretation. Social and political changes that have taken place over the last 50 years have brought about hopes and aspirations to improve Arab societies. Still, attempts to promote reforms in the status of women varied from one country to another, while in each place the aim was to remain inside the religious framework. This was permitted due to the flexible ability to choose rather freely from within the four Schools of Islamic law while also using procedural steps and regulations in order to bypass the strict authority of religious establishments.[40]

Cinematic representation deals with the ambivalent relations between state and religion and focuses quite often on the struggle between tradition and modernity, between conservatism and progress. Through popular culture in general and via the popular cinema as a means of indoctrination in particular, the state, especially in the 1950s and 1960s under the Nasserist regime, tried to promote its agenda. It maintained that even though polygamy was allowed as a religious practice (notwithstanding the controversial aspects of that male prerogative), it should not be accepted in a new society that wishes to reach progress and be regarded as more enlightened. There is no hidden ideological message in *Forbidden Women*; young Ahmad declares quite bluntly that polygamy is wrong, thus echoing early reformists' rhetoric in this matter. The feature film chooses other means to prove that polygamy should be avoided; it shows what happens to social stability as a result, from adultery to extramarital pregnancy, murder, and an intense struggle between co-wives. All three films convey the monogamist message, maintaining that the desire for offspring is not a good enough a reason to put a happy marriage at risk for the sake of a social practice that violates sacred codes of equality and fair treatment of a man's spouse.

Even though this is a rather marginal social phenomenon, it still seems that there is a need in popular culture to deal with this issue, and the messages conveyed through the silver screen are of great importance. This is still a patriarchal society with male-dominated values. Yet within these limitations, the important message to society is that the moral and social faults of polygamy outnumber the benefits. It seems that what the state is unable to achieve through legislation and legal struggle—due to a powerful religious establishment and a discourse that fears change—it aims to do through its cultural agents. One need not falsely think that the message is pro-feminist or an inseparable part of the women's liberation movement. The goal of these movies is to preserve a social order similar to the religious elements but in slightly different way, in a way that corresponds with the more general messages of the revolutionary ideals and ideology of national development.

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NOTES

[1] Ahmed E. Souaiaia, "From Transitory Status to Perpetual Sententiae: Rethinking Polygamy in Islamic Traditions," *Hawwa*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (2004), pp. 290-91.
[2] *Ibid*., p. 293.
[3] Muhammad himself was married to nine women at the same time. Sunni scholars who were asked to explain the contradiction between Muhammad's conduct and the religious prohibition maintained that Muhammad was exceptional and that what was allowed for him is forbidden among the rest of the Muslim community.
[4] The Hanafi School is named after Abu Hanifa (d. 765); The Maliki School is named after Malik ibn Anas (d. 796); The Shafi'i School is named after Imam al-Shafi'i (d. 820); The Hanbali School is named after Ahmad bin Hanbal (d. 855).
[5] Souaiaia, "From Transitory Status to Perpetual Sententiae," p. 293; Doreen Hinchcliffe, "Polygamy in Traditional and Contemporary Islamic Law," *Islam and the Modern Age*, No. 1 (1970), pp. 13-14; Roxanne D. Marcotte, "How Far Have Reforms Gone in Islam?," *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (2003), p. 156.
[6] Hinchcliffe, "Polygamy in Traditional and Contemporary Islamic Law," p. 14; Marcotte, "How Far Have Reforms Gone in Islam?," p. 156; Souaiaia, "From Transitory Status to Perpetual Sententiae," p. 293.
[7] Laila S. Shahd, *An Investigation of the Phenomenon of Polygamy in Rural Egypt* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2001), p. 33. Many men, mainly in villages, marry a second wife after their first wife gives birth to females. They believe that a second wife might bring them male children, despite the fact that it is the man who determines the newborn's sex. Shahd, *An Investigation of the Phenomenon of Polygamy in Rural Egypt*, pp. 23, 97.
[8] Marcotte, "How Far Have Reforms Gone in Islam?," p. 156.
[9] Shahd, *An Investigation of the Phenomenon of Polygamy in Rural Egypt*, pp. 16-17, 97.
[10] The Hanafi, Hanbali, and Maliki schools maintain that this question must be evaluated according to the woman's standard of living prior to marriage, whereas the Shafi'i School maintains that an equal allowance should be given to all women in accordance with the husband's financial capabilities.
[11] After a husband's death, his wives and children share his property equally (in fact the children receive most of it, especially his sons, since according to the Shari'a, a brother receives as much as twice as his sister). Shahd, *An Investigation of the Phenomenon of Polygamy in Rural Egypt*, pp. 36-37; Hinchcliffe, "Polygamy in Traditional and Contemporary Islamic Law," pp. 15-19, where there are many details on what solutions Islamic Law provides for women who find themselves in polygamous marriages against their will.
[12] Tunisian reformers adopted this point of view in 1956, when personal status laws were legislated in the country. Tunisia is the only Arab state to date that has abolished polygamy. Hinchcliffe, "Polygamy in Traditional and Contemporary Islamic Law," pp. 14, 26-27.
[13] Marcotte, "How Far Have Reforms Gone in Islam?," pp. 156-57.
[14] *Ibid*., p. 157; Shahd, *An Investigation of the Phenomenon of Polygamy in Rural Egypt*, p. 11; Orit Bashkin, Liat Kozma, and Israel Gershoni (eds.), *Sculpturing Culture in Egypt: Cultural Planning, National Identity and Social Change in Egypt, 1890-*

1939 (Tel Aviv: Ramot, Tel Aviv University, 1999), pp. 61-94; Qasim Amin, *The New Woman*, (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1995); Margot Badren, "Independent Women: More Than a Century of Feminism in Egypt" in Judith E. Tucker (ed.), *Arab Women: Old Boundaries, New Frontiers* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 129-48; Earl L. Sullivan, *Women in Egyptian Public Life* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986), pp. 21-38; Margot Badran, "Gender Activism: Feminists and Islamists in Egypt" in Valentine M. Moghadam (ed.), *Identity Politics and Women: Cultural Reassertions and Feminisms in International Perspective* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), pp. 202-27; Ghada Hashem Talhami, *The Mobilization of Muslim Women in Egypt* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), pp. 2-28; Soha Abdel Kader, *Egyptian Women in a Changing Society, 1899-1987* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1987).

[15] Guy Bechor, *Between Vision and Reality: Law in the Arab World* (Herzliya: IDC Publications, 2002), pp. 264, 266-67 (published in Hebrew); Essam Fawzy, "Muslim Personal Status Law in Egypt: the Current Situation and Possibilities of Reform through Internal Initiatives" in Lynn Welchman (ed.), *Women's Rights and Islamic Family Law: Perspectives on Reform* (London & New York: Zed Books Ltd, 2004), pp. 30-57; Valentine M. Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1993), pp. 109-16.

[16] Mervat F. Hatem, "Egyptian Discourses on Gender and Political Liberalization: Do Secularist and Islamist Views Really Differ?" *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (Autumn 1994), p. 664; Bechor, *Between Vision and Reality*, pp. 264-66; Shahd, *An Investigation of the Phenomenon of Polygamy in Rural Egypt*, p. 11; Malika Zeghal, "Religion and Politics in Egypt: The Ulema of al-Azhar, Radical Islam and the State (1952-94)," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (August 1999), pp. 371-99; Tamir Moustafa, "Conflict and Cooperation between the State and Religious Institutions in Contemporary Egypt," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 32 (2000), pp. 3-22; Meir Hatina, "Egypt's al-Azhar: Fortress of Orthodoxy and the Challenge of Modernity," *Zmanim* (Israel), Vol. 74 (2001), pp. 43-55, (published in Hebrew); Talhami, *The Mobilization of Muslim Women in Egypt*, pp. 18-28.

[17] Marcotte, "How Far Have Reforms Gone in Islam?," pp. 157-58; Shahd, *An Investigation of the Phenomenon of Polygamy in Rural Egypt*, p. 11.

[18] Hinchcliffe, "Polygamy in Traditional and Contemporary Islamic Law," p. 33; Fawzy, "Muslim Personal Status Law in Egypt," pp. 33-34.

[19] Shahd, *An Investigation of the Phenomenon of Polygamy in Rural Egypt*, p. 12; Bechor, *Between Vision and Reality*, p. 265; Fawzy, "Muslim Personal Status Law in Egypt," pp. 35-44; For more details on the Jihan Laws, see Talhami, *The Mobilization of Muslim Women in Egypt*, pp. 74-122 (chapters 4-5).

[20] Marcotte, "How Far Have Reforms Gone in Islam?" p. 159. More details on the 2000 Law in Bechor, *Between Vision and Reality*, pp. 280-87; Fawzy, "Muslim Personal Status Law in Egypt," pp. 58-71.

[21] Accurate figures in J. Chamie, "Polygyny among Arabs," *Population Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (1986), p. 58, table 2.

[22] *Ibid*., pp. 59-60; Shahd, *An Investigation of the Phenomenon of Polygamy in Rural Egypt*, p. 103.

[23] More than six percent of men over 50 years old—urban and rural alike—married more than one woman in the year 1960. Exact details in Chamie, "Polygyny among Arabs," p. 61, table 6.

[24] 1.5-2 percent of men with secondary or academic education married another woman, while 3.7-4.1 percent of men with primary education or without education at all were polygamous in Egypt in 1960. Chamie, Polygyny among Arabs," p. 62.

[25] Laura Bier, "Modernity and the Other Woman: Gender and National Identity in the Egyptian Women's Press, 1952-1970," *Gender and History*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (April 2004), pp. 100, 107.

[26] It is important to note here that in the period under inspection, the Egyptian cinema industry is split into two: A part of it remained in private hands and continued to make commercial films, while at the same time, the state began to nationalize private companies in all sectors of the economy. In 1963, a part of the cinema industry was nationalized, when the government purchased studios, filming equipment, and screening halls. The public sector collapsed in the beginning of the 1970s, after making 145 films, about a third of the entire 426 films that were made between 1963-1972. The reasons for this failure were mainly the lack of worthy management and the lack of popularity of the productions among the masses. Ziyad Fayed, *The Revolution in the Egyptian Cinema July 1952-October 1973* [*al-Thawra fi al-Sinama al-Misriyya Yulyu 1952-October 1973*] (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Misriyya al-Amma lil-Kitab, 1999), pp. 47-48; Ali Abu Shadi, *Cinema and Politics* [*Sinama wa-Siyasa*] (Damascus: al-Mada, 2002), pp. 41-105.

[27] Raymond William Baker, "Egypt in Shadows: Film and the Political Order," *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (January-February 1974), pp. 393-423; Lizbeth Malkmus and Roy Armes, *Arab and African Film Making* (London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1991); Samir Farid, "Periodization of Egyptian Cinema" in Alia Arasoughly (ed.), *Screens of Life: Critical Film Writing from the Arab World*, Vol. 1 (Quebec: World Heritage Press, 1996), pp. 1-18.

[28] Sherifa Zuhur, "Victims or Actors? Centering Women in Egyptian Commercial Film" in Sherifa Zuhur (ed.), *Images of Enchantment: Visual and Performing Arts of the Middle East* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1998), p. 213.

[29] Walter Armbrust, "The Rise and Fall of Nationalism in the Egyptian Cinema" in Fatma Muge Gocek (ed.), *Social Constructions of Nationalism in the Middle East* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), pp. 217, 221.

[30] This stereotype fits the data in Chamie's article for 50-year-old men and even older, who own businesses and are wealthy enough to marry more than one woman at the same time. Chamie, "Polygyny among Arabs," pp. 60-61.

[31] It is her right, after all. Hinchcliffe, "Polygamy in Traditional and Contemporary Islamic Law," p. 15.

[32] He is actually obliged to do so according to Islamic Law. Hinchcliffe, "Polygamy in Traditional and Contemporary Islamic Law," p. 15.

[33] The description fits the data from Chamie's article about wealthy men over 50 years old, both in the city and in the village, who marry more than one woman at the

same time. Chamie, "Polygyny among Arabs," pp. 60-61, 64.

[34] *Idda*, a legally prescribed period of waiting during which a woman cannot marry someone else after being widowed or divorced. Hinchcliffe, "Polygamy in Traditional and Contemporary Islamic Law," p. 18; Bechor, *Between Vision and Reality*, p. 276.

[35] The imam's argument is based upon the famous Koranic notion, which maintains, "There is no compulsion in religion." Chapter 2, *Surat al-Baqara* (The Cow), Verse 256.

[36] After the 1967 defeat, the regime provided a wider scope for criticism, since there was a feeling then public debate would help reorganize Egyptian society and prevent another military defeat. Any criticism against Nasser after 1967 was made through allegorical means. The 1968 film *Land of Hypocrisy* (*Ard al-Nifaq* by director Fatin Abd al-Wahab is a good example of this kind of allegory. Another film from the same year, *Certain Fear* (*Shay' min al-Khawf*) by director Hussein Kamal exemplifies the boundaries of criticism. The film, which presents the story of a village gang leader, was prohibited by the censorship, since it allegedly equated Nasser to the gang leader. Nasser thought differently and approved the film's screening, maintaining that his government was not a gang, and that he was not a gang leader.

[37] *Hadana*. To read about this in more detail, see Bechor, *Between Vision and Reality*, pp. 278-79.

[38] It must be recalled that this is a most surprising remark coming from a supposedly liberal enlightened man who should not have been considering polygamy in the first place. After all, according to statistics, the more educated a man is, the less he is inclined to seek polygamous marriage. Chamie, "Polygyny among Arabs," p. 62.

[39] Hinchcliffe, "Polygamy in Traditional and Contemporary Islamic Law," p. 19.

[40] Marcotte, "How Far Have Reforms Gone in Islam?," p. 158.