

Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East

The Egyptian Women's Movement

Nadje Al-Ali
University of Exeter



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK <http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk>
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA <http://www.cup.org>
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain

© Nadjé Al-Ali 2000

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2000

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Plantin MT 10/13 pt *System* QuarkXPress™ [SE]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 521 78022 5 hardback
ISBN 0 521 78504 9 paperback

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	page x
<i>Note on transliteration</i>	xii
<i>List of groups, networks and organizations</i>	xiii
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xv
Introduction	1
1 Up against conceptual frameworks: post-orientalism, occidentalism and presentations of the self	19
2 Contextualizing the Egyptian women's movement	51
3 Self and generation: formative experiences of Egyptian women activists	86
4 Secularism: challenging neo-orientalism and 'his-stories'	128
5 From words to deeds: priorities and projects of contemporary activists	149
6 A mirror of political culture in Egypt: divisions and debates among women activists	185
Conclusion: 'standing on shifting ground'	216
<i>Bibliography</i>	233
<i>Index</i>	253

1 Up against conceptual frameworks: post-orientalism, occidentalism and presentations of the self

As I think about the question of how post-colonial scholarship has influenced more recent works about the 'East', and also ponder on the gains and pitfalls of post-orientalist scholarship, I come across Edward Said's reassuring words in his introduction to *Culture and Imperialism* (1993): 'Gone are the binary oppositions dear to the nationalist and imperialist enterprise' (p. xxviii). This, no doubt, constitutes a radical shift from his earlier account of history and representation (*Orientalism*, 1978), in which Said stressed that relations between the 'West' and the 'non-West' have been continuously characterized by conflict, divisiveness and dichotomies as the inevitable consequence of and reaction to colonialism. A sense of relief, almost comfort, arises: are we living in new times in which processes of decolonization within formerly colonized as well as colonizing countries allow reconciliation, liberation and the necessary steps to go beyond essentialisms, hierarchies and binary oppositions?

The feeling of relief vanishes when I put down my books and papers on 'post-colonialism' – all full of promising notions of 'breaking down boundaries', 'hybridity', 'plural identities' and 'cultural interdependencies'. Reading the newspapers or watching television, I feel confronted with a very different language and reality: the ongoing battle of strength between the United States and Iraq (or rather Saddam Hussein, if we want to believe various spokespeople), Nato airstrikes in Yugoslavia, Serb aggression in Kosovo, and the ongoing oppression and humiliation of Palestinians in Israel. The list goes on with incidents of imperialist interference, ethnic violence, nationalist bigotry and religious fundamentalism, which not only give rise to a rhetoric of 'us' versus 'them' and a new system of hierarchies, but also show the dangerous and often bloody aspect of imperialism, and resistances to it, in our contemporary 'post-colonial' times.

Undeniably, the period of direct colonial occupation and rule by imperial powers has passed, but we are still left with processes and practices of domination as well as economic exploitation, all signifying present-day imperialism, sometimes called 'neo-colonialism'. Despite – or rather

because of – this realization, I found a source of inspiration (as so many other ‘younger scholars in and from the colonies as well as younger metropolitan researchers’, as Rattansi (1997) puts it) in post-colonial scholarship, especially in the works of Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Stuart Hall and Lila Abu-Lughod. What then is the significance of the concept of ‘post-colonialism’ in our analyses of contemporary power relations, cultural representations and politics and global capitalism?

The post-colonial turn

Like the concept ‘post-modern’, the post-colonial denotes a sense of ‘new times’ as well as particular theoretical approaches and analyses. Post-colonial scholarship, like post-modernism, often transcends traditional disciplinary boundaries and displays an ‘eclectic mix of post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, feminism, Marxism and postmodernism itself’ (Rattansi, 1997: 481). A survey of the literature debating the content, methodology and politics of the ‘post-colonial’ reveals that the term has been variously applied to very different kinds of historical moments, geographical regions, cultural identities, political affiliations, predicaments and reading practices (Moore-Gilbert, 1997: 11).

A lack of clear-cut definition about what is ‘post-colonial’ and the blurring of boundaries between colonized and colonizer have often lent themselves to the criticism that the concept and its underlying analyses tend to be theoretically and politically ambiguous (Shohat, 1992). Another objection is related to its perceived linearity, as the word ‘post’ suggests a ‘past’, that is the final closure of a historical period (McClintock, 1992; Shohat, 1992). Other critics attack post-colonial scholars for their complicity with western ‘high theory’ and their embeddedness in western academic institutions, their fashionable use of trendy jargon and their remoteness from the struggles and material realities in the ‘Third World’ (Ahmad, 1992; Dirlik, 1992). The criticism of the widespread use of post-structuralism goes beyond the notion of trendiness and marketability; it is also argued that post-colonial discourse is a ‘culturalism’ (Dirlik, 1992: 347), which seriously neglects the role of global capitalism in the structuring of the modern world (Ahmad, 1992; Dirlik, 1992).

Taking all these criticisms seriously and acknowledging problematic areas, several scholars, who are either self-consciously post-colonialists or, at the very least, sympathetic, have managed to counter many of the most common and severe criticisms. Stuart Hall (1996a), for instance, stresses that the post-colonial period is characterized by a general process of decolonization among both the formerly colonized and the colonizers, which is not to suggest that it marks an ‘epochal stage’ that reverses old

power relations once and for all. Post-colonial times are characterized by a series of transitions, a multiplicity of processes and developments towards decolonization and the de-centring of the 'West', but also, as many post-colonial critics point out, the emergence of powerful local elites and 'neo-colonial' dependency on the developed capitalist world (Hall, 1996a; Rattansi, 1997; Said, 1993).

Rather than downplaying the destructive role of the colonizers and neo-colonial powers, post-colonial scholarship intends to subvert the old colonizing-colonized binary and the clearly demarcated inside-outside of the colonial system by directing attention to 'the many ways in which colonization was never simply external to the societies of the imperial metropolis' (Hall, 1996a: 246). Effects of this inscription and 'transculturation' have resulted in hybridity among cultures, which were never as self-contained, authentic and 'pure' as they were characteristically portrayed by imperial powers in the past and nowadays by nationalist and fundamentalist movements in the previously colonized world.

But, for the time being, as Hall warns us:

We have to keep these two ends of the chain in play at the same time – overdetermination and difference, condensation and dissemination – if we are not to fall into a playful deconstructionism, the fantasy of a powerless *utopia* of difference. It is only too tempting to fall into the trap of assuming that, because essentialism has been deconstructed *theoretically*, therefore it has been displaced *politically*. (ibid.: 249)

Post-colonialism, then, does not have to be politically ambiguous, but it takes the complexity and ambiguity of politics into account. According to Hall, 'political positionalities are not fixed and do not repeat themselves from one historical situation to the next or from one theatre of antagonism to another' (ibid.: 244). Taking issue with Ella Shohat's criticism of the 'depoliticizing implications' of the post-colonialist project to subvert clear-cut politics of binary oppositions, Hall quotes her own words as backing up his argument:

The last three decades in the 'Third World' have offered a number of very complex and politically ambiguous developments . . . [including] the realization that the wretched of the earth are not unanimously revolutionary . . . and [that] despite the broad patterns of geo-political hegemony, power relations in the Third World are also dispersed and contradictory. (Shohat quoted in ibid.: 245)

Inherent in post-colonial politics is the questioning of the Enlightenment project and the de-centring of the 'West'. What cannot be stressed enough is that post-colonialism does not present a totalizing perspective on the formation and dynamics of historical moments and the contemporary world. Material relations and global capitalism should, ideally, figure

as much as literary productions and cultural representations. Some of the shortcomings of post-colonial scholarship might be explained by the fact that, despite its claim to interdisciplinary practice, much of post-colonial scholarship is practised by literary critics who do not sufficiently engage with other disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, economics and political science. Or to put it in a different way: many anthropologists, sociologists, economists and political scientists have not yet taken on board the theoretical, methodological and political stipulations generated by post-colonial scholarship.

Beyond *Orientalism*

Some treatises about post-colonial scholarship suggest that it is something that begins with Edward Said's classic study and critique of orientalism – the knowledge production about the 'East' and its underlying power relations and politics. But as Said himself points out in his more recent work, the resistance to colonial systems of representation and the attempt to decolonize history and culture started long before *Orientalism* (1978), and is most explicit in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Mask* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). Nevertheless, the influence and importance of *Orientalism* is evident in that it has extensively and passionately been cited, (mis)quoted, applied, evaluated, criticized, developed and subverted. Instead of belabouring *Orientalism* yet again, I would like to argue that Said's own intellectual and theoretical shift apparent in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), which indicates the move away from essentializing differences between the 'East' and the 'West' and thereby refusing the hierarchical binary positions upon which imperialism depended, has not been sufficiently taken on board and acknowledged by either his critics or his supporters.

Certainly, Said's attempt to articulate a politics of liberation on the basis of 'contrapuntual ensembles' or cultural hybridity as an alternative to chauvinistic and exclusionary nationalist politics easily lends itself to the criticism of being vague and naive (Rattansi, 1997: 497). The danger of interpreting cultural hybridity as fuzzy multiplicity is not unique to Said's work, but inherent in many post-colonial and post-modern writings. However vague the actual politics suggested by Said are, he provides a useful and creative framework in which a liberation politics can be further developed. Moreover, as a theoretical and methodological approach, *Culture and Imperialism* offers a way out of the impasse of essentialism and reductionism that Said criticized in *Orientalism*, yet had reproduced to some extent himself.

Inside the Middle East,¹ as well as among scholars working on the region, orientalism, understood as the practice of homogenizing and essentializing differences, is well and alive, albeit better disguised than in the past and often undercover. Post-orientalist scholarship, with its underlying aspiration of breaking away from discourses and methods that constructed a timeless essence, either with reference to exotic strangeness or framed in terms of mono-causal explanations (mainly pertaining to Islam), has still a long way to go before transcending its legacy.

Within the wide variety of scholarship that self-consciously considers itself post-orientalist, some works, more successfully than others, expose and undermine the monolithic and hegemonic discourses underlying earlier codifications and misrepresentations of 'the Orient'. While the process of deconstructing the notion of the 'East' has been a central motif in recent analyses of historians, literary critics, sociologists and anthropologists, this process has generally not included the 'West' within the field called 'Middle East Studies'. Reifications of the 'West' and an East–West dichotomy are, arguably, much more naturalized and unchallenged in studies relating to the various Arab countries of West Asia and North Africa than in other area studies, such as South Asia, for example.

There are many reasons for the fact that post-orientalist scholarship in general has been more successful in displacing the 'East' than the 'West', ranging from an absence of problematization of the 'West' by scholars and institutions too busy problematizing 'others' to geo-political pressures and factors, such as the establishment of the state of Israel. One very important factor is post-orientalism's rootedness in post-structuralist scholarship, namely the influence of Foucault transmitted via Said. What has made the West more monolithic is the vantage point of a critique of Enlightenment. It is not the West in its variety of discourses and ideologies or its daily manifestation that has been under the microscope, but rather the project of modernity and the philosophy of Enlightenment. In this process, modernity as a project becomes conflated with 'western thought'.

¹ In referring to the 'Middle East' I am following the designation given by Eickelman (1989). There are several problems with this terminology as it homogenizes the variety of peoples, experiences and cultures in the region. Politically, the term has become particularly problematic in the light of recent developments, e.g. the so-called peace process and discussions about a 'Middle East market', including Israel. While the designation 'Middle East' has not been coined by people living in the region and represents a nomenclature of European historical experience, it has been adopted in translation (*al-sharq al-awsat*). The term 'the Arab world' does not present an adequate alternative as it equally simplifies and generalizes. Moreover, the designation 'Arab' marginalizes the existence of non-Arab ethnic groups in the region.

In Egypt, as in many other parts of the formerly colonized world, the awareness of orientalism, the way Egypt has been studied, (mis)represented and, in the perception of many, ridiculed, evoked several reactions. On one level it led to a more systematic knowledge production about the 'West', on another level, but intrinsically linked to the previous one, the call for 'the indigenization of social science' emerged.

The move to decolonize anthropology and engage in post-orientalist scholarship induced more and more 'indigenous' scholars to do 'home-work', or 'anthropology in reverse' (Visweswaran, 1994: 102). While 'home-work' is still viewed with suspicion by the mainstream canon, it is becoming increasingly clear that the profound insights, language skills and motivations of many indigenous anthropologists subvert some of the cultural stereotypes, generalizations and misconceptions perpetuated by earlier conventional scholarship.

This is not to suggest that an 'indigenous scholar' is able to engage in intimate and in-depth research by the sheer attribute of being a 'local'. Many 'native' anthropologists are extremely far removed from the communities they set out to study in their home countries, either by class or religious affiliations, educational background or particular sub-cultural connection. Then there are many 'native' scholars who engage in positivistic research, trying to quantify, categorize and scientifically prove their previously well-thought-out presuppositions. However, I argue that those researchers who self-reflectively and critically engage in research at home have greater potential for 'close', in-depth and also 'liberating' research than their 'foreign' colleagues. This might be due to some previous involvement out of which the research topic grew, e.g. development work and women's activism. This practical involvement might be entangled with an emotional involvement, a deep urge to 'do something for one's country', a sense of responsibility that might transcend the compassion of a non-native researcher. Another reason for increased potential is language skill which allows the 'native' anthropologist to hear nuances and connotations that often remain blind spots to the researcher struggling with language.²

Unfortunately, many scholars, whether 'western', 'indigenous' or 'hyphenated', who are engaged in critiques of orientalism are often locked in the dichotomies they try to deconstruct and therefore reproduce certain binary oppositions (see, for example, Abdel-Kader, 1987; L. Ahmed, 1992; Badran, 1991, 1993, 1995; Kabbani, 1986; Zuhur, 1992).

² The works of Hania Sholkamy (1996, forthcoming), Iman Bibars (forthcoming), Heba El-Kholy (1997, 1998) and Reem Saad (1988, 1997, 1998) are examples of the kind of sensitive in-depth research which does not only require a total grip on colloquial Egyptian dialect, but also a previous insight into policy making as well as the make-up of the community they chose to study.

Whether in terms of 'traditional versus modern', 'secular versus religious' or 'East versus West', in one way or another, these works 'keep our gaze fixed upon the effects of the discursive hegemony of the West' (Kandiyoti, 1996: 16). The extreme manifestation of this impasse, however, is revealed in the emergence of a new and now quite fashionable 'school of thought'. This trend is characterized by the portrayal of Islamists as the only alternative force to increasing western encroachment, a stress on heterogeneity among Islamists (while homogenizing secular constituencies) and the condemnation of feminist critiques of Islamists' conceptions of womanhood as ethnocentric.

Without minimizing the significance of the rising tide of Islamism, I believe that scholars themselves have been actively, if unwittingly, engaged in muting those groups and individuals who have opposed or reacted against Islamism. Not only have issues such as Islamic revival and militancy been at the forefront of research dealing with Egyptian women, but their struggles, experiences and identities have also often been explained with reference to a framework that operates with simplistic dichotomies: the Islamist, traditional and authentic on the one hand and modernist, progressive and western on the other. While more recent literature has emphasized that Islamism is a modern movement, it still largely homogenizes and dichotomizes 'religion' versus 'secularism' and 'indigenous' versus 'western'.³

What generally needs to be dismantled more systematically is the notion of a monolithic West and the homogeneous category of westerners. In the context of 'Middle East' scholarship, only very few works (Abu-Lughod (ed.), 1998; Kandiyoti, 1996; R. Lewis, 1996; Mitchell & Abu-Lughod, 1993; Nelson, 1996; Zubaida, 1994) display a concern with this project showing the variety and contradictory discourses emanating from the 'West', as well as the complex and multi-faceted encounters and struggles, but also co-operations and friendships between various heterogeneous constituencies from both 'sides'. By highlighting divided loyalties, interests and contradictions – on the level of both discourses and practices – of secular-oriented women activists in Egypt, I hope that my work will contribute to unsettling and challenging the East–West essentialism as well as its underlying relationships. This does not detract from the awareness that Egypt, like many other formerly colonized countries, continues to be subjected in various ways to imperialist politics⁴ which

³ Veiling, in these works, is often described as a phenomenon of upward social mobility with regard to education, work and public activities (Ahmed, 1992; El-Guindy, 1981; Karam, 1998; Macleod, 1991; Moghadam, 1993; Zuhur, 1992).

⁴ For a detailed account of how American and international funding agencies portray and influence Egypt's economy, general policies as well as people's lives, see Mitchell (1991).

manifest themselves in the daily lives of people across class, gender, religious affiliation and place of residence. This does not prevent me from appreciating and even employing particular ‘essentialisms’ in specific contexts for strategic political purposes.

Occidentalism: the other side of the coin?

Achilles is replaced by Batman, the virgin and the child by Madonna, Michelangelo by Michael Jackson and even nation-states by the new international order.

Surely a new *ijtihad* is sorely needed.⁵

Reifications of the ‘West’ persist in scholarship dealing with Egypt, contributing to the consolidation of occidentalism as an increasingly powerful tool in contemporary Egyptian political culture.⁶ Occidentalism, like orientalism, is part of a political ploy: it uses available cultural categories to gain symbolic advantages for ‘the self’ and to handicap ‘the other’. It is shaped by political contingencies in the search for power and influence. However, it would be misleading to portray occidentalism as the counterpart of orientalism. Rather, I would characterize occidentalism in contemporary Egypt as a critique of modernity which is deeply aware of and reacting against orientalism. Historically, the so-called ‘West’ has been more powerful – and hence more able – to construct and impose images of alien societies (Carrier (ed.), 1995). Up to the present, unequal distributions of political and economic power characterize orientalism and occidentalism as two similar yet distinct processes.

Contemporary constructions of an imperialist, corrupting, decadent and alienating West take place in a variety of contexts: in leftist-nationalist as well as Islamist fora, such as newspapers, books, seminars, discussions in universities, in public meetings of intellectuals and artists etc. How far these public discourses are being reproduced at the micro level of interpersonal communication needs to be carefully analysed, but it can be said

⁵ Dr Abdel Wahab El-Messiry (1996) ‘Secularism and *ijtihad*’, in *Al-Waha* (Oasis), 4th issue. Magazine by the ‘Arab Cultural Association’ (platform of Islamist students at the American University in Cairo). *Ijtihad* usually refers to the reinterpretation of the *Sunnah*, in which the prophet Muhammad demonstrates how to carry out the more general instructions of the Qur’an. In the context of the article the author uses *ijtihad* to mean a redefinition of secularism.

⁶ The debates about the ‘West’, its promise of modernism and threat of imperialism, and the more recent articulations of what the ‘West’ is all about, are not peculiar to Egypt, but can be found in variations all over the Middle East in particular and the post-colonial world in general (Bhaba, 1994; Bouatta & Cherifati-Merabtine, 1994; Chatterjee, 1986; Nederveen & Parekh, 1995; Papanek, 1994; Spivak, 1988; Tavakoli-Targhi, 1994). However, this work concentrates specifically on the Egyptian context and the following discussion will reflect this focus.

with certainty that arguments about western conspiracies against Muslims, the failings and decay of western civilization and the threat of western cultural imperialism ring a bell among many Egyptians.⁷

Historically, intellectuals and reformers in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Egypt shared the modernist enthusiasm for enlightenment, technological progress, positivism and an all-encompassing truth. Many Egyptian intellectuals articulated a vision of the *ancien régime* as arbitrary and controlled by faith. Their alternative project entailed an elimination of traditions and ‘backwardness’.⁸ Islam was being reinterpreted and reformed to prove its compatibility with progress and rationality by modernists such as Muhammad Abduh and Qasim Amin, to name just two. Meanwhile, secular modernists challenged Islam as the basis for political and social organization, associated Egypt’s advancement with the efficacy of European culture and civilization, and particularly promoted scientific thinking as the key to progress.

The question arises as to why European thinkers have been credited for being self-critical in their attempts to overcome arbitrary and theological regimes, while Egyptians are easily discredited by notions of ‘aping the West’ – not only by European and North American scholars, but also by Egyptian intellectuals today. Can we speak about a more global and universal change of *Weltanschauung* in light of European hegemony and colonial oppression? Perhaps the relation between Egyptian modernizers⁹ and European thinkers was not as linear as supposed. There could have been a convergence between disillusionment with the *ancien régime* and self-criticism on the one hand, and the encounter and engagement with the European Enlightenment on the other. One must speculate that Egyptian intellectuals were selective in their appropriations and repudiations of European ideas about a modern nation state, just as Islamists and conservative nationalist forces have been with regard to the notions of traditions, authenticity and foreign imposition (Abu-Lughod, 1998b).

⁷ The current regime has been ambiguous concerning its rhetoric on the West. It rarely engages in outright attacks on the ‘West’ as such. Egyptian–American relations have been critically re-evaluated by various writers across the broad spectrum of the Egyptian press.

⁸ During the reign of Muhammad Ali (1805–48), European education became a model to reform the Egyptian school system. Intellectuals such as Shaykh Rifa‘i Al-Tahtawi (1801–71) and Ali Pasha Mubarak (1824–93) aimed at transmitting knowledge from Europe in the service of the state under Muhammad Ali and his successors (Vatikiotis, 1991: 121).

⁹ The most famous Egyptian modernist secularists are Salama Musa (1887–1958), Ahmad Lutfi Al-Sayyid (1872–1963), Muhammad Hussain Haykal (1888–1956) and Taha Hussain (1889–1973). Within the generation of modernist secularists, many were of either Lebanese Christian origin, e.g. Ya‘qub Sarruf (1852–1957) or Syrian Christian background, e.g. Shibli Shumayyil (1860–1917). Socialist ideas were introduced from the 1920s (Hourani, 1991; Vatikiotis, 1991).

As Chatterjee (1993) has forcefully argued in the case of Indian nationalism, nationalist elites employed the notion of 'colonial difference' in various ways. 'Colonial difference' – the representation of the 'other' as 'radically different, and hence incorrigibly inferior' (ibid.: 33) – had earlier been deployed by the British as a way to justify their policies of colonization. In post-colonial India nationalist elites attempted to erase notions of 'colonial difference' in the 'outer' or material domain of the state, the economy, law and administration, thereby making claim to 'universality of modern regimes of power' (ibid.: 26). However, within the 'inner' aspects of culture, language, religion and family life, the notion of an essential difference between the culture of the colonizer and the newly emerged nation state was emphasized (ibid.). Parallels can be found in Egypt where nationalist elites promoted credentials of modernity with regard to economic, political and social arenas related to the so-called public sphere. As I will show in greater detail in the following chapter, women were granted the right to vote, the right to education and work and were included in the processes of reform and modernization in post-colonial Egypt. Concerning women's roles and rights within the home and the family, the supposedly 'inner' aspects of a society, the notion of 'essential difference' to the colonizing culture and more broadly speaking the 'West' has been upheld and even magnified.

One significant and widespread flaw, which has only very recently been addressed, has been the conflation of Enlightenment and its appraisal of rationality, liberalism and democracy with European thought. Whether in Egypt, Britain or the United States, many intellectuals deal with Enlightenment and liberal egalitarianism as if it they were inherent characteristics of the 'West'. Ignored are the series of fierce historical struggles, such as the French Revolution, in which the outcomes were far from obvious (Zubaida, 1994: 7). As Sami Zubaida very lucidly put it, the props of liberal democracy are far from being inherent, and that 'in many parts of the "West", notably Spain, these struggles had failed until recently. We should also keep in mind the breakdown of rights and doctrines in much of Western Europe under Nazism and fascism' (ibid.). This historical view can be extended to present-day Europe and the United States where corporatism, sectarian strife, racism, neo-Nazism and religious fundamentalisms have been on the rise.

At present, years of colonial oppression, the ongoing experience of imperialist politics in post-colonial Egypt, disillusionment with a version of modernity that did not deliver its promises of linear progress, emancipation and affluence for all – linked to Egypt's internal social, political and economic crises – have contributed to a growing condemnation of 'the West'. It is not only Islamists and conservative nationalists who are at

the forefront of slandering the 'West', but leftist opposition forces also engage in anti-western campaigns.¹⁰ While constructions of the 'West' are used as a way to create an 'authentic' Egyptian identity, they are deeply informed by the way the 'East' has been misrepresented and stereotyped. Attacks on the West vary from outright polemics about sexual promiscuity and general decadence to more sophisticated cultural and political critiques.

Missing in the often very valid criticisms of atrocities carried out in the name of 'progress', e.g. World War II, Hiroshima, the destruction of the environment, the Gulf war etc., is any kind of acknowledgement that similar critiques and accusations have been made from within what is portrayed as a homogeneous and all-powerful West. Notwithstanding some Egyptian intellectuals' claim to originality, many of the critiques of modernity – ideas of scientific positivism, linear progress, hegemonic discourses and imperialist politics – have been put forward by writers, researchers and political activists in Europe and in the United States.¹¹ No allowances are made for the existence of contradictory discourses, opposition forces, power struggles or even self-criticisms internal to the 'West'.

However, generalizations put forward in certain contexts, e.g. public seminars or political meetings, discussions in cafés or friends' houses, do not necessarily reflect the complex and differentiated ways the 'West' enters into daily lives of a heterogeneous group of people – contemporary Egyptians.¹² What is prevailing on the level of discourses looks much more complex on the level of practices. Parallel to the negative imagery connected with western culture, politics and lifestyles, there exist various forms of glorification of the 'West'. In some instances, such as the praise for scientific thinking as being characteristic of the 'West', one can detect

¹⁰ Many of the fiercest and most impassioned critics of the 'West', read here as the project of modernity and its glorification of 'progress', are a number of former Marxist intellectuals (many of them educated in Britain or America) who either turned Islamist or became sympathetic to Islamist activism and discourses. As Marxists their struggle was specifically directed towards western capitalism; now their attacks are much more broad and generalized.

¹¹ This is far from suggesting that critiques of modernity originated in the 'West' and similar arguments within Egypt are imitated. However, the mostly male intellectuals I am referring to work within or are in regular contact with the American University in Cairo, make public claims to their knowledge of and insights into 'western thought', yet deny the similarity of their arguments with particular strands of post-modern and feminist thinking. Feminist critiques of social inequalities and hegemonic modernist discourses are often dismissed as 'men-hating women wanting to rule the world'.

¹² Lila Abu-Lughod's work on Egyptian soap operas (1995a, 1997) and Walter Armbrust's work on popular culture in Egypt (1996) give evidence to the differences between the elite, middle-class and low-income cultures. Moreover, Abu-Lughod's articles reflect the gap between rural and urban culture.

remnants of earlier modernist stipulations. I came across this notion in various contexts, e.g. conversations with Egyptians who have studied abroad, parents who send their children to the German high school or women activists commending more scientific approaches to their policy-oriented research projects. Much more than the spirit of positivism is alive in the halls of Egyptian academic and research institutions which generally favour quantitative and statistical ‘sound research’ to qualitative ‘gobbledegook’.

An elite and nationalist modernity, idealizing enlightenment and progress, has also been detected by Lila Abu-Lughod in her analyses of the intent, content and public reception of American and Egyptian soap operas (1995a, 1997). It is not merely American serials such as the popular *The Bold and the Beautiful* that reveal a tremendous gap between the lifestyles and the concerns of its characters and the people who watch it. Often, Egyptian soap operas hardly relate to the lives of their audiences. Aside from those serials merely produced for entertainment, Egyptian soap operas are often intended to convey social messages. A concerned group of culture-industry professionals, as Abu-Lughod states, perceives certain parts of the population, women and rural people, for instance, as being in need of enlightenment: ‘Appropriating and inflecting Western discourses on development they construct themselves as guides to modernity and assume responsibility of producing, through their television programmes, the virtuous modern citizen’ (1995a: 191).

Consumption, one aspect of this post-colonial modernity – especially consumption by Egyptian youths – has increasingly been dominated by western products (fashion, electrical appliances, music etc.). To be ‘chic’ means to aspire to the latest ‘western fashion’ – a phenomenon which is not limited to upper-class Egyptians, but is also widespread among the impoverished middle classes. Break-dancing in front of Al-Azhar mosque, McDonald’s and a whole other range of fast food spin-offs, video arcades and discotheques have become part of the Cairo scene. While western goods are only affordable to the upper middle class and upper classes, modified versions of *Bitza* and *Hamborga* have gained mass appeal.¹³ In the words of Bryan Turner, ‘the corruption of pristine faith is going to be brought about by Tina Turner and Coca-Cola and not by rational arguments and rational inspection of presuppositions and the understanding of western secularism’ (Turner, 1994: 10).

The ambiguities of western style consumption in material life and

¹³ In one incident a few years ago, 150 teenagers were arrested on the charge of belonging to a ‘satanic cult’ which was identified with devil worship and digging out skulls from the cemetery, as well as heavy-metal music, pre-marital sex, drugs and hanging out at McDonald’s.

culture are uncovered in Walter Armbrust's fascinating account of mass culture and modernism in Egypt. What can be, in certain contexts and by certain people, labelled as *shik 'awi* (very chic) could also have negative connotations designating inauthenticity and *nouveau riche* (Armbrust, 1996: 26–7). However, he also shows how historically Egyptian modernity has embraced western technology, scientific methods and consumption products on the one side, and 'Egyptian authenticity', that is continuity with the past, on the other. In recent years this complex constellation of Egyptian modernity has become more polarized and problematic in the light of a decrease in social mobility, increased economic hardships and underemployment. Education, supposedly bridging the gap 'between official media theory of what modernity should be and social practice' (ibid.: 133), has lost its value considerably in terms of guaranteeing a comfortable 'modern' life. Yet education is still widely perceived to be 'the only way out'. In contrast to riches obtained by *bita al-infitah* (those of the open door policies) or *nouveaux riches*, education is seen to allow for morally sound and authentic social climbing.

It becomes obvious that anti-westernism and anti-imperialism are related to discourses about Egypt's past. The Nasserist undertones and anti-imperialist slogans of newspaper headlines reveal a certain nostalgia for 'Egypt's glorious days' associated with the Nasser period (1952–70). A similar nostalgia has been detected by Abu-Lughod with regard to television serials, which 'invoke the period of socialist ideals and nationalist vision through charged symbols of the Nasirist era, like the great singer Umm Kulthum or the Aswan High Dam' (1993b: 29). The Sadat period (1970–81), which many Egyptians today remember for its economic policies which boosted mass consumption as well as for Camp David and the sense of capitulation, is often evoked negatively, especially in the light of more recent geo-political developments.

Disappointment with the 'peace process', generally perceived by Egyptian intellectuals to have worked at the expense of Palestinians and Arabs, has revived anti-Israeli sentiments. Recently, debates on the 'Middle East Market' and the 'nuclear non-proliferation treaty' (NPT) further increased the rejection of the 'naturalization' process with Israel initiated by Sadat. Israel's strong link with the 'West', politically with the United States in particular, but culturally with Europe and 'western civilization', expands the ground for anti-western discourses. Jewish regional ties and common historical and cultural backgrounds are rarely being acknowledged in a context where Israeli culture is homogenized as Zionist and western.

In post-colonial Egypt anti-western discourses are mainly directed towards the United States and rarely address British colonialism. An

American imperialist presence has been experienced through its financial and political support of Israel. Anti-western feelings, then, are deeply caught up with Zionism. On an economic level, Egypt's dependence on the United States¹⁴ and the various impacts of structural adjustment policies, such as the marked decline in government investment in the public sector, price increases and high interest rates, also contribute to the sense of prolonged imperialist presence and interference.

Geo-political factors might explain the pervasiveness and intensity of anti-western feelings, but internal political struggles and competitions over economic resources also need to be taken into account. As with orientalism, occidentalism's homogenizing thrust and its dichotomies cannot be explained in terms of simple misapprehensions or failures of understanding: they are put to use by Islamist and leftist-nationalist constituencies to gain symbolic advantage over adversaries within the Egyptian political landscape.

Without doubt, however, the particular reasons and context for Egyptian occidentalism can also be framed within a wider tendency found in many parts of the previously colonized world and also those countries subject to ongoing imperialist influence and expansion. Nationalist movements – whether during and after the fight for independence or in the process of decolonization – often homogenize and isolate their own and other populations and celebrate their 'authentic' identity in the name of nationalism. Blaming the West for most evils in the world is generally paralleled by a passionate and uncritical embracing of one's own primordial group without paying too much attention to the social, cultural, economic and political realities inside one's nation.¹⁵ But to accept this 'nativism', as Edward Said argues, 'is to accept the consequence of imperialism, the racial, religious, and political divisions imposed by imperialism itself' (1993: 276).

The dangers of chauvinism and xenophobia as an aspect of nationalist consciousness were recognized by Frantz Fanon. In his view, nationalist independence will remain rigid and trapped in old injustices, and will create new hierarchies and systems of oppression as long as it will not also involve a transformation of social consciousness. '*Liberation*, and not nationalist independence, is the new alternative' (Fanon, quoted in Said, 1993: 277). Social movements that address social injustices and orthodoxies, such as political authoritarianism, class oppression and patriarchy, have to resist a new powerful nationalist bourgeoisie. After independence, according to Said, among the various social movements

¹⁴ Egypt is the single largest recipient of American aid after Israel.

¹⁵ The Iranian Jalal Ali Ahmad's *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West* (1978) is an often quoted example for nativism that engages in blank condemnations of the 'West'.

resisting old orthodoxies, feminism became one of the main liberationist tendencies in the Third World (ibid.: 263), thereby posing a threat to the status quo.

It comes as no surprise then that the strategy of gaining symbolic power by essentializing the 'West' and its corruption is regularly utilized when talking about women and feminism. Portrayals of loose western women as well as man-hating feminists are linked to prescribing moral codes, especially concerning the roles, rights and duties of women and gender relations in Egypt. Much has been written on the notion of women as 'bearers of authentic culture' and I will only briefly address this already well-documented point later in this chapter.¹⁶ I will explore in more detail the questions of how negative constructions of the West are mobilized to discredit Egyptian women activists and how Egyptian women activists in turn use constructions of the West to legitimize their struggles.

It is my contention that contemporary secular-oriented women activists have, by and large, internalized the parameters within which permissible discourses are formulated. But what do the various women activists actually say about the 'West'? Moreover, later in this chapter and throughout this work, I will try to show that there are some women who go beyond the rhetoric of 'us versus them' and try to position themselves in value systems and political struggles that are not necessarily framed by the 'West' as 'the other'.

Egypt's gateway: dislocation of us versus them

Stereotypical representations create boundaries and make firm and separate what is in fact fluid and much closer to the norm than the dominant value system cares to admit. Many definitions of the 'West', and categories such as 'western feminism' are similar to the process, that, in Said's words almost two decades ago, seeks 'to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is closer to it and what is far away' (Said, 1978: 55). The 'reality' of the West is invented anew every time it is deployed for this or that purpose. However, orientalism and occidentalism do not constitute two symmetrically opposed phenomena; rather they represent two historically specific processes based on very different power relationships. Moreover, occidentalism reveals a much greater degree of contradiction between prevailing discourses and social practices than orientalism. The earlier conceptions of the 'West' as delivering progress and modernity have largely been replaced by

¹⁶ For a detailed discussions on the issue of women as 'cultural bearers' of the 'authentic nation' see Moghadam (ed.) (1994a); Yuval-Davis (1997); and Yuval-Davis & Anthias (eds.) (1989).

conceptions of the West as polluting and corrupting, but, in certain circles and in specific contexts, being 'western' opens up many doors. Let me try to illustrate this point with a little anecdote.

Throughout my seven-year stay in Egypt I occasionally travelled to visit my parents in Germany or friends elsewhere. I cannot recall one arrival back to Cairo that did not make me feel anxious and insecure, stirring up my conscience into wondering whether I had 'done something wrong'. Of course, I knew that being singled out from the other passengers, mainly Germans – who all proceeded through passport control without any delay – was just a formality, a simple process of checking 'my files' in the computers. Of course, I knew that this was due to my Arab name, a name that evokes suspicion among 'fellow Arabs'.

Usually the conversation at the passport control took the following course: first, I would be greeted in English with 'hello' (and often a smile). After a good look at my passport (turning the pages back and forth to look for the last entry and departure stamps) I regularly would be asked: 'bitkalami 'arabi?' (do you speak Arabic?) or 'aslan eeh?' (what is your origin?) The further tone of the conversation often depended on my answer to these questions. Several friends had advised me to pretend not to speak any Arabic, as 'you are always treated better at any Arab border if you are a foreigner'. I soon learned that the situation was much more complicated than my friends had imagined: it was a classic case of catch-22. If I answered in the negative to the question whether I spoke Arabic, some security personnel (who are always men) would react with a smile and try to figure out, in a more or less cordial way, how I came to my name. However, there were others who reacted to my negation with even greater suspicion and continued to insist that I must speak Arabic, because of my name. On good days I would play the game well and not reveal that I understood his questions; on bad days I would either 'give up' voluntarily and reveal my language skills, however imperfect, or due to tiredness and lack of concentration betray myself sooner or later.

At other times I refused to hide either my language skills or my father's origin and answered back in Arabic. This also evoked very different reactions, varying from praise of my command of the language (thereby often revealing a sense of amusement) to piercing and often hostile questioning. Whatever the scenario, the outcome was always similar: my passport would be taken and I would be motioned to step aside and wait, sometimes for just a few minutes, sometimes for over an hour. Most of the time I managed to calm myself down and feel less annoyed by thinking about the waiting time and humiliation many other people, especially Palestinians, have to endure. In comparison to them I could really con-

sider myself lucky, as I was never actually kept waiting for many hours, nor was I ever prevented from entering Egypt.

Matters were further complicated by the fact that I not only carry an Arab name, but that I am also the daughter of a man who is originally from Iraq. The particular reactions to my 'Iraqi background' varied according to the political situation and Egypt's relationship with Iraq.¹⁷ My worst re-entry ever into Egypt took place a month after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. As I had visited my family in Baghdad in July 1990 and was stuck in Iraq for a couple of weeks after the invasion, my passport had arrival and departure stamps from Iraq, covering the period during which the invasion of Kuwait took place (2 August 1990). This time I was not merely asked to wait but was interrogated for some hours about my visit to Iraq. My student visa and ID card from the American University in Cairo certainly helped to diffuse some of the tension and suspicion. When I was finally allowed to go through, picked up my luggage and happily hugged some Egyptian friends who had patiently waited for me, I soon felt much more stress than under interrogation at the airport. My friend Mona told me to be silent about my Iraqi background, because everyone was very upset with Iraqis for what they had done to Kuwait; not that I had previously gone around Cairo waving a sign saying 'I am Iraqi', but the thought of having to conceal my Iraqi connection was highly distressing and frightening. This particular experience was certainly unique in the degree of suspicion with which I was viewed and the intensity of the situation. Most other times it became more of a routine, one of those unpleasant things one has to go through.

If I have spent a considerable amount of time writing about Cairo airport, it is because I see the airport, its organization, rules and regulations as a metaphor for some of the contradictions of post-colonial Egypt. Whatever claims are made to 'authenticity', however fiercely the 'West' is attacked for corrupting and damaging the country, however passionately 'Arab brotherhood' is being evoked, the gateway to Egypt is far more open to Europeans and North Americans than to either Egypt's African neighbours or Arab sisters and brothers.

Visitors from the 'West' are usually tourists who bring jobs and spend money. Both the government and the manifold segments of the Egyptian tourist industry encourage and actively seek floods of western tourists to boost the economy. Attacks on tourists by Islamist militants in recent

¹⁷ Throughout my years of travelling, I also detected divergences from official government positions to Iraq among the airport personnel. Especially since Iraq was bombed during the Gulf war, the security person checking my passport has expressed his grief and anger about what is happening to the Iraqi people, despite the Egyptian military involvement in the war on the side of 'the allies'.

years have been so effective precisely because they are not merely expressions of hostile attitudes towards corrupting and sinful infidels, but they also hit the state at one of its most vulnerable spots, one crucial to survival.

It is not only 'western' tourists who are privileged when entering the country, but also businesspeople, development workers, UN officials, embassy personnel and even moneyless foreign students. As for foreign researchers, it has been increasingly difficult to obtain official research permits in Egypt. This has resulted in many researchers simply avoiding applying for one. Paradoxically, while the official research permit poses an obstacle, once it has been obtained (or circumvented) most European or North American researchers have relatively easy access to Egyptian top-notch intellectuals, artists and political figures, while Egyptian researchers would have to use *wasta* (connections) or affiliate themselves with western researchers. In recent years, however, there has been a shift in attitude towards western researchers and journalists, especially among NGO workers, women's and human rights activists and the political opposition, who increasingly perceive foreign researchers and journalists as politically naive and exploitative.

Presentations of self

Another reason for narrating my airport anecdote is that it alludes to some of the difficulties inherent in 'shuttling between two or more worlds' (Visweswaran, 1994: 119). Negotiating my identities during the airport proceedings involved a mixture of arbitrariness and strategizing. The 'rite of passage' at Cairo airport is emblematic of the ambiguities, dislocations and states of liminality inherent in identity constructions and representations of self. On rare occasions I actually felt strongly about a particular part of my identity; during the Gulf war, for example, I actually *felt* Iraqi. Most of the time though, while finding my way out of the airport, I *performed* being German or Iraqi. This manoeuvring continued throughout my research and I will explore issues of 'hyphenation' and 'positionality' as they crystallized throughout my research.

Throughout my actual 'fieldwork', in which I was to explore the different layers and elements of Egyptian women activists' identities, I realized that the only 'identity' that was really being discussed as such was mine. Sometimes I felt uncomfortable with the way some women identified me as Iraqi and therefore 'good' and trustworthy, just because of my name, 'blood' and my father's original nationality. It often reminded me of the situations and contexts when I was treated badly, also just because of my Arab name. One of the Nasserite women, who on several occasions cursed western conspiracies and western researchers

implicated in them, put it most bluntly when I asked her why she talked to me: *'But you are Iraqi. I would not have talked to you if you had been just a westerner!'*

My airport anecdote has already given some indication as to how politicized identity constructions might be. The significance of 'Iraqiness' and 'Germanness' varied greatly between Cairo airport and the context of my actual research. Among most Egyptian women activists, as well as among leftists and Islamists, Iraq has become the epitome of resistance to imperialist violence and injustice. Others see Iraqis as among the most recent and acute victims of both their own government and American hegemony. At times the specific attribution of 'being Iraqi' was replaced by a more generalized perception of me as 'Arab'. *'You are one of us'*, on rare occasions, could even mean 'Egyptian', but here it was not an attribute related to my 'background' as much as a designation based on my involvement in the Egyptian women's rights struggle. While I often felt uneasy and irritated by perceptions of who I am based on primordial elements of blood and heritage, I very much cherished the moments in which I became an 'honorary Egyptian'.

In specific situations, such as discussions about western feminisms, my education at the American University in Cairo and my upbringing in Germany, as well as during debates about homosexuality and relationships in general, the adjective 'western' was often ascribed to me. At times I actually experienced a sense of essential difference in attitude and outlook which I attributed to my 'socialization' in Germany. At other times I felt that the attribute 'western' was used as an easy device to discredit my opinion which happened to be different. 'Germanness' rarely figured in these ascriptions (except in the context of mocking my concern with punctuality and being organized), and when it was used, it had more positive connotations than the generalized term 'western'.

Due to my name and my father's origin, most of the Egyptians I met in the course of my stay assumed that I was a Muslim. However, my religious identity (having a Muslim Shi'a father and a Catholic mother) was never discussed among the secular women I interviewed. In the context of my research, ethnicity and my political outlook were perceived as more significant than my religious affiliation.

Parallel to, but not always in harmony with, the various ascriptions of my 'identity', I frequently sensed the 'hyphen', between Iraqi-German or Arab-Western. Hyphenated identities enact an often violent struggle between two or more worlds. Nasser Hussein's description of post-colonial identities certainly rings a bell: 'Hyphens are radically ambivalent signifiers, for they simultaneously connect and set apart; they simultaneously represent both belonging and not belonging. What is even more

curious about a hyphenated pair of words is that meaning cannot reside in one word or the other, but can only be understood in movement' (1990: 10).

The attempt to negotiate the terms between shifting alliances results in the feeling of being 'born over and over again as a hyphen rather than a fixed entity' (Trinh, 1991: 159). Being an Iraqi-German doing research in the Arab world suggests more than an accidental academic trajectory, since the very subject matter of my book is related to this 'hybrid subject position' (Visweswaran, 1994). Moreover, the tension between my roles as researcher and woman activist in Egypt further increased the sense of uneasy travelling between 'speaking for' and 'speaking from' (Abu-Lughod, 1991: 143).

The issue of 'hybridity' is problematized by Rosemary Sayigh who questions the effects of prolonged exposure to a specific culture: 'While culturally enriching, hybridity perhaps induces a half-conscious adoption of the research community's ethos; and this, while enhancing rapport, may block off certain questions and inquiries' (1996: 146). In my view, it is not only important to acknowledge our 'positionality', that is the different components of our identities, presuppositions and political orientations that we bring from our home(s), but as Lindisfarne (1997) and Sayigh (1996) point out, we must also recognize that our research community will have an impact on the ways we see and think about the world. Lindisfarne, for example, explains how her fieldwork in Syria shaped her 'political voice' and identity (Lindisfarne 1997), which in many ways parallels my experiences in Cairo.

My political commitment to feminism and my attempts to counter dehumanizing depictions of 'Arabs' and 'Muslims' in the western media developed and grew while living and doing research in Cairo. Only later, during my recent fieldwork, did I also become sensitive to sweeping generalizations concerning the 'West', which have now also become part of my research agenda. My work helped me to understand some of the complexities and problems involved in women's activism in Egypt – some of which had been unknown to me at the time of my own initial involvement a couple of years ago. The material bases for many of the seemingly ideological struggles, the personalized nature of conflicts among the various groups and the impact of the international community were not obvious to me at first. It also prompted me to rethink 'secularism', a concept I had clearly defined for myself before my actual research.¹⁸

While gaining insights, awareness, and often empathy, I started to examine my own positionality more critically. My encounters and inter-

¹⁸ In chapter 4 I will specifically take issue with the notion of 'secularism' and 'secular-oriented women activists'.