Introduction to Documents A and B

What were women’s lives in Egypt like during the early decades of the nineteenth century? The early Egyptian feminists came from the middle and upper classes who could educate their daughters (to limited extent) in the home. Privileged families were expected to practice the seclusion of women family members. The Oxford Islamic Studies Online defines seclusion as: referring to various practices designed to protect women from men in traditional Muslim societies, including confining women to the company of other women and close male relatives in their home or in separate female living quarters, veiling, self-effacing mannerisms, and the separation of men and women in public places. These practices reflect both social and religious custom.

Document A.
A Portrait of the Seclusion of Women in Egypt
Naguib Mahfouz

The following excerpt is from Palace Walk (1956), the first novel of The Cairo Trilogy by Naguib Mahfouz (1911-2006). His focus is the well-to-do family of the patriarch al-Sayyid Ahmad and his wife Amina, their grown sons Yasin, Fahmy and ten-year old Kamal, and daughters Khadija and Aisha. Very rarely does Amina’s husband grant her permission to leave the house, and then only in a carriage, never on foot. The father’s trip to Port Said is the rare occasion for the family to reconsider following the time-honored tradition of secluding privileged women in their homes. This is Amina’s reaction when the children suggest that she venture out of her home to walk to a local Muslim shrine. The setting is the eve of Egypt’s revolution against British rule (1919-1922).

She did not understand how her heart could answer this appeal [to visit the mosque] how her eyes could look beyond the limits of what was allowed, or how she could consider the adventure possible and even tempting, no — irresistible. Of course, since it was such a sacred pilgrimage, a visit to the shrine of al-Husayn appeared a powerful excuse for the radical leap her will was making…

Expressing his heartfelt approval, Kamal shouted, “I’ll go with you, Mother, and show you the way.”

Fahmy gazed at her affectionately when he saw the expression of anxious pleasure on her face, like that of a child hoping to get a new toy. To encourage her and play down the importance of the adventure, he said, “Have a look at the world. There’s nothing wrong with that. I’m afraid you’ll forget how to walk after staying home so much.”
In an outburst of enthusiasm Khadija ran to Umm Hanafi to get the black cloth she [the servant] wrapped around herself when she went out. Everyone was laughing and offering their comments. The day turned into a more joyous festival than any they had experienced. They all participated, unwillingly, in the revolution against their absent father's will (…). She was afflicted by the kind of fear people feel at crucial turning points. She raised her eyes to Fahmy and asked, “What do you think? Should I really go?”

Yasin yelled at her, “Trust in God.”

Khadija went up to her. Placing her hands on her shoulders, she gave her a gentle push saying, “Reciting the opening prayer of the Qu’ran will protect you. (…) As she crossed the threshold of the outer door and entered the street, she experienced a moment of panic. Her mouth felt dry and her pleasure was dispelled by a fit of anxiety. She had an oppressive feeling of doing something wrong. She moved slowly and grasped Kamal’s hand nervously. Her gait seemed disturbed and unsteady, as though she had not mastered the first principles of walking. She was gripped by intense embarrassment as she showed herself to the eyes of people she had known for ages but only through the peephole of the enclosed balcony. Uncle Hasanayn, the barber, Darwish, who sold beans, al-Fuli, the milkman, Bayumi, the drinks vendor, and Abu Sari’ who sold snacks—she imagined that they all recognized her just as she did them. She had difficulty convincing herself of the obvious fact that none of them had ever seen her before in their lives.

They crossed the street to Qirmiz Alley. It was not the shortest route to the mosque of al-Husayn, but unlike al-Nahhasin Street, it did not pass al-Sayyid Ahmad’s store or any other shops and was little frequented. She stopped for a moment before plunging into the alley. She turned to look at her latticed balcony. She could make out the shadows of her two daughters behind one panel. Another panel was raised to reveal the smiling faces of Fahmy and Yasin. The sight of them gave her some courage for her project.

Then she hurried along with her son down the desolate alley, feeling almost calm. Her anxiety and sense of doing something wrong did not leave her, but they retreated to the edges of her conscious emotions. Center stage was occupied by an eager interest in exploring the world as it revealed one of its alleys, a square, novel buildings, and lots of people. She found innocent pleasure in sharing the motion and freedom of other living creatures. It was the pleasure of someone who had spent a quarter of a century imprisoned by the walls of her home…


Questions: Answer these as instructed by your teacher.

1. Throughout this entire passage, Mahfouz does not use Amina’s name. Why do you think he chooses instead to refer to her only with the pronouns she and her? (There may be more than one reason.)
2. Amina’s great fear is that by taking this journey her eyes will look beyond the limits of “what was allowed.” How do you imagine Amina learned what is permissible and impermissible in her world, and from whom? What do Amina’s children do and say to encourage her to go beyond these bounds?

3. In what ways is Amina described as child-like? How have the roles of mother and ten-year old son been reversed, according to our society?

4. What is the function of the latticed balcony of Amina’s home? Does it function the same way for men and women? Explain.

5. What do we learn about less-privileged women in Cairo when Amina borrows her servant’s garment to go out into the streets?

6. Imagine that you are a young Egyptian woman in 1919 who is eager to change Egyptian society. What would be your strategies for changing the way a woman like Amina views her role in society?

Document B: The Harem Remembered
Leila Ahmed

Leila Ahmed (1940 - ) was born in Egypt to a well-connected and prosperous family. She grew up in the last years the British Empire and lived in Egypt through the Suez crisis of 1956 under Gamal Abdel Nasser. She left her homeland for study at Cambridge University in England, from which she earned her PhD. Later she moved to the United States. Since 1999 she has been on the faculty of The Harvard Divinity School, where she was the first professor of women’s studies in religion. She published Women and Gender in Islam in 1992 and in 2011 A Quiet Revolution: The Veil’s Resurgence, from the Middle East to America. In this excerpt from her autobiography she recalls childhood visits to her maternal grandmother’s home.

Looking back now with the assumptions of my own time, I could well conclude that the ethos of the world whose attitudes survived into my own childhood must have been an ethos in which women were regarded as inferior creatures, essentially sex objects and breeders, to be bought and disposed of for a man’s pleasure. But my memories do not fit with such a picture. I simply do not think that the message I got from the women of Zatoun [my mother’s paternal home] was that we, the girls, and they, the women, were
inferior…. It is quite possible that, while the women of Zatoun did not think of themselves and of us as inferior, the men did, although —given how powerful the cultural imperative of respect for parents, particularly the mother, was among those people— even for men such a view could not have been altogether uncomplicated. But men and women certainly did live essentially separate, almost unconnected lives. Men spent almost all their time with other men, and women with other women… (100)

[My mother and] All the aunts came nearly daily to Zatoun, sometimes with their children. Going to Zatoun and spending a couple of hours with Grandmother [in the harem] and with other women relatives was no doubt an enormous source of emotional and psychological support and pleasure. It was a way of sharing and renewing connection, of figuring out how to deal with whatever was going on in their lives with husbands, children, and the people who worked in their homes. All five sisters had married men they had never met, and no doubt these daily sessions in which they shared and analyzed their lives were vital to adjusting to what must have been at times enormously trying circumstances… The atmosphere in Grandmother’s receiving room was always wonderful. I do not remember a single occasion when it was not a pleasure to be there with the women. Relaxed, intimate, affectionate, rarely solemn, their conversations and exchanges were often extremely witty and sharp and funny. (104)


Questions:
• Compare Mahfouz’s portrait of Amina to the way Ahmed describes her grandmother and aunts. How do their portraits compare?
• How do the women at Zatoun overcome some of the hardships of their lives?
• How could the tight bonds fostered by gender segregation support women as they fight for their rights?

C. Background Reading

1. On Women in Islam

The emancipation of women was a project dear to the Prophet’s heart. The Quran gave women rights of inheritance and divorce centuries before Western women were accorded such status. The Quran prescribes some degree of segregation and veiling for the Prophet’s wives, but there is nothing in the Quran that requires the veiling of all women or their seclusion in a separate part of the house… The Quran makes men and women partners before God, with identical duties and responsibilities. The Quran also came to permit polygamy; at a time when Muslims were being killed in the wars against Mecca, and women were left without protectors, men were permitted to have up to four wives provided they treat them all with absolute equality and show no signs of favoring one rather than the others. The women of the first ummah [community of believers] in Medina took full part in its public life… They did not seem to have experienced Islam as
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March 4-5, 2017  
Handout for “Lesson Plan: First Feminists of Egypt: The Early Twentieth Century”

an oppressive religion though later, as happened in Christianity, men would hijack the faith and bring it into line with the prevailing patriarchy.


2. Women in the Context of Egypt’s Nationalist Movement

Transformations in women’s political culture from 1880 to 1952 paralleled key changes in the Egyptian landscape, notably British occupation of 1882, the revolution of 1919, nominal independence in 1922, and the 1952 overthrow of the monarchy. In the period from 1882 to 1922, male and female nationalists devised different political responses to the British colonial presence. Men’s political culture was characterized by newspapers, [political] parties, and a legislative assembly noted more for its oratory than its legislation. During this period, elite men oscillated between cooperation with British authorities in administering the state and opposition to colonial rule. Gender segregation mandated that middle- and upper-class women start women-only organizations and institutions, which gave them autonomy to pursue their own agendas…. These groups pressed for expanded education, reform of family law, and women’s rights in secular or religious terms… In the wake of the revolution of 1919 and failed negotiations, Great Britain unilaterally awarded Egypt semi-independence in 1922, giving male politicians greater control of the state. [In] the constitution of 1923…women were denied the vote in a system established to promote the interests of upper-class men.


Document D: I would Decree  
Malak Hifni Nasif

This excerpt from A Lecture in the Club of the Umma Party is taken from a speech Malak Hifni Nasif (see blurb for Document 4) presented to women in 1909. In 1911 Nasif formulated a list of demands presented to the all-male Muslim Egyptian Congress meeting in Heliopolis. The hope of feminists like Nasif was that following Britain’s nominal acknowledgement of Egypt’s independence demands such as these would be incorporated into Egypt’s constitution.

Cover of the publication of the EFU’s publication The Egyptian Woman  
Photo:  
http://egyptophile.blogspot.com/2014/12/hoda-shaarawi-une-egyptienne-visage.htm
The Path To Follow

Now I shall turn to the path we should follow. If I had the right to legislate, I would decree:

1. Teaching girls the Qur’an and the correct sunna [practice of the Prophet Muhammad].

2. Providing primary and secondary school education for girls, and compulsory preparatory school education for all.

3. Instructing girls on the theory and practice of home economics, health, first aid, and childcare.

4. Setting a quota for females in medicine and education so they can serve the women of Egypt.

5. Allowing women to study any other advanced subjects they wish without restriction.

6. Bringing up girls from infancy stressing patience, honesty, work, and other virtues.

7. Adhering to the shari’a [Islamic law] concerning betrothal and marriage, and not permitting any woman and man to marry without first meeting each other in the presence of the father or male relative of the bride.

8. Adopting the veil and outdoor dress of the Turkish women of Istanbul.*

9. Maintaining the best interests of the country and dispensing with foreign goods and people as much as possible.

10. Making it incumbent upon our brothers, the men of Egypt, to implement this program.

* Nasif complains that Egyptian women have gone too far in adopting Western dress, for example by cinching their waists and revealing their figures. She believes that elite women’s Turkish dress modified traditional clothing without abandoning it.

Women and Islam” Weekend Workshop  
March 4-5, 2017  
Handout for “Lesson Plan: First Feminists of Egypt: The Early Twentieth Century “

Questions

1. How does Nasif organize her prescription for the “path we should follow”? What comes first, and why do you think she chose it?

4. Nasif is cautious about adopting both foreign manners and goods from abroad. Given Egypt’s history at the time she lived, of what do you think she was fearful?

Documents 1 through 6

Document 1: An Early Marriage  
Huda Shaarawi

Huda Shaarawi (1879-1947) had a long career as the leader of the Egyptian Feminist Union, which she founded in 1923. She spent her youth in Cairo, born into a life of privilege. Her father was a wealthy landowner, prominent in Egyptian nationalist politics. Her mother descended from the Turko-Circassian elite that had ruled Egypt for centuries. Among the wealthy urban classes, seclusion of women was regarded as a mark of status. Shaarawi learned to recite the Quran at an early age, but despite her desire for training in Arabic grammar, her family deemed this subject necessary only for men. She was tutored at home and became more fluent in French, the language of elite women, than in Arabic. At age thirteen she was wed to her legal guardian, a cousin in his forties. This excerpt is from Shaarawi’s autobiography.


In an instant [at my wedding] … stark reality appeared. Faint and crying I clung to the gown of a relation — the wife of Ahmad Bey Hijazi — who was trying to flee like the others and I pleaded, ‘Don’t abandon me here! Take me with you.’ My French tutor who was at my side embraced me and cried along with me murmuring, ‘Have courage, my daughter, have courage.’ Mme Richard, supporting me on the other side, wept as she tried to console me with tender words. Then a woman came and lowered a veil of silver thread over my head like a mask concealing the face of a condemned person approaching execution. At that moment, the bridegroom entered the room…” (57)
One day [fifteen months after my marriage] I heard my mother speak to my husband in a loud, angry voice. Then she summoned me inquiring about a document my husband had given me, but I had no recollection of it. My husband turned and said, 'It is in the envelope I handed you the morning after our wedding.' Then I recalled he had given me a sealed envelope on which was written, 'To be kept with the Lady'... It was a declaration by Ali Shaarawi freeing his slave-concubine and committing himself thereafter to a monogamous union. It was a legal document, duly signed by two witnesses... When I heard that [my husband had returned to his slave-concubine with whom he was expecting a child] I clapped my hands with joy. I rushed to my companion and confidant and told her the news that would bring the end to my misery... Afterward he [my husband] tried to effect a reconciliation, promising to fulfill his obligations and whatever else might be requested of him...


**Questions:**

1. Shaarawi objected to this marriage on several counts. What were they?

2. What does the wedding veil mean to Shaarawi? What symbolism does it have in any traditions that you know about?

3. What is the role of Huda’s French tutor and of her family friend, Mme. Richards, in the scene described? How might Shaarawi’s knowledge of French culture have affected her views on women’s roles?

4. How does Shaarawi assert her will to escape the marriage, and on what contractual basis? Imagine that she were illiterate; would the outcome of her marriage have been the same?

5. Shaarawi reconciles with her husband seven years later. In the interim she: supports herself on her own inherited money, travels with chaperones to Alexandria, shops in public at department stores, meets many women and hears their tales, learns Arabic grammar (previously forbidden to her). She frequents the salons of Eugénie Le Brun, attended by both men and women. (Le Brun, a convert to Islam, also known as Madam Rushdi, was writing a book on Islam as a force in women’s empowerment.)

   - In what ways did Shaarawi defy conventions after her marriage?
   - How did her education in Arabic and French prepare her to do be a leader of Egyptian feminism?
Document 2a: Women and the National Struggle of Egypt
Huda Shaarawi.

Huda Shaarawi (see previous blurb) supported the Wafd Party in its quest for Egyptian independence from Britain following World War I. Her husband Ali Shaarawi was a founding member of the party, and politics drew them together. In 1919 the British deported the party’s leader Saad Zaghlul, along with others, but not Shaarawi’s husband who was the party’s treasurer. Huda led the women’s march in the streets of Cairo, breaking the restrictions of their gender-segregated lives, in protest against the deportation of their national leaders. She describes the scene of March 16 in her memoirs below.

By the end of the month it is estimated that 800 Egyptians were killed.

Egyptian women demonstrating during the revolution of 1919-1922. Wikipedia

I was determined the demonstration should resume. When I advanced, a British soldier stepped toward me pointing his gun, but I made my way past him. As one of the women tried to pull me back, I shouted in a loud voice, ‘Let me die so Egypt shall have an Edith Cavell’ (an English nurse shot and killed by the Germans during the First World War, who became an instant martyr). Continuing in the direction of the soldiers, I called upon the women to follow. A pair of arms grabbed me and the voice of Regina Khayyat rang in my ears. ‘This is madness. Do you want to risk the lives of the students? It will happen if the British raise a hand against you.’ At the thought of our unarmed sons doing battle against the weaponry of British troops, and of the Egyptian losses sure to occur, I came to my senses and stopped still. We stood still for three hours while the sun blazed down on us. The students meanwhile continued to encourage us, saying that the heat of the day would soon abate… I did not care if I suffered sunstroke – the blame would fall upon the tyrannical British authority — but we stood up to the heat and suffered no harm.

Huda Shaarawi, Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist (113-114)

2b: Egypt’s Hero Due in Cairo Today

The article clip below was written on April 3 and published on April 5, 1921 —a few weeks after Sharaawi led women in a street protest. The full article describes demonstrations throughout different quarters of Cairo, but does not mention women demonstrators.
EYPT'S HERO DUE IN CAIRO TODAY

Zaghlul Pasha, Exiled Nationalist Leader, Returning From Europe.

DEMONSTRATION PLANNED

City Ablaze With Crimson Banners, Typifying Independence—British Confined to Barracks.

BY T. WALTER WILLIAMS.

Copyright, 1921, by The New York Times Company.

CAIRO, April 3.—Saad Zaghlul Pasha, leader of the Egyptian Nationalists in their fight for independence, will arrive here tomorrow from Europe for his first visit to his native land since 1919. Monday and Tuesday, it is predicted here, will be the two most important days in modern Egyptian history, for with the arrival of Zaghlul will begin conferences which it is generally believed will result in the solution of the Egyptian problem.

Certainly preparations such as Egypt has never witnessed before are on foot to welcome the popular leader. The moderate element is apparently in full control of them, but a certain amount of anxiety is felt among foreigners. The demonstration is expected to be chiefly in Cairo, the home of Zaghlul. Others will take place in Alexandria upon the arrival of his steamship and all the vil-

Questions on Document 2a:

1. When Huda Shaarawi proclaims, “let me die” what evidence does she present that she is ready to do so?

2. What stops Shaarawi from leading the unarmed crowd into the armed British soldiers?

3. How does she convince the reader that she nonetheless continued to challenge British power?

4. Compare her act of courage to Amina’s in *Palace Walk*, or to women in Egypt's Arab Spring demonstrations of 2011.

Questions on Document 2b:

1. Shaarawi demonstrated in mid-March. Why do you think the British confined their troops on April 3 and left the Egyptian police in charge of demonstrations? What does it say about the success or failure of ongoing protests up until April 3?

2. How historic is Zaghlul’s return, according to the New York Times? By what means will the “Egyptian problem” be resolved, according to the Times?

3. Do you think women’s participation in the national struggle, as described by Huda, will further the national cause? The cause of women’s rights? Explain. Consult the timeline when formulating an answer.

4. How would you compare the impact of women’s participation in this march nearly one hundred years ago to the Women’s March on Washington following the election of Donald Trump in 2016?

**Document 3: Pan-Arab Feminism**

Huda Shaarawi

*Huda Shaarawi, center, one of three Egyptian delegates to an international conference in Rome, 1923*

[http://shaarawi.weebly.com](http://shaarawi.weebly.com)
Huda Shaarawi (see previous blurb) remained politically active her whole life. Her husband died in 1922; the next year she helped found the Egyptian Feminist Union. She led the EFU for many years and also helped to found the magazine L’Egyptienne (The Egyptian Woman). In 1923 she represented the EFU along with two colleagues at the international feminist meeting in Rome (International Alliance of Women). When she returned she publically removed her veil, signifying that women were entering the public sphere and would no longer tolerate being secluded within the home. The excerpt below is taken from her opening speech of the Arab Feminist Conference in Cairo, in 1944. The Arab Feminist Union was created in 1945, the same year as the Arab League.

The advanced nations after careful examination into the matter, have come to believe in the equality of sexes in all rights even though their religious and secular laws have not reached the level Islam has reached in terms of justice toward the woman. Islam has given her the right to vote for the ruler and has allowed her to give opinions on questions of jurisprudence and religion.

The woman, given by the creator the right to vote for the successor of the Prophet [Muhammad], is deprived of the right to vote for a deputy in a circuit or district election by a (male) being created by God. At the same time, this right is enjoyed by a man who might have less education and experience than the woman. And she is the mother who has given birth to the man and has raised and guided him.

The Sharia gave her the right to education, to take part in the hijra (referring to the time of the Prophet Muhammad and his flight from Mecca to Medina), and to fight in the ranks of warriors and has made her equal to the man in all rights and responsibilities, even in the crimes that either sex can commit. However, the man who alone distributes rights, has kept for himself the right to legislate and rule… The woman today demands to regain her share of rights that have been taken from her and gives back to the man the responsibilities and sanctions he has given to her.

Whenever the woman has demanded her rights in legislation and ruling to participate with the man in all things that bring good and benefit to her nation and her children, he claims he wants to spare the woman the perils of election battles, forgetting that she is more zealous about the election of deputies than men and that she already participates in election battles, quite often influencing the results… Gentlemen, I leave room for the conferees to defend the rights of the woman in all areas.

Questions

1. List the rights of women that according to Shaarawi women exercised during Prophet Muhammad’s lifetime.

2. Does Shaarawi here play “catch up” with European and American women? Explain?
3. Does the author express a wish here to extend the rights of women or to safeguard those they have, or both?

4. What rights is she advocating for here? How do you think her audience received this message? (Note: delegates from Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, Palestine, Syria and Trans-Jordan attended the 1945 conference.)


Document 4: On Polygamy
Malak Hifni Nasif

Malak Hifni Nasif (1886-1918) was born into a well-educated Egyptian family. Her father encouraged her studies of classical Arabic. She was among the first women to graduate from a training high school for teachers. A confident public speaker, she won permission to lecture to women’s groups on Fridays at the Egyptian University. She published essays in newspapers under her penname, Bahithat al-Badiya (Seeker in the Desert) like this one from 1910. Nasif founded the Union for the Education of Women as well as a health care service modeled on the Red Cross. She cultivated alliances with many other Arab feminists such as the Mayy Ziyada, and Huda Shaarawi. She discovered only after her marriage that her husband had a wife. She died at thirty-two of the influenza pandemic.

When a woman is doomed to bear the catastrophe of her husband’s second marriage, her joy disappears, and in its place burn the flames of envy, weakening her body and planting the seeds of evil inside her. Furthermore, if she is not pious, the devil will incite her and teach the methods of revenge and intrigue. It is not uncommon that we hear of a woman poisoning her husband, or his wife, or a son of the other woman, thus bringing about destruction for all. Nor is it uncommon that a woman spreads lies about her rival to her husband or mars her reputation among people…

To my mind, divorce is easier and less painful than taking a second wife. The first is unhappiness with freedom whereas the second is misery and bondage. For if unhappiness is inevitable, why should a woman bear with it and also undergo a blazing heartache and the rending of her soul?
Polygamy is a corruption of men, of health, of money, of moral values, of children, and of women’s hearts… Polygamy corrupts women’s hearts because the first wife hates the man for angering her and hurting her feelings, and the second wife never trusts him because he is committed to another. The result is he achieves nothing and becomes, like a jack-of-all trades, master of none!

It is, however, to my great relief that the habit of polygamy is shrinking now, especially among the educated and well-to-do, because modernity and enlightenment prohibit it, even though they may still claim that jurisprudence [Islamic law] permits it….”


Questions

1. Re-read Document C on Women and Islam. What qualifications are placed on polygamy in Islam? What reasons does Nasif present against polygamy from the point of view of woman’s well being?

2. What reasons does Nasif present against polygamy for the man’s sake? Why do you think she chooses to use the phrase, “master of none”?

3. Why does Nasif advocate for divorce over polygamous marriages? Do Muslim women have in principal the right of divorce? (Document C)

4. As a devout Muslim and feminist, what changes to Egyptian law do you think someone like Nasif would press for?

Document 5: Women’s Financial Rights are Guaranteed by Islam
Munira Thabit

Munira Thabit (1902-1967) obtained a French law degree but turned to journalism when it became too trying as a woman to practice law in Egypt. She founded her own Arabic magazine Al Amal from which this excerpt is taken (1925). Like other Egyptian feminists Thabit felt betrayed when the constitution of 1923 failed to acknowledge the rights for which women were advocating. Parliament provided no seats for women to even view the all-male legislature in action. Thabit advocated for women to be elected to parliament well before the EFU (Egyptian Feminist Union), but once the EFU caught up to her demands Shaarawi and Thabit reconciled. Throughout her life she had a wide general readership for her contributions to Al
Political rights are part of the general rights of women’s lives. Intelligent, educated, broad-minded women, who want the responsibility of leading dignified lives, cannot do so without enjoying their full rights … We take advantage of this occasion to tell those who care to know that we respect religion and the Qur’an more than those who pretend to be advocates of religion, and we understand it more thoroughly. Those who use religion as a slogan have a mentality different from ours and consequently have a specific objective to achieve, which blinds them to the truth. They are so confused that they end up harming themselves as well as religion. What are their objections to our demand for the just treatment of women in financial matters? Are we not living at a time in which women are often required to support men? … Men simply look for women’s fortunes. If a woman is wealthy, she attracts men’s attention and they court her. If she is not, she is not worth the effort.

This is not to mention the fact that men employ devilish and despicable techniques to deny women their financial rights, granted to them by the Shari’a.


Questions

1. For what type of woman is Thabit speaking? Might all women fit her description, or all men acknowledge that such women exist?

2. Who might “those who care to know” and “those who use religion” refer to?

3. In what ways is Thabit leveraging her own education and that of other women against those who wish to deny them rights?

Document 6: In Support of Higher Education for Women

Asma Fahmy

Asma Fahmy* was an educator born in the Sudan to Egyptian parents. She also contributed articles and stories to journals. It was not until the 1920s that Egypt founded state secondary for girls. Fahmy spent most of her life teaching at the Hilmiyya Secondary School for Girls. She studied at Cairo University as an external
student. Founded in 1908 Cairo University’s women’s division caused so much controversy that it was shut down.

* Photo: Cairo University, Wikipedia

*The University reopened to women in 1928. The excerpt below, written for a cultural weekly, was published in 1934.*

Women urgently need this kind of [higher] education. A woman’s mind, like that of her male counterpart, is what sets her apart from senseless beasts. This mind, nurtured by knowledge, will only develop if it is used constantly. A human being first and foremost, a woman should not be hampered by motherhood or domestic life from fulfilling the most basic human needs: the enjoyment of an adequate and liberating higher education. From the point of view of social interaction and connectivity, women need education far more than men, since they have long been deprived of it. Confined at home and prevented from participating in the free exchange of ideas and discussion, women have been prevented from developing their own social faculties. Cultivated men are accustomed to teamwork and have the tolerance necessary for conducting conversations and arguments based on rational thinking. Were women to acquire these characteristics in addition to their natural tenderness and sympathy, the whole society no doubt would move forward, and family life would become far happier.

…The biological function of women cannot alone lead society to progress and prosperity. Humanity needs women’s work and their independent talents outside the home as much as it needs their work inside it.


* Dates not given.

1. On what basis does Fahmy argue that women need higher education more than men?

2. According to Fahmy what is woman’s “most basic need” as a human being? Does it conflict with society’s needs as a whole? Why might some think so?

3. Based on what Fahmy writes, deduce several reasons that many Egyptians do not support higher education for women.

**Document 7 Excerpts from Modern Egypt by Lord Cromer, 1908**

Evelyn Baring 1st Earl of Cromer, better known as Lord Cromer (1841-1917) was a British imperialist. He was appointed consul-general to Egypt from in 1883 following the
British invasion of Egypt and remained until 1907. At the time he arrived Egypt was bankrupt and in debt to European powers. Britain’s main goal was to control the Suez Canal, which provided Britain with a crucial shortcut to India, as well as to profit from the Egyptian cotton industry. At the end of his tenure he wrote his two-volume opus Modern Egypt. In the book he justifies British rule by “the white man’s burden” to bring civilization to Egypt. In these extracts he bemoans the oppression of Egyptian women. In England, Cromer was a founding member and president of the Men’s League for Opposing Women’s Suffrage in England.


1. There are three quotations on the cover of the book. In what languages are they? How is the reader meant to be impressed by the author?
2. Since Napoleon also invaded Egypt, why do you think Cromer chose to quote him?
It cannot be doubted that the seclusion of women exercises a baneful effect on Eastern society. The arguments on this subject are, indeed, so commonplace that it is unnecessary to dwell on them. It will be sufficient to say that seclusion, by confining the sphere of woman’s interest to a very limited horizon, cramps the intellect and withers the mental development of one-half of the population in Moslem countries. “An Englishwoman asked an Egyptian lady how she passed her time. ‘I sit on this sofa,’ she answered, ‘and when I am tired, I cross over and sit on that.’” Moreover, inasmuch as women, in their capacities as wives and mothers, exercise a great influence over the characters of their husbands and sons, it is obvious that the seclusion of women must produce a deteriorating effect on the male population, in whose presumed interests the custom was originally established, and is still maintained.
1. Compare the Egyptian lady in this excerpt to the other women you have encountered in this lesson, such as Mafouz's Amina, or Ahmed's grandmother. How does Cromer convey his attitude toward Egyptian women? How much respect does Cromer show for the “Egyptian lady”? (The footnote indicates that this encounter took place in Cairo.)

2. Which if any of Cromer’s criticisms of seclusion are similar to those you encountered in other documents in this lesson? Specify which of his criticisms are similar, and which are not.

3. Building state schools was a priority of Isma'il Pasha, whose reign ended in 1879. Cromer reversed this trend by demanding fees for school attendance. What does this say about his commitment to “expand” the intellects of Egyptians?

Document C. On Polygamy page 157

1. Look back to Document 4 On Polygamy written by Malak Hifni Nasif. On what aspects of polygamy do she and Cromer agree?

2. How does Cromer use the far-from-universal practice of polygamy to demonstrate the inherent superiority of the colonizers and the degradation of all Egyptians?

3. In Victorian England how was “ideal of womanhood” used to reinforce the cult of domesticity?
4. Who are the revered women in Islam, such as Fatima and Ayisha, and what qualities are they revered for?


The mind of the true Eastern is at once lethargic and suspicious; he does not want to be reformed, and he is convinced that, if the European wishes to reform him, the desire springs from sentiments which bode him no good. Moreover, his conservatism is due to an instinct of self-preservation, and to a dim perception that, if he allows himself to be even slightly reformed, all the things to which he attaches importance will be not merely changed in this or that particular, but will rather be swept off the face of the earth. Perhaps he is not far wrong. Although there are many highly-educated gentlemen who profess the Moslem religion, it has yet to be proved that Islam can assimilate civilisation without succumbing in the process. It is, indeed, not improbable that, in its passage through the European crucible, many of the distinctive features of Islam, the good alike with the bad, will be volatilised, and that it will eventually issue forth in a form scarcely capable of recognition. “The
Women and Islam” Weekend Workshop  
March 4-5, 2017  
Handout for “Lesson Plan: First Feminists of Egypt: The Early Twentieth Century “

Note: Volatised here means turned to vapor

1. What reforms of Egyptian society were instituted by Mehmet Ali 1805-1867 (Muhammad Ali) and his heirs like Isma’il Pasha, whose reign ended in 1879? Do these changes bear out Cromer’s assertion that Egyptians do not want reforms?

2. Can Egyptians retain their religion and “become” civilized at the same time? What is Cromer’s viewpoint? How does he view the treatment of women as related to this question?

3. Would Cromer’s prediction about the near-demise of Islam in the wake of Egypt’s modernizing make some Egyptians more or less likely to adapt the reforms of Malak Hifni Nasif and Huda Shaarawi? Why or why not?

Document E: The Mission of Englishman page 130

in Egypt, male and female, up to a grand total of 9,734,000.

The Englishman, I have said, came to Egypt with the fixed idea that he had a mission to perform, and, with his views about individual justice, equal rights before the law, the greatest happiness of the greatest number, and similar notions, he will not unnaturally interpret his mission in this sense, that he is to benefit the mass of the population. There lie those nine or ten million native Egyptians at the bottom of the social ladder, a poor, ignorant, credulous, but whithal not unkindly race, being such as sixty centuries of misgovernment and oppression by various rulers, from Pharaohs to Pashas, have made them. It is for the civilised Englishman to extend to them the hand of fellowship and encouragement, and to raise them, morally and materially, from the abject state in which he finds them. And
1. According to Cromer has Egypt ever been a well-governed civilization? By implication, what is the only way Egypt will ever become “civilized”?

2. If someone claimed such immense inherent superiority to your culture, homeland, religion, history, nation, what feelings would it engender in you?

3. Look back to examples among the six feminist voices in Documents 1-6 in which proposed changes to women’s roles in society are made within the framework of Islam. How does this differ from Cromer’s viewpoint?

**Graphic Organizer 1**

**Presenting your Document**

**Directions:**
In order to present your advocate for women to your committee, fill in this graphic organizer. You can use it as notes when you present her to your committee.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Document No. &amp; Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date Published</th>
<th>Author's Biography</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social class, education, accomplishments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How do her accomplishments reflect on how women were moving forward in Egyptian society?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How do her efforts further the goal?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Type of document and its intended audience. |        |
List the changes for which the author advocates explicitly, or by implication.

What are the author’s arguments? What evidence does she present?

What can be deduced about the counter-arguments at the time this was written?

Other remarks

**Graphic Organizer 2: The Path to Follow**

Now we shall turn to the path we should follow. If we had the right to legislate, we would decree:

1. Because

2. Because

3. Because
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agenda 1: Committees Meet to Share Documents 1-6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. All committee members should keep a list of everyone’s demands.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Each student should present in order of his or her document number.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Each student has no more than 3 minutes to present.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. After each presentation committee members should discuss:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- What does this woman’s life demonstrate about how best to further the roles of women in the public sphere?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- What changes regarding the lives of women did or would (by implication) this woman favor?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- What “push-back” would proposing this change face?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Can the group begin to prioritize which are the most important changes to advocate for? Which are the most likely to win approval for implementation in the new constitution

*Note that the first three students all present on Huda Shaarawi. What can we see about the progression of her efforts?
Agenda 2: Listing Demands and Reasons for them

- Using notes from the last delegate meeting, and Nasif’s Document C as a guide, fill Graphic Organizer 2: The Path to Follow.

- The demands should be in order of importance. Do delegate members feel that the right to vote is primary, or the right to be educated, for example?

- Each one sentence demand should be followed by a one-sentence reason for this demand following the “because.”

- Take care to write each demand clearly and forcefully.

- Make sure that each demand comes from an understand of what the women advocates themselves want.

Graphic Organizer 3: Compare Feminist Movements

Compare Egypt’s women’s movement of the early twentieth century to that in the United States, Britain, or elsewhere in the world. Use your text or complete research to fill in the chart below. Before writing an essay create a Venn Diagram to help you to see how the two movements you are comparing both overlapped and differed.

Note: In making comparisons between feminisms in different societies, historian Judith Tucker offers this caveat:

*Historians have disagreed about how to characterize women’s writings and activities in this period [of Egyptian history]. Are we, in fact, dealing here with a familiar form of feminism, or do the differences between women’s concerns in Europe and in the Islamic world preclude the use of a universalizing concept such as feminism? In general, the former tendency of scholars to assume that women’s movements shared similar assumptions about gender inequality and therefore similar aims in the elimination of*
same have given way to a wariness about generalizing from the European experience. Certainly the development of feminism in Europe was followed with interest by women elsewhere, but it is far from clear that the means and aims of European feminism, to say nothing of its basic assumptions, were adopted wholesale.


### Graphic Organizer 3

**Comparison Chart: Feminists “First Wave” Movements**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comparison Chart</th>
<th>Egypt</th>
<th>United States (or other)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When did the feminist movement begin?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What event/s marked its beginning?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What rights did women have at that time?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What customs and traditions empowered or curtailed women’s participation in society at that time?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What events were happening at this time nationwide? How did they impact women’s roles and desire to change them?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name several key leaders of the movement. Into what social class were they born? What impelled these women to demand their rights?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was the movement influenced by those of other nations?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was change in women’s roles gradual or abrupt? Did new technologies play a role? Did clothing symbolize a change of status?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In what ways did religious institutions hold back or empower the movement?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What rights were highest on the feminist agenda?  
What strategies did women use to obtain their goals?  
How did men participate in the movement?  
What were the bases/arguments for resisting change on the part of both men and women?  
Gauge how effective the movement was by mid-20th century in meeting the demands women set forth to win?  
Other
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1873</td>
<td>Egyptian scholar and founding intellectual of al’Nahda (the Arab enlightenment) Rifa’a Rafi’ El-Tahtawi dies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1877</td>
<td>Slavery is outlawed. By 1884 this includes forbidding the sale of women as concubines.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1879</td>
<td>Huda Shaarawi born to upper-class family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1880s</td>
<td>Princess Nazli Fazil holds palace salons, including men and women.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1882</td>
<td>Britain occupies Egypt. While the Khedive, a hereditary ruler of Egypt remains, ultimate power is in the hands of the British. Egypt becomes dependent on foreign loans as it builds the Suez Canal (1869) and further modernizes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890s</td>
<td>Eugénie Le Brun’s holds her salon in Cairo at which unveiling and other feminist issues are discussed. A convert to Islam Le Brun believes it is social customs and not Islam that holds women back.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1892</td>
<td>Hind Nawfal founds al-Fatah (Young Woman) a monthly journal dedicated to women’s issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1899</td>
<td>Islamic scholar Qasim Amin publishes The Liberation of Women. He advocates a broad range of rights for women.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>The first known journal edited by a Muslim woman, Sa’diyya Sa’d al-Din, in Turkish and Arabic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>The monthly Tariqiyat al-Mar’a is launched from meetings in the home of Fatma Rashid. The journal supports gender segregation and demands religious education for girls. Many women start writing for conservative journals such as this one.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nabawiiya Musa (1890-1951) publishes Fruits of Life in Girl’s Education her program for female early education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Huda Shaarawi with other upper class women meet for lectures Fridays at Fouad I University. The meetings do not include men, but the space is public.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>Malak Hifni Nasif presents her ten-point feminist agenda to the Egyptian Nationalist Congress via a male proxy. She demands higher education for women and reforms to Personal Status Law based on Islamic law. She insists that women once again be allowed to pray in mosques.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>The Great War begins. Egypt becomes a protectorate of Britain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>The Egyptian nationalist Wafd party writes a proposed constitution. Despite support from women on the Wafdist Women’s Central Committee, the draft leaves out changes related to women’s status.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Malak Hifni Nasif dies of influenza; Huda Shaarawi eulogizes her in a public speech.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td>Egyptian revolution begins against British rule. Elite women led by Huda Shaarawi. The first public flouting of female segregation staged on behalf of the nation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>New Women Foundation founded to teach working class women hygiene, literacy and crafts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>Women can obtain a divorce from a court on more grounds, such as male desertion and imprisonment (Law 24).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>First government high school for girls.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1922</td>
<td>Egypt gains conditional independence from Britain. Egypt retains its monarch and establishes a parliament, but remains under the “protection” of Britain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 1923 | - The Wafd Party drafts a new constitution based on a parliamentary representative system. It fails to meet the expectations of Egyptian feminists.  
- Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU) founded by Huda Shaarawi. The EFU demands women’s right to work, to education, and (later on) to vote.  
- The EFU attends the International Woman Suffrage Alliance in Rome. Upon return Shaarawi unveils at the Cairo train station.  
- Legal reform for age at marriage: 18 for men and 16 for women; often not enforced. |
| 1925 | - Traditional divorce laws modified, discouraging male repudiation of their wives.  
- The EFU starts publishing *L’Egyptienne*, a journal dedicated to extending women’s rights. Published in French it reaches an international audience.  
- Mounira Thabit starts publishing *al-Amal* in Arabic which expressly advocates political rights for women. |
| 1927 | - EFU’s proposes amendments to the constitution restricting polygamy and the male right to divorce through verbal denunciation. The cabinet approves, but King Fouad rejects them. |
| 1928 | - First women enter Cairo University, with much controversy.  
- The Muslim Brotherhood is founded. |
| 1929 | - In divorce, women are given custody of their children until a later age than previously, after which they belong to the father. |
| 1937 | - EFU begins publication of *Al-Misriyah (The Woman)* in Arabic to reach different women of different social classes. |
| 1944 | - Arab Feminist Union founded; Huda Shaarawi elected president. |
| 1945 | - Shaarawi presented by Egypt with the Nishan al-Kama, its highest honor. |
| 1947 | - Huda Sha’arawi dies. Doria Shafik (1908-1975) and many others carry on the fight for women’s suffrage. |
| 1949 | - Legalized prostitution forbidden by law. |
| 1953 | - Monarchy abolished. Egypt becomes a republic. |
| 1955 | - Shari’a courts abolished. Personal Status Laws codified and applied by the state, based on Islamic laws (Shari’a). |
| 1956 | - Nasser becomes president of Egypt.  
- Women gain the right to vote and to run for political office.  
- Egyptian constitution guarantees equal opportunities to citizens regardless of gender.  
- Personal Status Laws, based on Shari’a, continue to govern issues related to the family such as divorce, inheritance, polygamy. |
| 1957 | - Women elected to Egyptian parliament. |