

Comedy of Emasculation: *Al-Nawm fi-al-`Asal*

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As a performance genre, comedy, according to Aristotle, presents “the painlessly ugly” (Banham, 1988, 234) as it tends to provide astute perspectives vis-à-vis reality through satirical and laughter-inducing depictions; however the message behind it is invariably serious and thought provoking. In the mid-1990s, an Egyptian film, entitled *Al-Nawm fi al-`Asal* (Sweet Slumber) was produced by and starred Egypt’s leading comedian, `Adil Imam.¹ The film is about the spread of an epidemic that leads to male impotence across Egypt, causing men to become incapable of performing or enjoying sex. The symbolic message of the film is that men (not women) have stopped participating effectively in the political affairs of their country and (men) must wake up from their deep slumber in order to bring about a much-needed socio-political change.

This paper challenges the sexual politics of the screenplay and critiques the blatant absence of women’s representation in the political satire this filmic narrative is trying to put forth. I argue that while the plot establishes masculinity as a metaphor for men’s political activism, it fails to present a comparable allegory to reflect women’s roles within the socio-political circumstances of their country. In the light of both gender studies and masculinity studies, I wish to argue that hegemonic masculinity is treated in this film as normative apropos men, and the subordination of women is considered *ipso facto*.

I will herein employ the term “hegemonic masculinity” and “subordinate masculinity” as coined by R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, who define it in terms of “the pattern of practice (i.e. things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men’s dominance over women to continue” (Connell and Masserschmidt, 2005, 832). They furthermore define hegemonic masculinity as follows:

Hegemonic masculinity was distinguished from other masculinities, especially subordinated masculinities ... it embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men. (Connell and Masserschmidt, 2005, 832)

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Hegemonic masculinity does not only assume subordinating women (and other less virile/powerful men); it also connotes sexual and material superiority. According to Mark E. Kann (1998), hegemonic norms of manhood “secure man’s consent, define citizenship, and legitimize political authority” (29). Kann adds:

Male elites promote a “hegemonic masculinity” that deploys norms of manhood to justify dominant authority and encourage mass deference to it ... hegemonic masculinity taps into the deepest recesses of men’s psychosexual, social and political identities. ... [It] enjoined males to establish independence, start families, and govern dependents to achieve manhood and procreate new generations ... [and stigmatized] disorderly men, whose marginal masculinity associated them with dependency, effeminacy, immaturity, and sterility. (1998, 29)

This social conception/image of men as hegemonic entities responsible for dependents, accountable for wives’ sexual satisfaction and financial needs, within their communities, is what propels the comedy of the filmic narrative. The irony that all men in the country have lost their sexual virility is synonymous with the notion of Connell’s subordinated masculinity; that wives are covering up the scandalous predicament is where Aristotle’s ‘painless ugliness’ lies. The premise of the film revolves around the delicate balance of the protagonist’s social position as Chief Criminal Justice Investigator, which is a hegemonic position symbolizing power and authority and his gender as a man, in a country where emasculation is an epidemic. This puts him at the risk of losing his hegemonic masculinity and of becoming a subordinated entity—more or less ‘like’ a woman.

Curiously, the film starts with a social surge where men are killing and beating their wives or committing suicide across classes, which according to Connell and Messerschmidt, (2005) is a by-product of men losing their hegemonic masculinity. The loss turns into violence as “Hegemony did not mean violence, although it could be supported by force; it meant ascendancy achieved through culture, institutions, and persuasion” (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, 832). Therefore, in the absence of such ascendancy, the only token of power is violence. This is what instigates the character Adil Imam is playing, Magdi, by virtue of his official position, to be in charge, in order to find the source of violence and end it. Thus, his own agency, both as man and authority figure, puts him at stake, and his search for a solution is both public and personal.

The film begins with high drama and tragedy when a newly-wed groom commits suicide. Upon interrogation, the bride says that he killed himself “*li-annu ma `erefsih*” (because he couldn’t). This phrase turns into an initially subliminal (but eventually overt) signifier of impotence throughout the film, as the epidemic of the male sexual inability to perform starts in the capital and spreads throughout the country. Men and women who try to explain the sad state just reiterate that same statement “because he couldn’t.” Playing the role of the Chief Criminal Justice Investigator, Magdi, is the official who first faces the dilemma as murder cases and violence between husbands and wives are reported in a rapid succession to his office one morning.

As he investigates the many cases, he observes his colleagues closely in order to find out whether they too were afflicted, and to understand if this was, indeed, an epidemic spreading amongst all of Egypt’s male population. He is assured of that fact when he discovers that he himself *ma `refsh* (could not). Thus, “[w]hat had hitherto been understood as positive, fixed and concrete – masculinity – quickly took on the appearance of being a problem” (Whitehead, 2002, 20). Furthermore, the attempt to get to the bottom of this disease proves to be no easy task, as the majority of men across society (and virtually all of their female partners) are adamant at keeping this under wraps. The secrecy surrounding impotence is the obstacle that Imam’s character finds hard to surmount. Men from all walks of life would much rather maintain a pretense that they are sexually adept than expose the malady and try to find a remedy for it. Sexual incompetence is regarded as a great scandal that men do not want to face and women try to cover up.

As the film continues to expose “the shifting representations of manliness” (Whitehead, 2002, 42), Magdi, the sole figure wishing to expose this state of emasculation, is coupled with an ambitious young female character. As a government official, he is ordered to be part of the cover up so he cooperates with the female journalist hoping that her hunger for a big story would propel her to do what he ‘cannot,’ which is to expose the truth. But the journalist is in the same quandary that the whole country is in, for, as a writer, she too is coerced by the high ups in the administration and censoring bureau not to tell the truth openly, but to only subtly or symbolically allude to it, which is of course very ironic considering the message of the film itself.

This is the only instance where men and women attain certain equality for, as a writer, the female journalist is oppressed and pressured into silence, to the same degree that any other male journalist would be. But, alas, this angle is never explored fully or utilized as an opportunity to project that both genders suffer a common condition of political marginalization and disenfranchisement. Both

men and women can be seen subordinated to the hegemonic masculinity (power) of the government. The journalist's suppressed voice remains within the realm of secondary plotline and is not referred to as a crucial angle of the basic conflict. Instead, the filmic narrative maintains a focus on the men's anxiety of emasculation accompanied by a pretense of normalcy for,

Considering the inequalities of contemporary gender relations, the notion of a crisis of masculinity would appear to many to be quite bizarre. For how is it possible that men and masculinity are in 'crisis' given the continued, worldwide, material inequalities that favour males and men? Despite the obvious contradiction, the notion of a male crisis is very prevalent at this juncture in history; indeed it pervades many of the social, political and academic debates about men. (Whitehead, 2002, 47)

The various men who are interrogated by Magdi keep repeating the same phrase, *kol hagah ha-tib 'a tamam* (everything will be just fine). As this statement is repeated, the viewers, as well as Magdi, understand the irony as it becomes apparent that the broad population keeps looking forward for things to improve, even though they all realize that in fact nothing is going to be 'just fine.' The focus of the main character, however, is not to join the conspiracy of silence about the spreading of impotence amongst the male population, but to get to the bottom of it and hopefully find a cure. At every attempt to unravel the truth, doors shut in his face as he realizes that both portions of society, the high officials and the masses, want to maintain a façade of normality while an epidemic was killing them slowly. Living with the fear of emasculation is apparently better than exposing it and allowing the world to know that Egyptian men 'couldn't.'

What enrages Magdi, as he further investigates the situation, is that the anxiety of emasculation lessens among the male population once they discover that it was a '*halah `amma*' (a collective condition) and not an individual crisis. Thus, there is comfort in numbers, and once the state is revealed to be widespread, men's anxiety lessens as they interpret it as inevitable. Nonetheless, accepting 'the situation' does not translate into public admissions of the disease or self-reflection, as the silence and covering-up continues. Realizing that men are incapable of talking publicly about their shortcoming, the Chief Investigator seeks the cooperation of the women as they are more likely to express their dissatisfaction with their husbands' performance or the (lack thereof) than the men are ready to discuss it.

Consequently, Magdi strategizes to use the voices of the women to expose the spreading of that male malady so he uses the young journalist as his instrument to find the truth. Magdi is portrayed as a hero, for he cares less for

his own generation than for the younger one represented by his college-age son. He tries to find out from him whether he ‘can.’ He tells him that if the epidemic spreads among the younger generation there will be no hope for Egypt. Needless to say, the symbolism is completely unsubtle in that scene or its message, but it leaves the spectator viewing the film from the point of view of women, wondering: does the young generation of Egypt consist only of young men? And why is the heroic main character, Magdi, not worried about the young women too? Are they not part of Egypt’s reality?

The metaphor of sexual impotence and political powerlessness is quite transparent in that filmic narrative, and there is no effort exerted by the makers of the film to deepen the implications. It is important to underscore that the approach of communicating ‘a national dilemma’ within a comedic genre makes the message more poignant, as it triggers within the audience what is called in Arabic ‘*al-mudhikat al-mubkiyat*’ or a tragi-comedic effect, while echoing their real life sad predicament — ‘the painlessly ugly’ according to Aristotle. The film is funny in a genuinely sad way; the comedy lies in the outer subject matter of male impotence that sweeps a whole country, the tragedy lies in the fact that this impotence has much deeper implications. It reflects the situation of modern Egyptians, now reduced to powerless citizens unable to participate in their country’s political affairs. Relegated to the position of silent observers, passive to a pathetic degree, the film derides both the political apparatus that suppresses the voices of its citizens and the population that accepts that oppression without resistance. While the message is poignant and important, and the comedy affective from the point of view of its message, there is a serious flaw in the construction of both the dramatis personae and gender politics of that work.

The film presents men as the natural political leaders, and with their fall the whole system crumbles, “[f]or men are increasingly caught in the pincers of a culture that still expects them to ‘be at the helm’, yet also requires them to engage in reflexive analysis of their masculinity” (Faludi quoted in Whitehead, 2002, 48). While impotence in this cinematic narrative symbolizes political emasculation, there is also an implied transgressive gender identification attributed to men who can no longer perform their sexual duties with their wives as they become ‘like’ women.

Reading the film poster as a narrative of propaganda for the film, its design vocabulary clearly conveys a male protagonist who is “disenchanted, unfilled, castrated and looking for a way out” (Whitehead, 2002, 50), as he poses without trousers and wedged between two women with the



cautionary statement that the film is rated 'for adults only'. This visual synopsis of the film plot "sanction[s] the display of masculine sensuality and, from this, open[s] up the possibility of an ambivalent masculine sexual identity; one that blurred the fixed distinctions between gay-and straight-identified man" (Nixon, 1997, 328). In this case it blurs the distinction between man/woman identity, with women certainly being the derided category.

Thus, while impotence and the decline in masculinity are a stigma that metaphorically demotes man from a political activist/participant to a passive observer, on the one hand, and relegates his gender status from male to female, on the other, it also automatically cancels out any view of women's participation in the political process as a time-honored practice or an established norm. The film essentially reflects the relationship between citizens and nation; the blatant problem is that the citizen is the Egyptian 'man' and the nation is feminized, which implies, according to masculine mythology, that only 'the man' can rescue 'the beautiful noble lady' in distress. With this facile view, women are not counted as citizens, but rather as dependents; and their voices and passions in regards to political struggle, resistance or patriotism are canceled out.

Examining this film as an emblematic product of Egyptian popular culture, I find the prevailing social constructions of sexuality, politics as well as citizenship apropos women both degrading and offensive. The film unquestionably perpetuates traditional stereotyping of patriarchy and gender roles; and while women watching the film join in the laughter, many miss the fact that the joke is really on them, for they have been stripped of their own social and political history by virtue of being represented as sick, by association and not because they lose something organic to their nature. Women signify the receivers of sexual pleasure, men the givers, so while the loss affects both, the degradation falls solely on men who now simply *ma-biye `rafush* (cannot).²

One of the major thematic problems within this cinematic narrative is that it engenders citizenship as male, thus the sexual lethargy that sweeps the nation is essentially to communicate to the viewer that patriarchy is in crisis. The implication is, with this being the case, the nation is also in crisis because men are not in control, which leads one to conclude that the 'nation' (the female) needs to be defended. As Susan Faludi states in *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*:

Men's grievances, by contrast, seem *hyperbolic*, almost *hysterical*; so many men seem to be doing battle with phantoms and witches that exist only in their own overheated imaginations. Women see men as guarding the fort, so they don't see how the culture of the fort shapes men. Men don't see how they are influenced by the culture either; in fact, they prefer

not to. If they did, they would have to let go of the illusion of control. (1999, 14)

This sociology of masculinity and femininity (hegemonic and subordinated respectively) dictates that men are construed as providers and women as provided for, and both genders rarely dispute this order. Thus, the film demonstrates that women are, of course, affected by that national crisis, but only by way of losing the privilege of receiving pleasure; meanwhile the onus is on men for they lose both pleasure and more importantly power. The only effect on the female population is that they stop enjoying the pleasure of sex; but what about the unmarried female population for instance? The implication, then, is that they are neither affected directly nor indirectly, they are by definition non-citizens at all.

The woman journalist, who is the only proactive female figure in the film, and the one who could possibly represent liberated, educated and independent women, is portrayed as a hollow foil, to support the male protagonist in his 'heroic' search for a solution to the crisis of masculinity and male political castration. This matches Judith Butler's understanding of problematic representations of women:

The feminist subject turns out to be discursively constituted by the very political system [and filmic narrative herein] that is supposed to facilitate its emancipation. This becomes politically problematic if that system can be shown to produce gendered subjects along a differential axis of domination or to produce subjects who are presumed to be masculine. In such cases, an uncritical appeal to such a system for the emancipation of "women" will be clearly self-defeating. (Butler, 1990, 3)

Indeed, the representation of women is self-defeating in the film. The two female roles of any consequence, Magdi's wife, Ilham, and the journalist assisting him in his quest, Salma, are presented as negligible lieutenants desperately seeking a solution for the male malady; their representation is yet another objectification of women as inept pretty faces.

Women in *al-Nawn fi-al-'Asal* are in fact twice removed from the political process: they are relegated to the traditional marginal gender group and historical category customarily referred to as 'children, the elderly and women'. In other words, women cannot fight for their rights or defend their country, and are thus represented as passive observers of the decline of the political power of 'men.' This fictitious depiction of women in regards to the political process removes them from the center of power twofold: once by being women and another by

being construed as ‘non-citizens.’ Women are even denied the angst of being citizens deprived of their political marginalization – figuratively castrated. From a certain angle they can be viewed as the cohorts of the powers to be, for women expose the epidemic, not as a patriotic act or proactive political group, but rather as informers seeking to find solutions for personal crises. So, while men’s problems represent public concerns, women’s burdens are personal troubles that pertain only to their domesticity.

In this sense, the film is a long shot from the historical footage included in the cinematic version of Naguib Mahfouz’s trilogy, depicting the 1919 revolution in Egypt, when feminists/nationalists joined forces in public demonstrations and protests against the British occupation. Women in that work of fiction and historical juncture did not march alongside men calling for the emancipation of women; rather, they marched as nationalists calling for the freedom of their country. Conversely, in *al-Nawm fi-al-`Asal*, the final scene presents a demonstration where men march shouting in agony *Aaah, aaah*, as an expression of pain and a call for reform, and shows no women – a demonstration of men only.

In Mahfouz’s trilogy the nation’s gender was neutralized and was represented as a shared homeland to be defended by all, while in *al-Nawm fi-al-`Asal* the nation is decidedly and stereotypically feminized. Hence the responsibility of defending the homeland rests solely on men’s shoulders, while the failure to defend the country translates into the emasculation of men and effeminizing them, which is presented in the film as the ultimate humiliation, and a fate worse than death. From this perspective, the plot reveals a regressive/traditionalist view of masculinity and avoids projecting the realities of the age, such as the economic partnership of men and women within the family unit, as now the majority of women work and contribute to their families’ income. This fact alone should establish a certain level of gender egalitarianism when depicting contemporary family dynamics; but the film neglects those important modern roles played by women.

Another oversight is that with the education and social mobility open for women today many participate in the construction of the governmental establishment itself, thus it would have been infinitely more interesting (and definitely funnier) if that aspect were problematized as well. For instance, if the film had tackled the hypothetical question of whether women in powerful governmental positions would have aided in the cover-up of such a disease or tried to expose it. That would have been an interesting conflict addressing power alongside gender relations. Furthermore, if women suffered physical setbacks, such as the inability to become pregnant or for comic effect suddenly become unable to cook, the lesser of all evils, the makers of the film would have

equalized the problem between the genders on the one hand, and heightened the comedy on the other.

Finally, once again, the film propagates the stereotype that both the nation and its women population are ‘damsels in distress’, waiting for the virile and chivalrous men to rescue them. The humor arises from the fact that the wait for such rescue will be long, as men have lost their virility, and so the state of distress will continue until men are well again. Furthermore, the screenplay underscores that one of the many ‘burdens of masculinity’ is to lead and/or be politically involved in the decision-making processes of the country. This same burden is neither expected of nor shared by the female citizens, who are portrayed in that cinematic narrative as wives now deprived of sexual pleasure. Men’s impotence impinges on women’s fulfillment but does not evoke in them a sense of frustration apropos their oppressed overlooked citizenship. The imparted message of the film is that with the deprivation of the male population from political power, they have all become pitifully like women.

Endnotes

¹ *Al-Nawm fi al-`Asal* (Sweet Slumber) is an Egyptian film, produced in 1996 by the famous screen director Sherif Arafa, screenplay by Waheed Hamid, and starred Egypt’s leading comedian, Adil Imam along with Sherine Sayif al-Nasr and Dalal Abdel Aziz. The title supports the *double entendre* of sleeping deeply (as in sweet dreams) and/or being in a political trance/stagnation.

² While the film received a number of good (subjective) reviews upon its opening in 1996, one of the most interesting reflections on the work was written in 2013 by Magdi Nagib Wahbi eight years post production. In this review, Wahbi states that the film was prophetic in its view of Egypt’s future; for after the 2011 revolution, he thinks that the population was still emasculated and unable to act. In fact, he ends his thoughts on the subject-matter of the film saying, “This is Egypt [today], however [its] slumber is not in honey, rather in cesspools and swamps” (translation mine). Magdi Nagib Wahbi, *Al-Hiwar al-Mutamaddin*.

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