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# Islam, Migration, and Nubian Women in Egypt: Muhammad Khalil Qāsim's *al-Shamandurah* & *al-Khalah Aycha*

Naglaa Mahmoud

داريا سكينه تعرف تماما معني هذه الزيجه البيضاء، فلسوف تنقطع بسببها  
صله جمال باهله هنا، و هناك في مصر، فلا يزورهم و لا يزورونه، لا يحس  
...بواجب ازاءهم و لا يحسون بواجب ازاءه

*Daria Sakina knows very well the meaning of this marriage to the white woman. He (Daria's son) will be disconnected from his family, exiled to Masr [Cairo] where no one will visit him, no one will feel any duty towards him, nor will he feel any towards us.<sup>1</sup>*

## Point of departure

This article discusses the intersection of Islam, gender and migration. In addition, it explores Nubian women as portrayed in the Nubian Egyptian novelist Muhammad Khalil Qasim's literary production of *al-Shamandurah* and his collection of short stories *al-Khalah Aycha*.<sup>2</sup> Both the novel and short stories depict the encounters Nubian women faced during the historical periods of displacement, forced migration and relocation due to the construction and inauguration of the Aswan High Dam (1960–1970). The challenges confronting the major female characters of Daria Sakina and Auntie Aycha are gateways to the intersection of gender issues with complex migration processes and uncontested Islamic values about women's roles in a Nubian village.

- 1 QĀSIM, *al-Shamandurah*, p. 76. All translations from *al-Shamandurah* are by the author.
- 2 Muhammad Khalil Qāsim (1921–1968) is a prominent Nubian writer who spent decades of his life in prison because of his anti-colonial and communist activism. He wrote poems, books and short stories. The two texts discussed are the only ones preserved.

The female characters of *al-Shamandurah* and *al-Khalah Aycha* are integral to understanding how a community disaster mobilizes gender dynamics. It is not the western feminism of male dominance, female oppression, and patriarchal social structure that is inherent in the Nubian community of Upper Egypt. In fact, it is the flooding triggered by the rise in the water level caused by the Aswan Dam that accelerated the migration of Nubian men to the bigger cities of the North. When skin color is mentioned as playing a significant role in gender relations, it is inherently intertwined with the capitalism and greediness of the big cities of the North, specifically Cairo.

## Introduction

Rural Nubian women have come to embrace multiple identities in the context of Egypt's state-building politics of the last century. These changes strengthened their role while often tripling their burdens. Alongside their Arab Egyptian peasant counterparts, Nubian women struggled against patriarchy and the stigmatization of rural life by the urban elite. Nubian women are additionally laden with the ever-shifting connotations associated with their Africanity and the blackness<sup>3</sup> of their skin color, as variously perceived by Arabs and Europeans amidst evolving political contexts.

The beauty of Nubian blackness is continually stigmatized because of images born of the trans-Saharan slave trade. There is no doubt that the superiority of whiteness<sup>4</sup> over blackness developed during the Ottoman Empire, which provided top opportunities in the army or government for both Turkish or Ottoman immigrants and white slaves but rarely black slaves. The same hierarchy developed inside the harem<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, the urban elite and middle classes appear to have relied on the labor of black, mostly female slaves to supplement household staff long before the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, this preference for Caucasian white over African black continued through the decades of British colonial rule over Egypt and Sudan. Feminist scholar Fatima Siddiqi describes the current political and social consequences of enslavement: "It was a controlling reason behind both the Mahdist revolt of 1881–1899, between the Sudanese on one side and the Egyptians and then the British on the other, and it leaves its lasting legacy in the split between

3 I use the term blackness to refer to darker skin color. There are several layers of darkness in Southern Egyptian and Northern Sudanese colloquial Arabic. The darkest is *azraq* (blue), then *aswad* (black), then *asmar* (brown) and last is *qamhi* meaning wheat or brown. Nubians usually fall into the category of blue and black while the rest of Egyptians fall into *asmar* or *qamhi*.

4 I use the term "whiteness" here to refer to lighter skin color. Later, the paper argues that the contrast of whiteness and blackness is much deeper than skin color.

5 This is a separate part of a Muslim household reserved for wives and female slaves.

6 See WALZ and CUNO, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East*.

the North and the South in Bilad-al-Sudan, 'the land of the blacks'.<sup>7</sup> Contemporary racial slurs articulated against Nubian women as "black devils"<sup>8</sup> or ugly Africans testify that whiteness of skin color has become the standard of many Egyptians' vision of female beauty.

In the literature of Nubian Egyptians, these concepts are troubled. In Qasim's work, the blackness of the Nubian woman is set in contrast to the whiteness of Cairo, the urban center of gravity that drags her children into servitude, and most often never returns them. Historically, the status of black women in Egypt and Nilotic neighbors further south was neither as powerless nor as racialized as it became in the colonial context. Although factors of class, ethnicity, race and religion undoubtedly influenced women's lives throughout all historical eras, Nubian women have always enjoyed a certain autonomy. Traditionally they worked as peasants, matchmakers, nannies, and midwives. In Egypt as well as in the larger family of Nilotic civilizations, there are numerous examples of black women ascending to the height of authority, including the famous Queen Hatshepsut of ancient Egypt.

Contemporary patriarchal practices in the Nubian Egyptian community are often attributed to the arrival of Arab Muslims in the 7th century. Feminist scholar Leila Ahmed has challenged this narrative, instead suggesting that women in African (in this context Nubian) societies faced more pronounced oppression during the era prior to Arab conquest. In her words, Ahmed argues that women in public spheres were mostly limited to the lower class in rural areas. The seclusion of women in the harem during the Ottoman Empire, for example, was a continuation of an ideal of protection and respect for women.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the rural peasant has evolved to be an indicator of lower class practice. Ancient indigenous African communities, in this case Nubians in Egypt and Sudan, continued their agricultural practices. Nubian women continue agricultural practices, despite the association between these practices and the lower classes, which has been perpetuated until modern times

While a thorough treatment of this debate is beyond the scope of this present study, the essential point is that despite the profound and far-reaching changes in social structure brought about by the Muslim conquests, this was not the most significant turning point for Nubian women. In fact, it was the imposition of Western modernity that most profoundly fractured gender dynamics within

7 SIDDIQI, *Women Writing Africa*, p. 21.

8 In a scene from the Egyptian comic film, *Saidi fel Gam'a al Amrikiyya*, one visitor sleeps with a Nubian prostitute and describes this as "experiencing the black night instead of the red one."

9 SIDDIQI, *Women Writing Africa*, p. 41.

Nubian Egyptian society. British intervention underscored the economic divide between urban and rural areas. During the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium that ruled both Egypt and Sudan, Muhammad Ali welcomed foreigners to settle in the country to accelerate its modernization. He encouraged them to immigrate and extended to them a sense of security. He gave foreigners privileges such as tax exemptions, customs reductions, consular protection and trials in mixed courts.<sup>10</sup> Hence, some European foreigners initially settled in the region not as colonizers but as a foreign community, occupying a distinct space and cultivating social values that were clearly suspended above the indigenous masses. They formed an elitist stratum that maintained allegiance to, and prided itself upon, an affiliation with European culture.<sup>11</sup>

While the nationalist 1952 revolution – also known as the Free Officers Coup – altered the power and wealth structure by promising people a more egalitarian society based on justice rather than inherited wealth and titles, it only changed the membership of the elite rather than eradicating class altogether. Rural areas became more impoverished and the city received a flow of male migrants. Consequently, urban women seemed, at least in theory, to attain a higher economic status. They enjoyed newfound freedom in pursuing their goals and ambitions. Geographically, Cairo became abundant with employment opportunities and better economic standards than Upper Egypt.

Nubian women, particularly after the construction of the Aswan High Dam, have developed a sense of identity distinct from urban *Aswangyia* (Aswanites), *Sa'yada* (Upper Egyptians), or *al-Baydaa* (Cairenes; literally, “the whites”). In addition to belonging to an underrepresented group, the Nubian woman journeys a difficult path to survive without her male Nubian partner. She confronts these challenges despite the dearth of scholarship on her social or political challenges. Until recent decades brought a greater number of Black African immigrants and refugees to Egypt, she alone could testify to the experience of color prejudice against black beauty in the state built upon her ancient homeland. The marginalization of several scholarly works that discuss the Nubian woman and her identity crisis in either the African or Middle Eastern context and the general scarcity of literature are due to Nubian women’s lack of access to production of knowledge and culture on the national level. Cairo is the center and the source of artistic scenes and many Nubian women encounter logistical and financial difficulties in traveling the necessary distance. Thus, their literary production is pre-

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 40–43.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

dominantly buried in Aswan, in the far south of Egypt. In contrast, Nubian women residing in Khartoum, Sudan are much more visible and artistically celebrated than their counterparts in Egypt.

It is intrinsically accepted as an authentic voice when women writers explore in literature the voices on gender dynamics. The matter is different when a male writer ventures into speaking of the female voice in his literature. However, looking at gender dialectics in the writings of male Nubian novelists offers another possibility for interpretation. Muhammad Khalil Qasim's works offer a voice on gender dynamics in the Nubian household. His meticulous descriptions of the Nubian village woman in both *al-Shamandurah* and *al-Khala Aycha* provide a rich subject for discussion. In his masterpiece, *al-Shamandurah*, the Nubian woman – whether she is a mother, a daughter, a sister or just a member of the community – is grappling with tensions, disparities and financial and social insecurities. Because Qasim was writing in the era prior to the mass flooding of Nubian ancestral lands by the Aswan High Dam, his descriptions are a unique tableaux of Nubian women on the verge of momentous change. Surprisingly, he seldom characterizes Nubian women as victims of the social patriarchal structure, but as individuals who have agency to change the status quo.

The mass exodus of Nubian Egyptians from villages to several major cities impacted the core Nubian family and its structure. Male Nubians were forced to leave their families and seek opportunities for wage labor in the urban worlds of Cairo and Alexandria. Nubian women were thus left to face resettlement alone, transitioning to a different environment while coping with impoverishment and stigmatization of their skin color. However, their struggle for acknowledgement and space is not marked by an anti-male intonation. The Nubian woman's cause is to work for better social and economic conditions for rural women. To fully understand the dimensions of this struggle, religious beliefs and migration to urban areas are crucial factors in the formation of Nubian women's identities.

### **Islam, Migration, and Gender**

There is almost a consensus amongst scholars of gender and Islam that the manipulation of Islamic texts in a male dominated culture plays a role in gender disparity amongst Muslims. The verse of the Quran Muslim men quote is, "Men are guardians over women, because of that in respect of which Allah has made some of them excel others, and because of the men spending of their wealth" (Surah 4, verse 34). When it comes to migration and movement for the betterment of one's conditions, the quoted verse says, "You females,

stay in your houses and do not act like women from the days of ignorance” (Surah 33, verse 33). The Quranic texts and the Prophet’s sayings are decontextualized when it comes to their application to Muslim women by men with agendas of control and superior power hierarchy. These verses, while intended to protect women and honor them, are used to restrict their movement and double their responsibilities.

Some argue that the patriarchal system is not indigenous to African cultures and communities. In ancient Egyptian and Nubian history, for example, the emphasis was on matrilineal lineage as the core of the society. Family heritage or *miras* in Arabic is divided and distributed according to the woman’s lineage. In other words, the woman in the family holds authority over much of the family’s possessions. Arab culture, however, was patriarchal in the era prior to Islam. It emphasized masculinity and gave priority to men in power. Imam Faisal Abdul-Rauf says that before the revelation of Islam to the Prophet Muhammad, Arab women had no rights; they were men’s property. Before Islam, men could have as many wives as they wanted.<sup>12</sup> For Arabs before Islam, to have a baby girl was a shame. There was even the commonly accepted tradition of burying girls because of the shame and degradation they brought to their clans. Islam, as a religion, prohibited these traditions, gave women a right to inheritance, and emphasized the overall fair treatment of women. Over the course of history, these ideals of justice and equality to women have been ignored. With the introduction of Islam to the East African region in the 7th and 8th centuries, and Nubia’s conversion to Islam, the patriarchal version of Arab practice in this region has often conflicted with indigenous African traditions.

Western feminists, on the other hand, have been inclined to regard religion as another source of women’s subordination. They tend to cite the way women are often represented as subordinate in religious texts, and the frequency with which religion is used to justify and maintain men’s dominant position in society. Although these charges are leveled at all the major religions, Islam has a reputation for being “anti-woman” and for supporting a segregated social system where women are economically and politically marginalized. It is no surprise that western feminists have not drawn upon Islamic texts when addressing gender inequalities in Muslim societies.<sup>13</sup>

Anne Jennings refutes some of the stereotypical Orientalist claims that women’s subordination was basically due to Islamic beliefs and peculiar only to Muslim women when she mentions, “Muslim women are not the passive tools of men, obediently enduring

12 ABDUL-RAOUF, “The Prophet was a Revolutionary Feminist.”

13 HASHIM, “Reconciling Islam and Feminism.”

ignorance and confinement. Instead, they are themselves actors, concerned with influence, persuasion, and the negotiation of social order to their own advantage.”<sup>14</sup> However, she concurs that there is considerable paternalism towards women in Islam itself. “Women’s subordination is mandated by Islam in certain of its legal and religious texts, and by a complex of traditional values that are regarded as Islamic by the villagers.”<sup>15</sup> The unique articulation of Jennings’ discussion on gender and Islam is her transcendence of the Nubian woman’s blackness as an influential factor in their economic disempowerment. Her anthropological study on Nubian women of West Aswan takes the reader into another realm, considering the Nubian village holistically. Her explanation of what it means to grow up as a female in West Aswan is set in the context of village life in general. Jennings mentions that rural Nubian women work in tourism to earn extra money. She maintains that the involvement of village women with tourism is a prime example of women’s informal economic activity. The “informal economy” can be defined as a variety of occupations in which people work for goods instead of money or for money that is not reported to the government and thus remains unrecorded in official figures.<sup>16</sup> Jennings presents the idea of independence inherent in Nubian women villagers: “Nubian women have traditionally (stemming perhaps from pre-Islamic times) had the right to earn extra money; in the past, they raised sheep and goats to sell, which helped them when their husbands were migrant workers, but which they continued to do even when their husbands were living at home.”<sup>17</sup> Therefore, the plight of Nubian women is not totally due to remnants of the Arab patriarchal system.

### Rural Urban Migration and Nubian Women

Much of the existing literature on Egyptian women focuses on Cairo and reflects the situation of educated women of the middle class. While migration is often voluntary, in the case of Nubian men, it is not. Migration from rural to urban areas in the case of Nubians is longstanding. Because of the paucity of arable land in this part of Nubia, men have been leaving the area to find work for several generations. Nubia witnessed a series of floods due to the erection and heightening of dams in 1903, 1912, and 1933, culminating in the building of the Aswan High Dam in 1964. In his plan to compensate Nubians, Nasser relocated them onto new land north of Aswan. The Nubians’ main source of living was agriculture near the Nile, but

<sup>14</sup> JENNINGS, *Nubian Women of West Aswan*, pp. 3–5.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*



the newly settled lands were not as close to the river as the Nubians' older villages. Although socio-economic conditions are principal factors in the pace of migration, men and women always choose to migrate. The Nubians' experience with migration is complex. The relocation of the Nubian villages due to the building of the Aswan High Dam was mandated by the state. After a series of policies the state used to convince Nubians to leave their villages, males continued migrating to Cairo and Alexandria because the new Nubian villages did not offer them much improvement in their lives.

Migration experiences are not gender neutral. The migration process and its causes and effects impact men and women differently. The differences in these experiences are due to the role, behavior, and relationships that society assigns to each of them. Manthiba Phalane argues in her "Gender, Migration and the Reconfiguration of Labour Market" that whether for men or women, the migration process is always for the sake of better living conditions. The reasons both men and women move are due to a lack of employment opportunities and conditions of poverty, civil wars, political tensions in Africa and elsewhere in the world.<sup>18</sup> She continued that gender norms about the inappropriateness of women migrating autonomously, the constraining effects of their traditional family roles, and women's lack of social and economic independence, all hinder women's participation in migration and in the international labor market.<sup>19</sup> If this norm is applied to Nubian women, they have sought other sources to generate income, particularly after the socio-economic crisis of the 1960s and how it laid the foundation for the mass exodus of Nubians to Cairo and Alexandria. In Cairo, male migrants fell under the dehumanization of the capital. Smith mentions that the images of Nubians as *barabra*, slaves, African or black are produced overwhelmingly in the metropolitan center of Cairo in television, state publications, and museums.<sup>20</sup> In this regard, Nubian male migrants increased the load of their female counterparts. Large numbers of the sons intermarried with northern women in Cairo and Alexandria.

The representation of Nubian women in the literary texts of Muhammad Khalil Qasim presents the complexities of Nubian women struggling for identity formation. The accumulated concepts of female subordination, reiteration of whiteness as the exemplary beauty in popular culture, and urban migration to bigger cities after the industrialization of the nation are found in Qasim's novels. His *al-Shamandurah* offers an exemplary character of Daria Sakina who takes on the role of the head of the family while waiting for her son

18 PHALANE, "Gender, Migration and the Reconfiguration of Labour Market."

19 Ibid.

20 SMITH, "Place, Class, and Race in the Barabra Café."

to return, while Auntie Aycha acts as the repository of cultural heritage by maintaining the old Nubian myths.

### **Daria Sakina & al-Khala Aycha**

The female characters in *al-Shamandurah* are strong, proud women negotiating space and asserting their equality with men. They are very often the ones who change the characters' destinies and keep other male characters alive. Readers of these works are baffled by the way women strive for financial and sexual security and independence, honor, and preservation of their lands, while concurrently anticipating the flooding of their villages or collecting donations to rebuild the relocated villages. The incomplete love story of Sharifa (a Nubian woman) and Hassan al-Masri (an Upper Egyptian with no roots in Nubia) is set in contrast with Jamal's (Daria Sakina's son working in Cairo) marriage to a white woman from "Masr" (which literally means "Egypt" but colloquially refers to the Cairo region). Yet those love stories are only subtexts to the larger theme of displacement, financial compensation, and relocation of Nubians to the new villages.

In addition, female characters in *al-Khala Aycha*<sup>21</sup> present an example of women griots in Nubian communities. The elderly female auntie who recounts stories to the children's village is also an active member of the new community that supports rebuilding the cultural centers in the newly relocated villages of Nubia. Qasim's collection of short stories *al-Khala Aycha* follows the modernist school of realism. Qasim offers to his readers a series of real images of Nubian life, allowing readers to formulate their own picture of the Nubian past and present. In this collection, one finds almost every facet of Nubian heritage.

A recurring theme in African literature is the person who carries the memories of the ancestors. *al-Khala* or *al-Jadda* [The Auntie or Grandma] is the counterpart of the male griot who carries the memories of his ancestry. In Nubian tradition, the grandmother is the woman who stays most of the time with the children at home. She is the one who preserves the stories and narratives from the past, and passes them on to the children of the whole tribe. In my interview with Haj Jamal Suleiman, the author of the book *Nubian Myths*, in 'Aneba village in August 2016, I came to realize that the grandma is the main carrier of village history.

Muhammad Khalil Qasim uses his grandmother's stories to preserve the village tradition. Some of the stories recounted by grandmothers have become part of our everyday jargon such as "al-talta

21 Qāsim, *Al-khālah 'ayshah*.

tabta” meaning “the third is harsher.” This phrase which Qasim uses is woven into the fabric of the Arabic language to refer to the wisdom of learning from your recurring experiences. Following post-World-War-II poetic imagery, Qasim tells a story of respect to the elder woman in the village. In his short story *al-Khala Aycha*, Qasim recounts a young Nubian, Ahmad, starting to collect dues from Nubian villagers to establish a new school in New Nubia [Al-Tahjeer]. An elderly village woman screams, “Ahmad Effendi! Ahmad Effendi!!”, to attract his attention. He realizes that she had been waiting for him at the door, joyfully smiling and holding something in her hand. Ahmad bypasses her house and ignores her shouting. He believes that this elderly woman lives independently and cannot afford to pay dues to build a school. He is too embarrassed to ask for her donation. The elderly woman is saddened by Ahmad’s assumption that she is old, lonely and poor. She opens her hand and sobbingly hands Ahmad ten paper piasters. The money paper is intentionally a bit torn, symbolizing her anger at Ahmad’s indifference and embarrassment. Hugging the elderly Auntie while crying, Ahmad apologizes and takes her money.

The elder is hurt by the young man’s indifference to the little she owns. Although she believes that whatever she has will help in rebuilding the community, the younger Ahmad had questioned her ability to contribute to the New Nubian projects. In this short story that Qasim wrote during his early years in prison, he draws our attention to the importance of elders as carriers of the memories and histories of the village. Those female griots residing in Nubian villages are becoming extinct. Although there are several attempts to archive Nubian heritage, stories of ancestors are still taken for granted. It is the duty of young generations of artists and writers to preserve this valuable heritage. Qasim and following generations of writers register those stories in their literary productions.

### **Women and Nubian Literature of Crises**

Often the literature of crises [*adab al-mehna*] draws its plots from the difficulty of reality itself. The catastrophe, or *al-mehna*, is the main protagonist. It is the instigator of minor actions or reactions by Nubian characters. The writer uses the rhetoric of descriptions to draw readers into the overall catastrophe inflicted upon the community. The plot of Qasim’s novel *al-Shamandurah* hinges on the dilemma of displacement and dispossession from their ancestral land. The novel describes at length nature, the Nile, and nights and days in the old village of Qattah. The females in the novel are primarily preoccupied with surviving the catastrophe of the anticipated

flooding. Generally, the character of the Nubian woman is not pre-occupied with acknowledgement or access to space in their social arena. The female characters are not set in contrast to men. Rather, they are fighting alongside men for their collective survival of the upcoming flood. The female figure in Qasim's novel is not eroticized in describing her sexuality, motherhood, and struggle with non-Nubian women. All her actions or reactions are a direct result of coping with a situation resulting from migration, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, to an urban area.

*Al-Shamandurah* is a metaphorical story of a woman who is helping ships to rest near her land and yet is forced to leave her culture and her heritage and to relocate and adapt. It is a story of her journey on the Nile. At the outset of the novel, readers are struck with the image of a woman sitting quietly and drawing some figures in the sand and then distorting them. This woman, who is in fact the mother of the narrator, does not speak throughout the whole novel, yet we come to know her story of grief, loss, poverty, struggle, and later her death. Fateema, mother of Hamid, fears approaching her son or touching him. Diagnosed with epilepsy while pregnant with him, once while breastfeeding him she falls asleep, nearly killing him. Since this incident, she does not approach him or any of her children. Her husband, who loves her deeply but is helpless to heal her, escapes by taking another wife (Hajouba), and alienates her. Despite this sad story, we come to know that she insists on having her house registered in her son's name. Hamid describes her as "possessing something more than her kind gestures and looks: she is a strong woman who can stand up to my father."<sup>22</sup> Here, the silence of the mother is a strong aspect of her resilience.

The rural Nubian woman's strength is manifested in several other characters. Batta, the narrator's sister, is a hardworking, dedicated and kind sibling who also helps in the field. She works hard on her father's land. Her initial fight with her stepmother, Hajouba, is justified. She is described as a girl who basically does all the harvest work in the field but does not participate in the feast. The narrator explains:

فقد سهرت علي الزرع و انتزعت "الهالوك" من بين جذوره, و وعزت الارض و بتننها و حولت الماء و حفظت مواقيت الري... فمن حقها اذن حين يكوم المحصول ان تعزل لنفسها كيله او كيليتين و تشتري لنفسها و تشتري لنفسها شيئا من المتجر او من السفينه السوداء التي ترسو علي مرافتنا في الموسم

She stayed up late to watch the harvest. She uprooted the orobanche and hoed the land and switched the water and memorized the schedule for irrigation. She has every right when it is time for the

22 QĀSIM, *al-Shamandurah*, p. 14.

harvest to set some aside and buy herself something from the store or from the black ship embarking on our shore this season.<sup>23</sup>

Like Batta and closer to her age is Sharifa, the pretty young girl who is loved by every boy in the village. Sharifa, an orphan girl, helps her mother as they await her brother Jamal to return and assume his family responsibilities. Her ambiguous nostalgic remembrance and affection for the Upper Egyptian fugitive Hassan al-Masri, who attempted to sexually harass her in the cornfield, is the writer's way of insinuating the impossibility of a love story between them. This is emphasized by Sharifa's response when one of the girls asked her if she could marry him. Sharifa states that Hassan al-Masri is *halabi* or foreign, meaning that he is rootless and does not belong. Sharifa describes him to her sister in law, "Do not mention anything to Jamal. Hassan al-Masri is a stranger, not family; he is not a cousin of ours, he is not from the village - he is *halabi*."<sup>24</sup> Sharifa then marries Bora'i, a man from her village and her tribe, whom she had known since his boyhood.

Whenever prejudice against Nubians is discussed, the issue of blackness and color arises. Many scholars argue that there is discrimination against Nubians based on their skin color. However, objective scholarship contextualizes this prejudice within the economic and geographic location of the Nubian homeland. Nubian women speak about the whiteness of Masri and the fact that they detest it with every white person they encounter. Their hate for whiteness evokes their hate for urban living, the forced desertion of their loved ones and the city's manipulation and greed. Do women carry the color of the nation? Does color affect gender dynamics? Do we measure the standardized beauty of the nation by the blackness or whiteness of females or rather by the burdens of poverty, unemployment and exile that they go through? The story of Daria Sakina in *al-Shamandurah* perhaps offers a clue to answering these questions.

The story of Daria Sakina is indeed the story of Nubia. Daria Sakina is a woman who embraces, in her mobility and perseverance, an authentic example of a rural Nubian woman. Her strongholds of her land, her children and her Nubian traditions against the greediness of the cities of the North are representations of Nubia struggling to preserve its existence against the inundation of the Aswan High Dam, forced migrations and relocations.

Although Sakina is reaching old age, she still maintains her beauty and the physical strength to hold an axe and cultivate the land.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 428.

Her presence in the novel is symbolic of Nubian women in all rural areas. The narrator describes her:

داريا سكينه , المسكينه تعيش في النجع علي محصول بضعه نخلات و العمل في البيوت. تطحن و تغسل و تغريل و تعجن...و تربي في بيتها المهتمدم بعض الدواجن و الحملان..اما القيراطان اللذان...فملاكهما فقد رهنتهما عند ابي و فاء لبعض ديونها..غلبانه

Daria Sakina is a poor woman who lives on the produce of few palm trees and serves at houses. She grinds, washes, strains, and kneads. In her tumbledown house, she raises a few chicken and lambs. She has two acres of land and she puts them on a mortgage to my father so that she can pay her debts. She is bereft.<sup>25</sup>

The poverty of Daria Sakina is somehow related to her history in the village of "Qattah." She mentions that she comes from a previously enslaved family. She is solely responsible for providing her daughter with a decent life. While begging some men to give her land to cultivate, she tells the merchant who was jokingly proposing that she should marry Sheikh Amin:

و هل من المعقول ان يتزوج رجل مثل امين امراه مثلها, ابنه جاريه و عبد اعتقهما جد عبد الله الجزار؟

Is it logical that Amin would marry a woman like her, a daughter of a slave woman and slave man who were freed by the grandfather of Abdullah al-Jazzar?<sup>26</sup>

Sakina's poverty and debt do not stop her from striving to live, and praying for her migrant son to come back. After Sheikh Amin, the merchant, declines her request to cultivate two acres, she seeks out Abdullah al-Jazzar, another villager who rents people's land for extra charge. When al-Jazzar inquires who would cultivate the land, she responds that she would be the person because she did so when her late husband was still alive. Against the male villagers' desire, she rents the land and starts cultivating it with her daughter Sharifa.

و مضت داريا تشمم كمها الواسع و جرجار جلبابها و تمسك بالفاس و تتأفف ثم تبصق في راحه يدها تهوي بالفاس و تتوقف لتلهث ثم تعود الي العزق و التسويه بسرعه...حتي تتعب قليلا ملقيه براسها الي الخلف بينما تستند بيدها علي مقبض الفاس و تتأمل الرجال من حولها

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

Daria lifts her wide sleeves and her gown up and holds the axe, anxious, exhausted and spitting in her palm. She then puts the axe down and pauses so she can breathe, then goes back to hoeing and evening the land. When she gets a little tired, she throws her head a bit back while holding the handle of the axe in her hand and looking at the men around her.<sup>27</sup>

Daria Sakina grieves for her son Jamal, who migrated to Cairo and retains no contact. When the government officials register the lands and palm trees of those affected by the flooding of the Aswan High Dam, and subsequent migration, Jamal is not present. Daria, having registered the land in his name, cannot file for compensation. She summons him in a letter, and describes his Cairo wife as *al-beyda*, the white woman. She sees his marriage to a woman from Cairo as his severing from his family in Nubia:

ارسلته الي مصر ليكدح , ابقاء علي شريحه الارض الصغيره ووفاء بديونهما، فاذا همصر تبتلعه و تبعد  
 عنهما...و رها الي الابد تقصيه عن الام التي تعبده و التي ضحت بالزواج من اجله و من اجل هذه  
 .....اليتميه  
 داريا سكينه تعرف تماما معني هذه الزيجه البيضاء، فلسوف تنقطع بسببها صله جمال باهله هنا، و  
 ...هناك في مصر، فلا يزورهم و لا يزورونه، لا يحس بواجب ازاءهم و لا يحسون بواجب ازاءه

We sent him to Masr (Cairo) to work hard so that we could keep this small piece of land, and pay our debts. Surprisingly, Masr (Cairo) has swallowed him, kept him away from his mother, his mother who worshiped him and sacrificed her marriage for the sake of his.<sup>28</sup>

Daria's greatest distress is the fact that her son is married to a white woman from Masr [Cairo]. Historically, Nubian families are saddened by these outside, Cairene marriages.

This is akin to a kidnapping, and the white woman is a criminal.

ورها كانت هذه البيضاء ينبوع سعادته لجمال..و رها كانت طيبه طاهره و لكنها تعتبر مجرمه في نظر  
 المجتمع الصغير الذي يعيش في نجعنا ..و ليس الفتى اقل اجراما منها هي التي تصيدته ..فقد سلبت  
 هذه الزيجه البيضاء عصاره الحياه من جسد هذه الام و بريق الامل من عين هذه الشقيقه التعسه

This marriage to the white woman deprived the juice of life from the body of the mother and the stream of hope from the eye of the desperate sister.<sup>29</sup>

27 Ibid., p. 189.

28 Ibid., p. 76.

29 Ibid.

Daria's total rejection of her son's marriage to the white Cairene woman is symbolic of the attitudes of Nubian women towards Cairo and its kidnapping of their sons, husbands, and brothers, who are their major source of support. Women articulate this sentiment when they chat about why it is hurtful for them for their family member to marry a woman from Cairo. They say that they hate whenever the name of the city is mentioned because it evokes the face of every white woman.

و تضح الدار بالضحك ، حتي داريا سكينه سمحت لنفسها ان تضحك ، تضحك : ذلك ان زوج هذه الشاطره التي عادت من مصر منذ شهور هجرها الي زوجه بيضاء، فعادت تندب حظها و تنفث حقدها شهور كلما جري اسم المدينه علي لسان الناس، تكره كل وجه ابيض، تكره سعديه لانها بيضاء و لا تتصور حسن المصري

The house is full of laughter. Even Daria Sakina is laughing and laughing at this apparently intelligent Nubian woman whose husband abandoned her for a white woman from Cairo. The Nubian wife is infuriated now at anyone from the city and pours her grudge over anyone who praises the city. The Nubian wife hates every white face, she hates Saadia because she is white.<sup>30</sup>

The historical contrast of Nubian women with Cairene white women has influenced certain views of Nubian men about their own women. Nubian women are indeed in trauma because their male counterparts prefer to marry white Cairene women. In the previous section, readers see the views of Nubian women on the whiteness of Cairene women. Imagine the opinion of the Nubian man. Some men take pride in the beauty of their women. For example, in the beginning of the novel, Bor'ai is in love with Sharifa. Towards the end, when Hassan al-Masri leaves the village, Sharifa is saddened by his departure. Sharifa and Hassan al-Masri's story is juxtaposed with the story of a Nubian woman who is seduced by a building contractor from Upper Egypt, a *halabi*. The village lawyer describes how the halabi cornered the Nubian woman alone. She states: "give me a chance to get ready for what you want from me." In the end, she deceives him, crushing his head on the building he had just completed. Here, the Upper Egyptian, who attacks a Nubian woman and tries to rape her, is described as *halabi*. She smartly outmaneuvers and murders him.<sup>31</sup>

Readers are really astonished at Jamal's justification for his mother's and sister's rejection of his white lady. The story of Jamal was mentioned previously. He is the Nubian boy who settled in

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp. 478-479.



Cairo and married a white woman, named Zanouba, disgracing his mother, Daria Sakina, and his sister, Sharifa, who believe that she is responsible for blocking his home visits; she has stolen their son and brother. Eventually, Jamal and his wife return to his village in Aswan. Zanouba does her best to win over the hearts of his family. She gains the respect and love of most in the village, but not Jamal's mother and sister. Consider this dialogue between Zanouba and her husband Jamal:

النساء يفهمن ما في عيون الاخريات يا جمال. انها تمقتني.  
 انها لا تمقتك بل تغار منك، فانت بيضاء جميله بينما هي سمراء عجوز.  
 حتي شريفه افتح عيني فجاه فاظدطها تراقبني خلسه و في عينها الحيره.  
 انت الملولمه يا زنوبه. لماذا تفتحين عينيك عليها فجاه. المساله يجب ان ترك للزمن

- Women understand what is in the eyes of other women, Jamal. She hates me [meaning his mother].
- She does not detest you but she is jealous of you. You are white and pretty while she is black and old.<sup>32</sup>

Patriarchy and whiteness are omnipresent here. The Nubian man highlights the fact that there is a tension between his Cairene wife and his Nubian family, because of the superiority and favorability of whiteness over blackness. While he describes it as jealousy, it is financial security that the women of his family lack. While Zanouba herself is not financially secure, she cannot integrate into the Nubian family, and urges their departure.

In a word, Nubian literature has generated a prototypically resilient female protagonist. The female characters of *al-Shamandurah* and *al-Khala Aycha* are integral to understanding how a community disaster mobilizes gender dynamics. It is not the western feminisms of male dominance, female oppression, and patriarchal social structure that are inherent to the Nubian community of Upper Egypt. It is in fact, the Nile River flooding from the Aswan Dam, accelerating the migration of Nubian men into the bigger cities of the North. Even when skin color is mentioned as playing a significant role in gender relations, it is inherently intertwined with the capitalism and greed of the city.

Set from 1931 to 1932, in the Nubian village of Qattah – just one year before the flood of 1933 – *al-Shamandurah* and *al-Khala Aycha* are stories of a lost nation, resurrected through Qasim's memories, during his many years in jail. Through his recreation of the incidents, he is not re-imagining his nation. He uses memory as history, as a statement on the status quo, as a harsh critique of the bigger

32 Ibid., 412.

nation-state of Egypt: a nation state that is centered on Cairo and which marginalizes its subjects in the upper regions and Nubian areas. The relationship between men and women in this novel focuses on the injustices of the bigger nation, such as the absence of monetary compensation, and the destruction of the centuries old vital palm tree plantations. The women of *al-Shamandurah* and *al-Khala Aycha* are in distress and turmoil because of injustices by government officials. This is the real source of the rupture in the Nubian community.

## Conclusion

Literature is a gateway through which readers can venture into the undercurrents: concealed qualities of gender relations, particularly of underrepresented peoples. Nubian literature in Arabic is an exceptional tool for understanding Nubian women and their own autobiographical representations. According to the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics, the literacy rate in Egypt is about 26.5%; 20% of this group is female.<sup>33</sup> This statistic has led some to assume that illiteracy rate is higher in rural areas, particularly the Nubian villages. That would necessitate the analysis of Nubian women and their dynamics with their male counterparts, in the broader group of all Egyptian women. Certain themes that permeate scholarship on Muslim women – characterizing them as docile, oppressed, non-vocal, passive, and constantly subjected to male domination – are generally the same stereotypes applied to Nubian women residing in rural upper Egypt.

The geographic location of Nubia, and its rural characteristics, add to the difficulty of understanding the inner anxieties, fears, hopes and powers of Nubian women. Today, the Nubian community is concentrated around the cities of Luxor and Aswan in Upper Egypt. The largest displacement of Nubians occurred in 1964 with the building of the Aswan High Dam. This event led to a new awareness of Nubian identity. Thus, the literature of Nubians in Arabic is an avenue through which one can look at this socially and economically marginalized group. This body of literature enhances our understanding of the important influence of economic and social factors on Nubian women and their views of the world. Moreover, it narrates the ways that Nubian women negotiate their space in a marginalized and underrepresented community.

Nubian literature in Arabic focuses on this tragic history of flooding, displacement and re-settlement. In addition, it highlights

33 See the report on the illiteracy rate in Egypt according to CAPMS, released by the news channel MBC: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r05nhprvoXU>.

how these incidents affect the daily lives of Nubian women. There is no doubt that rural Nubian women developed a sense of antagonism towards the urban centers of Aswan and Cairo. The forced migration of Nubians disrupted the gender balance, changing relationships and historic social norms, and increased women's domestic daily responsibilities for household, children and education.

Nubian writers, both male and female, represent these issues of survival of rural women. Although marked by the ability to adapt and ultimately survive, rural women continue to seek approval and acknowledgement. Their resentment of "the city" is characterized by an overall loathing of the place that has disrupted their family structure, now extended to the second and third generations. As shown here in *al-Shamandurah* and *al-Khala Aycha*, Qasim's description of the rural Nubian woman is one of strength, endurance, and adaptability. Her ability to survive the harshest circumstances is repeatedly the main theme in contemporary literature, and is the personification of this female society, as so poignantly portrayed by both generations. Daria Sakina and Auntie Aycha, in *al-Shamandurah* and *al-Khala Aycha*, are examples of Nubian women's struggle and continuous empowerment. This story is emblematic of the self-empowerment of the Nubian woman. Fighting against the extinction of her ancestors' stories, a strongly holding onto the land, and a resilience against the blending and fusion of her identity are key factors in empowering Nubian communities.

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