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Reproducing the Revolution: Gender, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Postcoloniality in
Contemporary Egypt

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In 2011 when the Arab Spring spread to Egypt, thousands of men and women gathered at Tahrir Square in Cairo in mass protests that led to the forced removal of President Hosni Mubarak, whose authoritarian government had reigned for three decades. The widespread emancipatory and populist fervor surrounding the subsequent

post-revolutionary moment in Egypt was ripe with optimism for the future of a “democratic Egypt,” and the Arab Spring was heralded as a sign of the final stage of anticolonial struggle in Egypt’s quest for autonomy.ⁱ However, with the consecutive rise and fall of the Muslim Brotherhood from the center of Egyptian politics, and the return of a military-based authoritarian state, it seems that these postcolonial promises were short-lived. The protests both for/against the legitimacy of Morsi as well as the military-provisional government continue, so the question remains: How did the seemingly “universal” calls for systemic change in Egypt that toppled a regime in 2011 fail to produce such transformations?

Through the partial lens of the Muslim Brotherhood, which still stands as one of the most influential civic and political groups in Egypt, we shall seek to expose and analyze some of the historically-rooted tensions and contradictions that have proved to undermine the potential for systemic social and economic change in Egypt. An attempt will be made to historically locate the MB’s accession to power both in regard to the group’s own internal transformations as it has responded to local circumstances, as well as contextualize these changes as they relate to national and transnational socioeconomic processes on a broader scale. More specifically, issues of gender shall serve as a primary focus of this analysis due to the inherent embeddedness of gender in political discourse, as well as the fact that gendered relations intersect with a multiplicity of focal points of identification and contention, such as those of class, family, and religion. Furthermore, the problems that have arisen with regard to gender rights/politics in post-revolutionary Egypt interconnect within broader issues of neoliberal practices, the authoritarian state, and postcoloniality, providing a nodal point of reference from which to expose some obstacles in the path toward systemic change.

We shall begin by providing a glimpse of the 2011 Egyptian revolution from a few diverse perspectives, in order to both explore the composition of the mass mobilizations as well as to locate the events within the history of Egyptian neoliberal practices and the state’s authoritarian tendencies. Next, due to the fact that in 2011 the Muslim Brotherhood ascended to the center of Egyptian politics on a wave of popular support and was able to gain the executive seat, albeit with a minority of the vote, we shall then contextualize these events within the history of the MB, as well as investigate factors that contributed to the rise of transformations that occurred within the MB’s structure, ideology, and outreach strategies that eventually gave them executive power. It is here where we shall explicate the failures and contradictions of the MB, with special attention paid to issues of gender and how they connect to themes of the historically “deep” authoritarian state, in order to explore pervasive tensions that continue to permeate the Egyptian social field. Then, we shall examine how the return of the military-backed totalitarian state has ushered in new forms of contention between the secularist government and Islamist groups (the MB specifically) as they battle for symbolic and physical space utilizing issues of gender to demonize the other’s position, thus reaffirming their own political legitimacy. Finally, we shall use a more theoretical lens through which to examine possible forces of feminist resistance against such repressive modes of representation.

The Revolution and its Aftermath

The 18-day protests that took place at Cairo’s Tahrir Square were marked not only by the use of new forms of social media to subvert government censorship to spur revolutionary mobilizations, but also for the intersectional and heterogeneous composition of the protesters themselves. For example, Hafez notes that women made up somewhere between 20-50 percent of the protesters, which contributed to the widely promulgated notion of the protests as progressive and “universal” in nature (Hafez 37).ⁱⁱ In addition, Hirschkind notes that the Tahrir Square protests expressed a common desire

for “popular sovereignty”, capable of transcending normal binaries that were seen to divide Egypt. He describes how the mass mobilization unfolded without ever imposing the question of “religious or secular” on itself, and proceeded according to a unified logic that emphasized a “unique political sensibility that galvanized solidarity” (Hirschkind 121). This was especially significant due to the fact that, as Hirschkind notes, the Mubarak regime stood as a “bulwark against Islamic fundamentalism” and a staunch defender of secular tradition. Even the strong presence of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist factions at the protests did not cause secular protesters to produce a critique of this supposed “intrusion of politicized religion as a danger to rationalist politics.”

In addition, those in rural areas such as in the Upper Valley, away from the highly contested urban space of Cairo, were directly affected by the Tahrir mobilizations. Abu-Lughod notes that people in rural villages, who had also faced various forms of arbitrary power exerted by the Mubarak regime, reacted to “January 28th, the day of lawlessness”, during which the police attacked protesters, by forming their own “popular committees” to safeguard their communities (“Living the Revolution” 21). Moreover, these committees then transformed into communal decision making bodies that began a self-regulatory system of management that sought to address communal social problems without pressure from the police-state. Abu-Lughod argues that these villagers espoused a language of “social morality, not of rights” (“Living the Revolution” 23). They sought to challenge the abuses of the nation-state as felt through local councils and security police, providing a communal redeployment of notions of justice, responsibility, and welfare to combat corruption experienced locally. The significance of these transformations in rural Upper Egypt lies not only in the diverse languages of dissent but in the way in which villagers channeled grievances on display in Cairo into their own site-specific manifestation of protest and reform. Suffice it to say that the 2011 Egyptian revolution was far-reaching in scope, and certainly did embrace elements of spontaneity, but the grievances were nevertheless grounded in historically produced conditions of dispossession and inequality.

There was no doubt a diverse array of grievances among the heterogeneous composition of protesters during the 2011 Egyptian uprisings, yet they certainly shared a disdain of and dissatisfaction with the status quo of the Mubarak regime. Indeed, as Ahmed Shokr notes, a chief characterization of the population of Egypt has been what Shokr calls “anti-hegemony”, illustrated by a refusal to identify with the interests of ruling and professional elites (Shokr). Largely based on the crisis of the state authority’s loss of legitimacy in the eyes of a majority of the citizenry, sentiments of anti-hegemony during the recent years under the Mubarak regime can be summarized by the popular conception that Egypt was “closer to being a failed state than at any time in its modern history” (Shokr). These sentiments, traceable to the formation of the Egyptian state itself, undoubtedly persisted through the aftermath of 18-day uprising in Egypt. Shokr writes, “the weeks that followed Mubarak’s departure saw hundreds of protests against bosses, ministers and governors associated with the ills of the former regime.” The protests that continue to permeate Egypt today reflect these anti-hegemonic attitudes, for they represent the enduring desire for systemic change that has failed to materialize under the leadership of Morsi and now al-Sisi.

Part of the reason for the persistence of popular discontent lies in the fact that the supposed universality of the 2011 uprising seemed to have been appropriated by a small minority of interests, which has dominated post-revolutionary governance and political discourse. For example, whereas women accounted for a significant percentage of the protests at Tahrir Square, Hafez notes that the subsequent events “revealed that women would not be part of the political deliberations between various contending parties and

the Supreme Military Council (SMC) in charge of the country” (Hafez 38). Instead, she sees “multilayered patriarchal power” at the heart of the Egyptian uprising, not only characterized by the historically paternalistic relationship between Mubarak and his subjects but also by the way in which women have had to advance their interests within the patriarchal agenda of post-revolutionary politics. Before describing the latter process by which the “patriarchal bargain” between women and men as well as the state was disrupted by the 2011 revolution, we must first discuss the formulation of such a “patriarchal bargain” in twentieth century Egypt and its intensification/deterioration under Mubarak. Moreover, we shall see how the construction of the paternalistic state (and gender politics) developed through the same socioeconomic processes that sowed the seeds for the rise of political Islam in Egypt. The fact that after the 2011 political deliberation it was the Muslim Brotherhood that emerged as the group through which women’s interests had to be represented gives credence to the necessary interweaving of these two histories as a method of analysis.

Historical Context: the Nasser and Sadat eras

Gaining power in 1952 with the military coup led by the Free Officers Movement, Gamal Abdel Nasser disseminated a nationalist agenda that advocated for state-led industrial development and social welfare focused, in part, on agrarian land reform.ⁱⁱⁱ In response to the crisis ridden 1940’s rooted in conflicts of wealth distribution and property relations as well as the British occupation of Egypt, Nasser and the Free Officers sought to establish a non-aligned state free of foreign capital, embarking on a program of “national coalitions” between the state bureaucracy, the military, select corporate interests as well as organized labor (Shokr). For Shokr, “the economic backbone of the regime became what critical observers called the state bourgeoisie.” Government planning came from this multifaceted elite in the form of bureaucracy, producing the deeply structured institutions that many argue still govern Egypt to this day.^{iv} As for Nasser’s authoritarian bent, Shokr notes how many reforms and ‘socialist’ achievements were coupled with the tendency to silence alternative voices of dissent and outlaw independent political initiatives.^v El-Mahdi illuminates this mixture of cooptation and coercion eloquently when she writes, “it is no surprise that the Nasserite regime that granted women suffrage and equal rights to education and employment was the same regime that demobilized feminist organizations of the time and upheld the conservative 1920’s-1930’s personal status law” (el-Mahdi 126).

Nasser stood as an embodiment of the growing forces of pan-Arab nationalism and socialism that were part and parcel of the various decolonization processes of the period, of which Egypt’s Britain-controlled monarchy that was toppled in 1952 was symbolic. Due to Arab nationalists’ anti-imperialist rhetoric, the monarchy of Saudi Arabia, with its U.S. corporate connections, became a chief target to leaders like Nasser. From the Saudi perspective, pan-Arab nationalism and calls for an anti-imperialist socialist agenda could serve as a potential threat to the monarchy if the movement gained hold within its borders. As Leila Ahmed notes, the ruling elites of Saudi Arabia attempted to combat the spread of Pan Arabism and socialism to their region by disseminating their own form of Wahhabi Islam through organizing Islamic institutions with significant financial support (*A Quiet Revolution* 61). To counter Nasserite ideology, the Saudi monarchs help found the Muslim World League in 1962, which contained some leading members of the Muslim Brotherhood, to spread information and ideas to foment a new mainstream “Islamic bloc” in resistance to “un-Islamic” Arab nationalism (Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution* 62). Having fled to Saudi Arabia to avoid persecution after Nasser took power, the Brotherhood used its outreach strategies and grassroots mobilization tactics to further the League’s dissemination of anti-Nasserite publications, in which they criticized Nasser’s secular imposition of socialism and nationalism as a digression from the values of true Islam.

The effects of these criticisms, as experienced by many Egyptian Muslims, became heightened as Egypt stumbled into economic turmoil as a result of the Yemeni war, which had been by proxy a dimension of the “Arab Cold War” between Nasser’s support for Arab nationalists and Saudi Arabian backing of the Yemeni monarchy (Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution* 65). In turn, the heavy-handed repression of the Muslim Brotherhood as exerted by the Nasserite regime, which included widespread imprisonment and six executions of leaders of the Brotherhood (Armajani 60), gradually lessened as a result of both the 1967 Six-Day War and the liberalization programs of Sadat beginning in 1970.

Many scholars, including Leila Ahmed, see Egypt’s concessions to Israel as a result of Egypt’s defeat in the 1967 Six-Day War as “the moment when Islamism began to take hold” (*Women* 217). The 1962-1967 Yemeni War also produced economic difficulties that, in tandem with internal mismanagement, caused many people to lose faith in Nasser’s modernizing “socialist” program. Under Anwar Sadat, who took power in 1970, the government was forced to begin to make concessions to affluent and powerful classes as a retreat from the expenditure-based state corporatism of the Nasserite regime. It was during this time of economic stagflation of the 1970s when Sadat pursued policies of economic liberalization to open up Egypt to foreign capital. Shokr notes that these neoliberal reforms were characterized by “the lifting of protectionist and other regulatory measures, the reversal of agrarian reforms and centrally planned industrialization, the dismantling of state monopolies... and the opening up of new sectors of the economy to private enterprise” (Shokr). One of the main effects of Sadat’s efforts was that these policies relocated economic power into the hands of actors such as “foreign investors, private business groups and speculators, global financial institutions,” thereby engendering what David Harvey calls “accumulation by dispossession” (3), resulting among other factors in the hollowing out of the government’s social sphere in its ability to provide adequate services such as healthcare and education.^{vi}

It is within this context that Sadat permitted the Muslim Brotherhood to reenter the public domain after two decades of severe repression under Nasser. Ahmed describes the decision, “Sadat, who was under attack from Nasserists and leftists as the government retreated from socialist commitments, actively encouraged the Muslim Brethren so that it might serve as a base of opposition to his opponents” (*Women* 217). The Brotherhood’s publications circulated widely, disseminating “religious idiom as the idiom of political discourse”, yet their message soon began to criticize the Sadat regime and its policies of liberalization, thereby transforming their publications into a “language of dissent” (Ahmed, *Women* 218). The ability for the Muslim Brotherhood to gain widespread appeal was partly due to the increasing number of university graduates that were unable to find jobs and absorb into the “state bourgeoisie,” who therefore became attracted to the anti-western and anti-neoliberal rhetoric espoused by the Brotherhood. Critiques of Western cultural imperialism played a large role in Islamist rhetoric, which identified a “moral breakdown and corruption” present in Sadat’s neoliberal reforms.^{vii} The imposition of foreign capital resulted in foreign investments in industries such as tourism and fast food, “lucrative only to foreigners and to a few Egyptian middlemen” (Ahmed, *Women* 218), as well as the flooding of consumer and luxury goods, which came at the expense of the local tobacco and textile industries. The Muslim Brotherhood, with its roots in social and charitable activism/mobilization since its creation in 1928 by Hanna al-Banna, was able to appropriate these sentiments so as to position itself as a voice of resistance against these forms of cultural imperialism and secularizing trends of Sadat’s regime.

Gender and the Veil

Despite its androcentric name, the Muslim Brotherhood (and political Islam more generally) has undoubtedly proven attractive to many women as well as men in both

upper and lower classes. The resurgence of the veil has served as a locus of controversy and attention regarding the role of women in Islamist movements, whom outsiders often times depict as victims of repression of the inherently patriarchal Islam (Mahmood 15). However, there is obviously a multidimensional conversation to be had before we make any conclusive judgments regarding the *hijab*. Moreover, the Muslim Brotherhood, who may easily fall in to this category of demonized groups, in no way represents a unified logic regarding the role/subjugation of women. For example, Hasan Ismail Hudaibi, who succeeded al-Banna as leader of the MB, maintained a nuanced position on the role of women in an Islamic society. When speaking of his own daughters, he remarks, “Both are married and I hope that they have found harmony between their homes and jobs” (Ahmed, *Women* 195). Furthermore, Ahmed argues that it is not sound to equate “fervent religious or religio-political commitment” with “a negative attitude towards women’s employment”, for many including the Muslim Brotherhood saw the second income of women as beneficial toward the consolidation of middle-class status (*Women* 195).

In addition, the resurgence of the veil beginning in the 1970s cannot be seen exclusively as a completely autonomous choice made by women with the hope for advancing their position in society, an embodiment of individual piety, or an exertion of top-down force exerted by the Saudi Arabian financially backed dissemination of Islamic ideologies into Egyptian universities and other public spheres (Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution* 122).^{viii} There are undoubtedly diverse motivations that have prompted Muslim women to veil, which are also affected by local circumstances and (trans)-national trends. But how then do we account for the backlash against working women that has indeed been present in contemporary Egypt? Lila Abu-Lughod identifies the false dichotomy between secular working women and domestic Islamic women when she argues, “the reality is...that women who have taken on the veil are in fact working or expected to work” (“Marriage” 247). In addition, Mervat Hatem explains plainly that “in present day Egypt most Muslim women wear various forms of Islamic dress and the choice of head covering does not necessarily carry a political valence” (4). Since the issue of employment is one “negotiable” for Islamists, it may be the case that more broad issues of socio-economic disenfranchisement are behind both the backlash against working women as well as their further subordination in post-revolutionary deliberations among the Brotherhood and the military elite.

Patriarchal and Neoliberal Bargains

Hosni Mubarak, who succeeded Anwar Sadat as President in 1981, not only perpetuated the “personalized authoritarian politics” of Nasser and Sadat but he adopted to a greater extent a paternalistic position in relation to his subjects. Hafez describes how Mubarak legitimated his role as father of the nation through the “construction of a mythical power that reigned in chaos to ensure the safety and stability of the masses” (39). Utilizing the flexible nature of the authoritarian state, Mubarak furthered Egypt’s commitment to Sadat’s neoliberalizing trends while exerting authoritarian power to maintain stability. In similar fashion to Sadat, Mubarak simultaneously shut down a number of feminist NGO’s while creating the National Council for Women to be headed by his wife (el-Mahdi 129).

Moreover, Mubarak’s regime maintained legitimacy through reshaping the day-to-day operations of individuals through the arbitrary exertion of power through the state’s security apparatus. Hafez likens the functioning of the Egyptian state under Mubarak to one dictated by the Foucauldian concept of “biopower”, which can be defined as “a diffused form of power that induces self-regulation” (39). In essence, the constant threat of violence posed by the authority of the security apparatus (as well as the Emergency Status Law), coupled with increased socio-economic disenfranchisement fueled by the

penetration of foreign capital^{ix}, produced the internalization of fear and impotence in the citizenry. The “patriarchal bargain”, by which citizens gave up certain freedoms for the benefits of stability handed down by the paternalist state, was deteriorating. Hafez also sees the decline of another manifestation of the “patriarchal bargain” as a result of the disparity produced by that state, that between the patriarchal husband and his family. She notes how grievances addressed pre-2011 against the Mubarak regime reflected the breakdown of familial and patriarchal values. Husbands were “systematically disempowered through increased cost of living and lack of employment opportunities,” and were thereby unable to provide for their youths, a grievance of parenthood displayed by females as well (Hafez 39). When Mubarak did finally step down, this “shattered the myth” of his paternalistic ethos, allowing citizens to see themselves as potential actors for the first time in their participation in the rearrangement of society. It is too early to tell whether or not these new-found subjectivities were ephemeral insights, which were then subordinated by the subsequent power struggle between the MB and the military-government that failed to sufficiently articulate the widespread calls for transformative socioeconomic amelioration. It is also quite possible that Egyptians will continue to protest, albeit not necessarily in a unified form, for more inclusive rights to a participatory system of governance until more reforms are produced.

However, as we have already noted, the absence of women from the post-revolutionary political deliberations seems to have disrupted this notion of emancipatory agency that was so fervently present at Tahrir Square. Hafez sees the refusal of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Council of Wise Men to include discussions on the rights or even presence of women in their meetings reflect the persistence of what she calls a “connective patriarchy”(40). She argues that the apparent “emasculatation” felt by Egyptian men as a result of their economic disempowerment produced a backlash against associating with women, generating increased tendencies toward gender differentiation in compensation for this lack (Hafez 40). Norma Moruzzi sees this as endemic of a more widespread tradition in which “authoritarian government incorporat(e) women as equal political subjects through state-sponsored policies of secular modernization, but no one as participatory political citizens” (Moruzzi). In addition, Muhammad Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood, who gained popular appeal through the universal applicability of the open signifier, “Islam” as the answer, produced in December 2012 a constitution that in no way reflected a democratic consensus and instead represented only “major power brokers: the Muslim Brothers, the army and the conservative *salafis*” (Shokr). In terms of reform, the Brotherhood’s party, the Freedom and Justice Party, did implement a policy that provided health insurance to female-headed households, to about 30 percent of Egyptian families, a part of its attempt to define itself as in line with the interests of the average Egyptian woman (Hatem 4). However, this strongly clashed with the Brotherhood’s neoliberal agenda and did little to confront the deeper issue of creating better employment opportunities for women.

The failure of the Muslim Brotherhood to maintain any semblance of a transformative vision is partly due to the fact that despite the military’s withdrawal from the government after the 2012 elections, the matrix of state-security institutions that have governed the country since Nasser have remained unreformed. Groups such as the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF) and the Egyptian General Petroleum Corporation (EGPC) are deeply embedded in the state, having served vital interests under Egypt’s state-led industrialization programs. The history of the MB itself, as we have discussed, has contributed to the development of many divergent interests among the Brothers that have served to fracture the possibility for a unified agenda. For instance, the Islamic resurgence of the 1970s was largely prompted by the financial support of Saudi Arabia, which helped spread the Muslim Brotherhood’s Islamic discourse into

various parts of Egyptian society. As Leila Ahmed notes, many of the Muslim Brothers were able to accumulate vast amounts of wealth from the oil-producing Saudi Arabia, fueled by the 1973 oil-price hikes. Ahmed describes how some Brothers viewed this wealth as “a sign of God’s favor to Muslims, in particular Muslims who followed the strictest forms of Islam, including wearing hijab” (*A Quiet Revolution* 101). Moreover, the grassroots mobilization pursued by the Muslim Brotherhood featured rhetoric that sought to offer redress to the socioeconomic ills experienced by lower-class Egyptians at the hands of Sadat’s neoliberalizing policies. At the same time, though, the Brothers supported the same liberalization policies of Sadat that helped dislodge the hegemony of the Nasserite left in universities and other professional syndicates (Naguib 118). This produced a disconnect between MB leaders and its working class support base, for the Brotherhood has maintained a *cultural* critique of neoliberal economics, lamenting the moral degradation and corruption of Egyptian society, yet has at the same time remained ambivalent in its reproach of socioeconomic processes that benefit the elitist/professional elements of the Brotherhood.

In its post-2011 political discourse, then, the Brotherhood had to grapple with these apparent contradictory interests. Its heterogeneous composition, with low-income communities in need of socioeconomic aid as well as professional/financial elites, has forced the MB to try to balance a populist cultural critique of neoliberalism with an agenda espousing a pro-market discourse. As part of Morsi’s proposed economic agenda, labeled the “Renaissance Project”, the Freedom and Justice Party called for increases in foreign investment as a remedy to Egypt’s economic woes (Naguib 131). Judging from the fact that before the financial crisis in 2008, Egypt reached its peak of foreign direct investment at \$11.5 billion, which failed to deliver sufficient economic amelioration, the economic policies advocated by the Brotherhood seemed to be simply a perpetuation of neoliberal reform that had already plagued Egypt (Shokr). There is no doubt that the Brotherhood was confined in its attempts to legislate by structural continuities inherited from previous regimes, and one may see its failure to capture the populace’s desire for systemic change as a symptom of institutional arrangements of power that prevented any form of participatory politics from ever taking shape, yet was also hindered by the contradictory class interests of the Brotherhood itself.

Contemporary Gender Discussions

With the return of Field Marshall ‘Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi, commander of SCAF for the military-led government, we have seen continued protests both for and against the legitimacy of the interim government as well as of Morsi’s recently deposed Islamist government. In addition, issues of gender have been at the forefront of both factions’ respective attempts to demonize the other camp in regard to their treatment of women. Hatem describes how several sit-in demonstrations conducted by Muslim women at al-Nahda and Nasr City, which conveyed their privileging of religious faith above other modes of achievement as the primary marker of goodness in women, were appropriated by the liberal and secular media/government. According to Hatem, “the state-run and liberal media preferred to see the Islamist women as dupes of male leadership or would-be human shields” (Hatem 3). The effect of incidents like these was to further widen the gap between representations of Islamist and liberal women, which, as we shall now discuss, is owed to the history of Egypt’s encounter with colonialism.

Lila Abu-Lughod problematizes this distinction in her discussion on secularists and Islamists contemporary views on marriage, family, and love. She contends that the arguments both for the “retraditionalization” of women’s roles in society as decreed by Islamists as well as the rejection of secular, western emancipated “freedom” as defined by the West are so entrenched in society yet are based on spurious claims to a truly indigenous “tradition”. She identifies Qasim Amin, widely regarded as the father of

Egyptian feminism, who wrote within the context of British colonialism about the proper roles and “liberation” of *modern* women, as a figure whose ideas are inextricably linked to imperialist discourse. Amin’s admiration for Western notions of hygiene, rationality, and enlightened discipline was expressed thoroughly in his writings, which were strongly reflected in his advocacy for a specific type of modern Egyptian women and family. Abu-Lughod sees Amin chiefly as a promoter of the “modern bourgeois family with its ideal of conjugal love and scientific child rearing” (“Marriage” 256). His ideas were part and parcel of the colonizer’s attempt to subject women to the individualized form of surveillance and control as were other members of the colonized state, as well as “to organize the family into a house of discipline for producing a new Egyptian mentality” (“Marriage” 256).

Moreover, Islamist claims made today for the return of “tradition,” such as advocacy for a domestically dependent wife and mother, are in essence drawn upon colonialist constructs of Western modernity, which thereby complicates the dichotomous relationship between Islamic tradition and secular emancipation. Abu-Lughod also suggests that in some kin-based societies the distinction between public and private does not function in such a discrete way, such that a women’s involvement with family can be seen as a form of “public action” (“Marriage” 261). In turn, the contemporary tensions present between the military-provisional government’s claims for legitimacy over the “freedom” of women from their apparent victimization and repression under the Muslim Brotherhood must be reconsidered. As Abu-Lughod follows from Homi Bhabha, it may be that for Egypt, as in other postcolonial contexts, “access to any sort of real ‘tradition’ has been made impossible by the historical cultural encounter with the West” (“Marriage” 261).

Such polarized discourses of women’s emancipation in Egypt have only served to reaffirm the marginalized position women faced in the post-2011 political deliberations. The fluidity of gender dynamics in Egypt is not easily articulated through the popularized dichotomy by which women are either subjugated under Islamic patriarchy or emancipated by Western secularism. As Homi Bhabha recognizes, there must appear a “third space of enunciation” by which Egyptian women can negotiate a specific form of agency and conception of “cultural difference” that resists binary categorization (“Cultural Diversity” 55). This possibility is elucidated by Saba Mahmood’s work with the Women’s Mosque Movement in urban Egypt, in which Muslim women have increasingly attended mosques, donned various forms of *hijab*, as well as become active in private mosques in response to political turmoil in Egypt’s public sphere. She argues that we must reject Western-informed conceptions of feminist agency, due to the fact that the actions by Egyptian Muslim women, in their decisions to participate in the Mosque Movement, are shaped by many non-liberal traditions (Mahmood 25). Since the aims of women to pursue new forms of piety have occurred within a “discursive tradition that regards subordination to a transcendent will (and to male authority) as its coveted goal,” it would be easy to regard these women’s actions as simply a reaffirmation of hegemonic social norms (18). However, according to Mahmood, within this movement women are entering new public and social roles, for this mobilization of women into mosques has altered mosques as male-centered spaces of pedagogy (20). For Mahmood, this alone suggests that the women’s actions may articulate a different form of feminist agency, distinct from the dichotomy between subordination/resistance against a patriarchal structure.

Foucault’s paradox of *subjectivization* is of vital importance to Mahmood’s argument, which dictates, “the very processes and conditions that secure a subject’s subordination are also the means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent (Mahmood 27-28). Due to the fact that the normative, perpetual articulation of

power-gender relations that structure a society are those that produce the subject internal to these relationships, any form of feminist resistance or attempts to re-articulate agency must necessarily occur within these very structures. Therefore, Mahmood is able to see that although women's aims in attending mosques partly reinforce the same "discursive tradition" that ensures their subordination, the fact that Mosque Movement women's enactment of new social norms and assertion of presence in previously defined male spaces are unique negotiations of collective agency, or *habitus*, in the Egyptian feminist subject. Moreover, Mahmood's account provides an alternative view against the polarized discussions that surround women's veiling and adherence to Islam from a non-Western feminist perspective. It is the need to re-conceptualize acts of piety and negotiations of agency in Islamic women that may help move the focus toward addressing systemic conditions that entail both female and male marginalization in the contemporary Egyptian context.

Concluding Remarks

However, to rely too heavily on theoretical formations, such as Mahmood's variation of poststructuralist feminism, in order to re-conceptualize the Egyptian feminist subject would obscure the very material realities that contribute significantly to gendered inequalities. Some scholars agree that the "focus on Islam has sidelined serious discussions of socioeconomic disparities" (Ghannam 164). There is no doubt that access to a more fluid construction of gender dynamics is largely based on relative socioeconomic status. In addition, as Farha Ghannam notes, the intersection between gender and class plays a significant role in the everyday performance of gender roles. Cultural norms are enacted daily by Egyptian men and women as they fulfill their socioeconomic duties with respect to their families and the state itself. However, as Norma Moruzzi writes, "during periods of revolutionary upheaval, gender norms become unstable. If the state itself is under threat, so is the family order sponsored by that state" ("Gender and the Revolutions"). As we have seen, the revolution of 2011 produced a historical lacuna in the trajectory of Egypt's gender relations as well as in the direction of the social and economic structures underpinning those cultural norms and practices. If women are to play a central role in the rearrangement of political and social institutions that govern the state, then a larger, less polarized discussion must be had between Islamist groups and the secular military government to create socioeconomic amelioration and mobility that is primary to this goal. As Algerian theorist Frantz Fanon wrote of the postcolonial state in its quest for not only egalitarian gender relations but also socioeconomic autonomy, "The issue which blocks the horizon, is the need for a redistribution of wealth. Humanity will have to address this question, no matter how devastating the consequences may be" (*The Wretched of the Earth* 98). In the case of Egypt, the continued debates over which direction the country shall take contribute to the primacy of Fanon's conviction. As this paper has attempted to show, the obstacles in front of truly transformative change in Egypt are caused by tensions that intersect through gendered, class, and religious lines, serving to prevent ongoing and authentic opportunities for collaborative dialogue and action that could potentially unite the at times polarized factions in support of democratizing reform. Only time will tell whether or not Egypt will respond to Fanon's prophecy and pave the way for systemic change.

Endnotes:

ⁱ According to Ahmad Shokr, an activist in Benghazi during the Libyan uprising remarked, "the 2011 revolts mark the true end of colonialism in the Arab world." "Reflections on

Two Revolutions,” *Middle East Research and Information Project*. 265. 2012. Web. 22 Nov. 2013.

ii However, we will problematize these notions of universality later, with reference to arguments such as the one posed by Jessica Winegar, who argues that, “the iconic image of the revolutionary, in the Egyptian uprising as in others, is that of a young man.”

“Privileging the Revolution: gender, class, space, and affect in Egypt,” *American Ethnologist* 39.1 (2012): 67.

iii More a detailed outline of Nasser’s domestic policies, see Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992. Print.

iv Ahmad Shokr states, “In many respects, Egypt is still governed by a matrix of institutions created during the Nasser era, including those supervising the most sensitive areas of the economy.”

v Although many members of the Muslim Brotherhood supported the wealth-redistribution aims of Nasser’s economic policies, the group was severely repressed by Nasser’s government due to the fact that, at the time of the Free Officers’ Revolution in 1952, the Brotherhood had posed an alternative political threat as well as allegedly attempted to assassinate Nasser in 1954.

vi For an extended analysis of “accumulation by dispossession,” see David Harvey, *A Brief Introduction to Neoliberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

vii Leila Ahmed notes a particularly telling case in which a foreign property development company and an Egyptian tourism company struck a deal that acquired land near the pyramids to develop a giant tourist complex along the lines of Disneyland. However, the scheme was exposed and cancelled by anthropologist Dr. Ni’imat Fuad, for the architecturally rich area would have been destroyed (Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* 218).

viii In addition, Leila Ahmed notes that most women who began to don various forms of Islamic dress, such as *hijab*, in the 1970s came from families for whom wearing *hijab* was not a traditional practice of the previous generation. In many cases families did not approve of their daughter’s decision to don the veil. See Leila Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil’s Resurgence, from the Middle East to America*. London: Yale University Press, 2011. Print.

ix Abu-Lughod notes how effects of Sadat-Mubarak neoliberal reforms were experienced in the Theban Hills region of Egypt. She describes how the lack of educational/health services as well as the penetration of the Tourism industry into its architecturally rich area produced a marginalized and dispossessed community, which was further repressed by security police. Lila Abu-Lughod, “Living the ‘revolution’ in an Egyptian village: moral action in a national space,” *American Ethnologist* 39.1. (2012): 21-25.

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