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The Dangers of Dancing: The Media and Morality in 1930s Egypt

SHAUN T. LOPEZ

On the night of May 22, 1936, a large crowd filled the Casino al-Busfur, a popular Cairo nightclub.¹ One of the featured attractions that night was Imtithal Fawzy, a well-known dancer and sometime actress. According to media reports, immediately following Fawzy's performance, a man brandishing a piece of broken glass approached the dancer and viciously slit her throat. Fawzy died at the scene from her wounds. A few days later, on May 27, newspapers reported that the body of Ayushah Nabil, another Cairo dancer, had been found in a Cairo hotel room. Nabil had been stabbed 28 times. Roughly two weeks later, the newspapers reported death threats against three more dancers, this time, in Alexandria. The media sensation around these cases, in particular the Fawzy murder, occupied the press for much of the summer of 1936. Descriptions of the crime scenes, biographies of the victims, the motives of the killers, and the implications of the crimes for Egyptian society were all regularly featured in the pages of newspapers and magazines. Stories related to the Fawzy murder also appeared occasionally on the front pages of Egypt's most popular daily newspapers—uncommon, if not unheard of, for Egyptian crime reporting in 1936. What was behind this apparent epidemic of attacks on Cairo dancers? And why were the murders seized upon by the Cairo media, and by extension, Egypt's reading public?

In this paper, I consider the role of media sensation in reflecting and producing gender in 1930s Egypt. By revisiting the massive press coverage around the 1936 murder of Imtithal Fawzy, I will demonstrate that events like her murder, publicized by the press and debated in the public discourse of the time, provided the evidentiary material for heated debates about female sexuality and masculine moral responsibility during the period. The pages of the press, I will suggest, constituted a sort of imaginary public in which men and women, upper and lower class, and urban and rural Egyptians existed together, blurring assumed gender, class, and spatial boundaries in 1930s Egypt. These pages in turn were

consumed by politicians, activists, and Egyptians of both genders and varying social classes, and the events covered therein were evaluated against prevailing notions of masculinity and femininity. By comparing press coverage of Fawzy's murder to another case sixteen years earlier, I will show how these sensations both reflected and contributed to the extent in which moral propriety was a factor in maintaining membership in society, and the rights and responsibilities implied therein. Moreover, I will argue that gender, and in particular, formulations of acceptable masculine behavior, were based largely on shifting notions of responsibility for the maintenance of moral order during Egypt's liberal period. These shifts, I will suggest, were intertwined with the public's perception of a developing, post-colonial state in inter-war Egypt.

Media Sensation and Gender

The murder of Imtithal Fawzy in May 1936 was a *cause celebre* in every sense of the word. Virtually every Egyptian newspaper and magazine of the time, among them political dailies, women's magazines, entertainment weeklies, and legal journals, covered the case in one form or another. That the Egyptian public was captivated by the sensational nature of the case and its compelling cast of characters is not, in and of itself, surprising, nor is it unique to either the time or place of 1930s Egypt. For example, newspaper stories about Jack the Ripper terrified English readers in the 1880s, and American audiences have often been mesmerized by a violent and/or sensational case.² In Egypt, recent press sensations have included concerns about organ stealing from orphanages and more recently, fears of a serial killer stalking the streets of Heliopolis.³

Historians of other areas have, in turn, made good use of the myriad texts produced to describe a sensational crime and often to titillate the reading public. Judith Walkowitz's *City of Dreadful Delight*, for example, details the impact of the Ripper murders on gender dis-

course in 1880s London. Curiously, however, historians of modern Egypt, especially those who study gender, have largely neglected the possibilities offered by newspapers and magazines for the study of identity. This is particularly striking, considering the sheer volume of periodical literature published in Egypt during the first half of the twentieth century. The first modern newspaper did not appear until 1876, and only after World War I did the press fully blossom into a lively and diverse institution. By the 1920s and 30s, however, literally hundreds of newspapers and magazines could be found on Cairo's newsstands. Political dailies and weeklies, entertainment journals, religious publications, and women's magazines were published with increasing frequency after 1918, providing readers, and sometimes even non-readers, with the news of the day from a variety of perspectives. The proliferation of periodicals was accompanied by shifts in both the style of news reporting and choice of newsworthy topics. After World War I, editors looking to sell more newspapers increasingly included *hawadith*, i.e., murders, robberies, domestic violence, prostitution, and other forms of mayhem, in their coverage. By 1920, most of the daily and weekly political journals dedicated a section, a page, or multiple pages to coverage of *hawadith* taking place both within and outside of Cairo and Alexandria. This development was accompanied by the rise of photojournalism, which was utilized by many of the leading newspapers and magazines by the 1930s.⁴ By representing news in pictorial form, information about the most sensational cases was now accessible to even non-literate members of Egyptian society. And while the complex political situation in Egypt after World War I occasionally resulted in censorship of overtly political articles, *hawadith* were generally ignored by censors, dismissed as unrelated to real news, and therefore deemed non-threatening.

While the censors may not have taken *hawadith* coverage seriously, it is somewhat surprising that historians have followed their lead. Attempts to write the history of gender -- defined here as social and cultural knowledge about sexual difference⁵ -- have instead focused on Egyptian elites and the influence of discourses drawn from sources external to the time and space of modern Egypt. Most of the existing literature tends to follow two major patterns. The first focuses primarily on the influence of European colonial discourses on elite discussions of gender in Egypt. These studies tell the story of late nineteenth-century progressives such as Qasim Amin who, clearly influenced by this colonial perspective, identified the relative absence of women in Egyptian public life as the locus of Egypt's backwardness and a major hindrance in Egypt's drive for modernity and independence.⁶ Margot Badran's important work on Egyptian feminism and nationalism falls into this group, as it describes the activism of a small group of

Western-influenced elite women campaigning for the greater incorporation of women into Egyptian public life.⁷

The second pattern can be found in those studies that seek to re-interpret foundational Islamic texts in order to carve out a larger space for women in Egyptian society. Leila Ahmed, Denise Spellberg, and Fatima Mernissi have all sought to broaden Arab and Islamic gender notions by finding a greater role in earlier Islamic history and discourse for women.⁸ Others have examined the rise of an Islamic feminist perspective in the 1930s and after.⁹ More recently, studies have combined the two patterns, noting that secular and Islamic progressives sought to re-interpret Islamic texts in a way that would allow for technological, social, and cultural transformations. This so-called Islamic modernism attempted to create space for women's participation in the process of modernity without threatening their status and participation in Egypt's religious culture.¹⁰

Attempts by elites to combine religious and western discourses and forge what Lila Abu-Lughod has called a hybrid modernity are certainly worthy of study, but ultimately limiting.¹¹ By focusing on elites, these studies are, for the most part, a history of politics and ideas, rather than of experience. Focusing on these elite discourses in discussing the construction of gendered identities fails to consider that identity formation is a process that takes place at all levels of society, in myriad ways, and for many different reasons. Moreover, the vast majority of women are almost completely ignored, supposedly unrecoverable in the historical record.

While these important works have informed my own research, I will point out that studying press coverage of *hawadith* in the Egyptian press affords us a hitherto completely neglected perspective on the production of gender in modern Egypt. First and foremost, it allows us to see when, how, and why events on the ground, in Egypt itself, might have played a role in how people understood and experienced sexual difference. While the basis for gender discourse among elites might have been centered on liberal notions of sexual equality or religiously derived notions of gender complementarity, this discourse did not exist in a vacuum. Gender was contested every day in the streets, markets, living rooms, and dance halls of Egyptian society, and the biggest media sensations, like the 1936 Dancer Murders, were, in effect, only the most sensational of these contests. Press coverage of these cases came in the form of crime narratives, editorials, and letters to the editor, and was followed by the vast majority of urban Egyptians. In addition, media coverage usually contained multiple narratives about the details of the case: the story as told by the different parties to the case, as told by the authorities (police, prosecutors, etc...), and as told by the media itself. Moreover, press coverage of *hawadith*

played a role in defining the very idea of Egyptianness. Egyptians from different cities, social backgrounds, religions, and genders all existed together in the pages of the press, in a virtual public that might not have reflected the realities of Egyptian life, but nonetheless confirmed the idea of a diverse but real community.

Following Benedict Anderson's notion of the imagined community, I would suggest that the biggest sensations were, through the widely disseminated media, a sort of shared experience of Egyptians as a whole, and as such matters of concern to each and every citizen.¹² Furthermore, while the reading public was decidedly middle and upper class, the content of many (and perhaps a majority) of *hawadith* articles focused on non-elites. Those who anxiously followed the most sensational cases were captivated by stories of low-level bureaucrats, peasants, street vendors, soldiers, housewives, and prostitutes every bit as much as by stories about high society and elite scandal. Through these multiple and competing narratives, the parties to a case were, in effect, tried before the court of public opinion. More importantly, their behavior, and its appropriateness for Egyptian society, was also on trial. In this way, media sensations like the Dancer Murders were, as I will demonstrate, given meaning against a backdrop of broader discussions of gender at the time. Conversely, these broader discussions of gender were placed against a backdrop of these real-life Egyptian dramas, and assumptions about sexual difference were often re-evaluated and sometimes re-formed as a result of those cases.

Raya and Sakina: the Masculine and the Feminine in 1920

Perhaps the best place to start the story is in 1920, with arguably the first true media sensation in modern Egyptian history: the Raya and Sakina serial murders. These two women, along with their husbands and two other men, were tried, convicted, and executed for the murder of at least 17 women in Alexandria.¹³ The gruesome details of the case, the testimonies of the defendants and witnesses, and the associations Egyptian commentators made between the murders and the state of the Nation served to captivate Egyptians of all social classes for the better part of two years. Thanks to multiple movies and plays based loosely on their story, Raya and Sakina remain cultural anti-icons even today. While this is neither the time nor place to revisit all the details of the Raya and Sakina case, I want to mention a couple of points as a basis for comparison and contrast to media discussions of gender around the Dancer Murders of 1936.¹⁴

Despite its seemingly non-political nature, press coverage of the case linked it to both the history of British colonialism in Egypt and nationalist responses to it. Be-

ginning in 1882, British troops occupied Egypt, and a colonial administration controlled Egyptian politics, military, and policing until limited Egyptian independence was gained in 1923. To the extent that foreign nationals were involved, the colonial administration, along with officials from other Western nations, also exercised control of legal matters in the form of the mixed court system. In the face of their own political impotence, Egyptian nationalists during the colonial period generally tended to locate Egyptian identity within their own perceived spiritual or cultural superiority in the realm of family and home. Just as Partha Chatterjee has noted with regards to nineteenth century Bengal, the result was a formulation of national honor located not just in the home itself, but in the bodies of women.¹⁵ Margot Badran, Selma Botman, and others have noted that in the Egyptian context, women thus symbolized the "self-identity of the nation, its spiritual essence, and its cultural integrity," and as such were expected to remain within a traditional family structure that restricted them to domestic spaces.¹⁶ Deprived of significant political power, Egyptian nationalists went one step further, and the nation itself was generally gendered female in their calls for political independence.¹⁷

At the same time, prevailing notions about the nature of women's sexuality served to both complicate and justify attempts to keep women confined to the domestic sphere. As Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi puts it, women are often characterized as "omnisexual" in Arabo-Islamic discourse: that is, wholly and exclusively sexual beings. As a result, the woman's sexual appetite was seen as beyond her control and as such poses a dangerous threat to the stability of society.¹⁸ Egyptian nationalist attempts to protect the national honor located in the family, home, and bodies of Egyptian women, therefore, required vigilance of the supposedly dangerous sexuality of those same bodies. At a time when Egyptian nationalist activity was at its peak and leaders of the movement were engaged in negotiations with British officials, it is not surprising that the Raya and Sakina murders were partly understood within the context of nationalist discourses that centered on women.

Raya and Sakina, along with their husbands, were involved in the prostitution trade and their victims were also all prostitutes or street women. Victims were targeted for two main reasons: a) because they carried most of their wealth on their person, and b) because nobody was likely to notice their disappearance enough to report it. By virtue of the immoral lives they led, media reports generally described them as non-members of society—people who lived on the fringes of decency and by doing so, forfeited their rights and responsibilities as citizens. At a time when elite women's calls for female citizenship and suffrage were still in their infancy,

it is hardly surprising that their poor and “immoral” sisters were held in such low regard. Moreover, to many writers, the murdered women were described not so much as victims, but rather as violators of Egypt’s moral order whose deaths were in some way their own fault. Commentators repeatedly linked the murders to the increasing visibility of women outside the domestic setting, which was deemed antithetical to the religious and cultural bases of Egyptian national unity and a potential source of *fitna*, or social chaos. Editorials from a wide spectrum of perspectives viewed the case as evidence that steps needed to be taken in order to limit the dangers of interaction between men and women. Moreover, commentators repeatedly cited those public spaces where the presence of women was new and potentially destabilizing for Egyptian society, including the streets, coffeehouses, markets, and schools. Movie theatres and entertainment clubs were seen as particularly dangerous influences responsible for the loss of moral decency that led to crimes like the Raya and Sakina murders.

In the wake of the murders, the presence of women in public spaces was also generally described as a failing of Egypt’s male population. In the face of horrible crimes by women against women, individual masculinity itself was on trial. Multiple articles blamed the murders in particular, and Egyptian moral decay in general, partly on the inability of men to control and limit the “dangerous” sexuality wielded by their women. In relation to the Raya and Sakina murders, masculinity was first and foremost defined by the extent to which men could control the physical movement of women, and by extension, by the chaos women’s sexual natures could rain down on society. In the absence of any tangible political power to legislate social change in Egypt, individual men were assigned the important task of controlling the honor of the home, and by extension, the nation.

Imtithal Fawzy: Fallen Woman or Citizen of the Nation?

So let’s fast forward to the summer of 1936, when Imtithal Fawzy was a familiar name among the singers, dancers, and actresses who performed on the Cairo nightclub circuit. While she might have been well known among the men who frequented these clubs, it was only in death that Fawzy became a household name. According to reports published in the illustrated journal *al-Musammir* only days after her murder, Fawzy and another actress/dancer, Mary Mansur, had begun performing at the *Casino al-Busfur* on May 2, 1936. Although Fawzy was known primarily for her dancing, the show with Mansur was more diverse and included singing and monologues. It was by all accounts a popular show. On the night of May 22nd, as Fawzy completed her monologue, an audience member later identified as Hussein Ibrahim re-

moved a piece of broken glass from the folds of his gallabiya and attacked her. Her throat slit, she fell to the ground and eventually died as she was transported to the hospital. Ibrahim was immediately apprehended and confessed to the police, although later at his trial he claimed to have been an innocent bystander.¹⁹

Newspapers and magazines immediately seized upon the case, and generally made it their lead *hawadith* story. The brutal nature of the killing and the moderate celebrity of the victim notwithstanding, the case became a matter of public concern first and foremost because it was a story of organized crime and police ineptitude. The murderer had not acted alone, but rather on behalf of an organized criminal gang known as the *Beltagia*.²⁰ The *Beltagia*’s primary source of income was a good old-fashioned protection racket, aimed at fleecing the entertainers and nightclub owners of Cairo’s Ezbakiya neighborhood. In exchange for monthly payments, the gang provided “protection” for its clients; i.e., those who didn’t pay would be beaten or worse by members of the gang itself. Imtithal Fawzy was murdered for refusing to pay the “insurance” money demanded by the *Beltagia*. More disturbing to Egyptians was the failure of the police to protect the victim. On the day of her murder, a member of the gang had phoned the dancer’s house. Speaking with Fawzy’s mother, he demanded that the dancer pay the requested amount or “be killed tonight.” The dancer immediately reported the threat to the Ezbakiya police station and asked for protection. The police, however, refused to help, saying that their job was not to protect, but rather to respond to crimes when they happened. A few hours later, Imtithal Fawzy was dead.²¹

News reports and editorials demanding police reform and an end to organized crime in Egypt filled the pages of the Egyptian press throughout the Summer of 1936. Daily newspapers such as *al-Abram*, *al-Balagh*, and *Misr* were joined by entertainment weeklies such as *al-Sabah* and *al-Ushu*, as well as by illustrated journals such as *Al-Musammir* and *al-Kashkul*, in condemning the authorities for their failure to protect Fawzy. The general tenor of articles was that Fawzy’s death meant that no one was safe. In fact, virtually every newspaper or magazine in print featured editorials decrying the failure of the police to protect members of society. While one could write an entire book on the police reform aspect of the case, I will concentrate here on what the case tells us about gender and morality in Egypt at the time.

Just who was Imtithal Fawzy, and how was her death greeted by the Egyptian public? A number of journals printed biographies of the entertainer, and virtually all of them valorized the nightclub dancer for her talent and her caring nature. *Al-Musammir* for example, printed her life story under the headline “Imtithal, you poor soul! Your blood is on the neck of the government!”

According to the article, Imtithal's real name was Asma and she was born in a small village in the Delta. She soon moved with her family to Alexandria where she studied and was, according to the article, an exemplary student. As she reached her teen years, Asma was removed from school to stay home with her mother, to help around the house, and perhaps to be under the protection of her family as she grew into womanhood. At fourteen, Asma married the son of a lawyer. The marriage lasted two years, and she bore a daughter before ultimately leaving her husband. According to *al-Musawwir*, Fawzy then turned to a life of dancing, working in many of the nightclubs and coffee shops of Alexandria. She changed her name to Imtithal and was among the more popular dancers on the Alexandria entertainment scene. The biographical articles usually described her as an innovative performer, particularly well known for combining belly dancing (*raqs sharqi*) with Western forms, and she was a favorite of foreigners who frequented Egypt's nightclubs. Her career took another step forward when she joined noted theatrical director Nagib al-Rihani's troupe, where she worked until joining Mary Mansur for the show at the Busfur.²²

Various newspapers and magazines celebrated the career of Fawzy, but articles were even more flattering of her personal traits. *Al-Musawwir* described her as a loving soul who supported an entire family with the money she earned from dancing. "Imtithal had no property of her own except a house in the Muharam Bik neighborhood of Alexandria, where she lived on one floor with the mother and daughter she supported and rented the other floors to extended family."²³ *Al-Abram* reported that Imtithal was known in entertainment circles for the "gentleness of her character and her good heartedness."²⁴ *Al-Sabab* noted that fans were attracted to her warm heart.²⁵ Other journals emphasized the strength of her character. The *Egyptian Times*, for example, emphasized that her strong will had led to her death.²⁶ Several publications noted that a large contingent of entertainers attended the funeral, for Imtithal Fawzy was a kind-hearted individual, loved by all who knew her.

The celebration of Fawzy's life and career seems surprising, given the nature of her work. As Karin Van Nieuwkerk has noted, female dancers in Egypt during the 1930s were almost universally regarded by the public as immoral. Egyptian feminists lobbying for an end to prostitution and conservative groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood regularly cited the nightclubs as purveyors of sin. According to Van Nieuwkerk, while many dancers working in nightclubs might not have been working as prostitutes, they certainly engaged in behavior deemed immoral by the average Egyptian. Common practices such as *fat'h* — in which dancers sat and drank in the company of male customers for tips — were no doubt enough to cast shame on the reputation of the

performers.²⁷ There is little doubt that Fawzy, like most other dancers in the clubs, engaged in *fat'h*. *Al-Sabab* magazine, for example, reported that admiring male customers at the Busfur always showered her with gifts.²⁸ And it seems clear that she engaged in practices that must have at least suggested prostitution to Egyptian readers, whether she was actually engaged in its practice or not. *Al-Sabab*, for example, also reported that when Fawzy left the clubs every night "there were tens of fans awaiting her to offer their cars, and perhaps she would take a walk along the Nile with one of them."²⁹ Van Nieuwkerk also notes that simply by wearing suggestive clothes and performing in public spaces, dancers were generally marked as immoral women. One article even noted that, early in Fawzy's career, a legal complaint was raised against her for the immorality of her dancing.³⁰ While she was able to convince the judge that her performance did nothing to violate decency or to offend the feelings of her male audience, there can be little doubt that Fawzy was associated with prostitution and immoral behavior like other dancers. In fact, in more than one case, press coverage of her case overtly made the link between prostitution and the world of entertainers.³¹

What is striking about coverage of the case, then, is the way in which behavior seemingly coded as "immoral" failed to temper sympathy for the slain dancer. Despite persistent pressure in the 1930s by Egyptian feminists to ban prostitution, and by other groups to rein in immoral behavior, Fawzy became a beloved figure in death.³² The tremendous outpouring of sorrow and the valorization of her life and career, were, in fact, in complete opposition to the treatment of the victims of the Raya and Sakina case sixteen years before. The prostitutes who were murdered in 1920 were almost universally criticized for their immoral lifestyles, and were actually held responsible for their own deaths. They were portrayed as fallen women, a threat to the social order, and as outcasts from respectable society. Their lives certainly weren't memorialized as Fawzy's was, and little public sympathy was forthcoming after their deaths. This is not to say that commentators saw no link between female immorality and social disorder in 1936. A number of editorials published following the investigation into Fawzy's murder decried the "moral chaos" (*fawdat al-Akhlāq*) they believed Egypt was experiencing.³³

These "reminders," however, in no way challenged the basic narrative surrounding Imtithal Fawzy. In death, she was coded as a citizen with rights who deserved the protection of the state from lawless elements in society — despite the tacit association between her chosen profession and immorality. Now, I use the term "citizen" here with some trepidation as studies of women's citizenship in the Middle East have generally

focused on its limits as delineated by patriarchy. Selma Botman, for example, has argued that during Egypt's liberal period (1923-1952), "upper class women accepted the patriarchal character of the Muslim family in exchange for new rights in the public arena."³⁴ While in many cases that might have been true, media coverage of the Fawzy murder suggests a more complicated negotiation between gender and citizenship.³⁵ Imtithal Fawzy's lifestyle as a dancer and single mother certainly did not fit the kind of patriarchal Muslim family model noted by Botman. She nonetheless was perceived as having both rights and responsibilities, both under the law and as a member of the community. What interests me, then, is why women defined as immoral in 1920 were seen to have forfeited those rights, while Fawzy was not only accorded them, but as a victim of violent crime was made to represent both male and female citizens alike. Had notions of morality shifted that dramatically despite the continued campaigns by activists to stem what they perceived as a moral crisis? Possible answers to this question can be found in the flurry of editorials demanding action from the Egyptian government in the wake of Fawzy's murder.

Morality and the State

Following the murders of Imtithal Fawzy and Ayousha Nabeel, the newspapers were filled with editorials responding to the proliferation of gangs like the *Beltagia* throughout Egypt's cities. Many other editorials, however, indicted what was perceived as increasing moral laxity in Egyptian society. *Al-Masa'* blamed this growing immorality on the British occupation. One editorial stated that

The British occupation brought freedom to the man and to the woman, but freedom in this case means the absence of religion. So the man went to search out life in its most vile forms. And the woman looked to increase her power by selling herself. So immorality spread and the manifestations of this are moral depravity in the nightclubs...³⁶

Al-Amana al-Qawmia blamed the loss of morality in society on the movement to liberate women, which it described as "against Islam and against nature." Another article in the newspaper blamed nightclubs and the effect that improperly dressed women had on men.³⁷ And as with the Raya and Sakina case, articles sometimes noted the role of men in relation to female sexual behavior. Young girls, according to an *al-Shafaq* editorial, were regularly seen in the streets and midans "escorted by their fathers while practically naked."³⁸ The point here is that, in 1936, most newspapers, and by extension, many readers, viewed Egypt as suffering from a moral crisis—the murder of Imtithal Fawzy was, in this way, a catalyst for a broader discussion about decency as a whole. In this regard, one does find a notable similar-

ity between the media blitz following the 1920 Raya and Sakina murders, and the one that followed the Dancer Murders in 1936. Both cases engendered debate about a moral crisis in the Egyptian society. The difference, however, was not so much in the definition of morality itself, but rather in who was responsible for upholding it.

At his trial, Fu'ad Al-Shami, the head of the *Beltagia* crime ring, admitted his role in the death of Imtithal Fawzy. He defended his actions, however, on the grounds that the victim had offended his sense of manhood by refusing to pay him.

We are men, we are predators by nature. And the victim humiliated me, scorned me in front of other men, and she ordered me removed from the nightclub like a dog. All my life I have been a he-man, and God has always enabled me to be victorious.³⁹

Times had changed in Egypt, however, and Al-Shami's championing of the strong man didn't resonate as it might have in 1920. No longer did the press and the public call for men to control the women in their families in order to stem society's slide into moral depravity and to uphold the nation's moral superiority and honor. Moreover, men were not generally blamed even for actions directly related to this perceived moral depravity—for example, going to the nightclubs or hiring prostitutes. Rather, in 1936, it was the State that was held responsible for the policing of morality in Egypt. While the Egyptian Feminist Union had for years been unsuccessfully arguing for government regulation of certain immoral behaviors, the media blitz around the Dancer Murders gave these calls new immediacy. Time and time again, editorials in the summer of 1936 repeated the need for the State to intervene. *Al-Shafaq* called repeatedly for legal action to control the dress of women in the streets, and for legislation making marriage compulsory as a way to fight the sexual freedom it deemed as undermining the moral fabric of society.⁴⁰ *Al-Amanah al-Qawmia* called for government regulation of nightclubs and beaches as places where men and women behaved improperly together.⁴¹ An editorial in *al-Muqattam* called on the State to ban alcohol due to its role in leading to immorality and criminal behavior.⁴²

Countless editorials echoed these themes, suggesting that the most notable shift between 1920 and 1936 was not in the definition of moral behavior, but rather with regard to whose responsibility it was to regulate it. That the State had replaced individual masculinity as the responsible party suggests that public or popular perceptions of State power were intimately related to shifts in gender discourse and the relevance of moral behavior to membership in society. To be sure, the relationship between Egypt and Britain, its colonizing power, had shifted considerably between 1920 and 1936. In 1923, Egypt was granted conditional independence by the

British, and inaugurated a new constitution that, in theory at least, suggested greater equality for women. Botman, Badran, and others have argued that the “liberalism” of this newly independent Egypt was still predicated on a gendered division of society between a male public realm and a female domestic sphere.⁴³ Moreover, most historians have considered the new State politically impotent, thanks to the considerable power retained by the British and the inability of successive governments to remain in power for any extended period.

The editorials that followed the Fawzy murder and trial, however, suggest a different popular perception of the State. While the British remained powerful in many aspects of Egyptian life, the appeals by commentators and citizens for the Egyptian state to act to stem immorality indicate a belief that the government possessed the power and authority to implement social change in the 1930s. Although this faith in the government’s power to intervene to stem “moral crises” did not carry over to political or diplomatic affairs, it was, nonetheless an important task, and seems to indicate that formulations of national honor centered around family and home remained consistent in the sixteen years following the Raya and Sakina murders.

The development of faith, or at least hope, that the State could and would take the lead in the policing of morality illustrates a number of other interesting aspects of gender discourse during the period. That morality remained a central aspect of formulations of both national honor and social order seems clear. At the same time, women did in fact make significant gains during the 1920s and 30s, resulting in the increased crossing of women into spaces traditionally gendered male. Greater integration of women into the work force, and an active women’s movement championing the civil and political rights of women are two examples. The paradox is this: ideas about sexual danger located in the bodies of women did not shift dramatically during the years between Raya and Sakina and the murder of Imtithal Fawzy, even as women gained a more public presence in society. In fact, that public presence, often chronicled in media sensations like the Fawzy murder, provided evidence that the threat of female sexuality was real.

Instead, the real shift in popular gender discourse was from an emphasis on individuals, families, and sometimes, local communities to police their own behavior, to a belief in a modern State that would take responsibility for this policing. Women still possessed dangerous sexual power, but whether their membership in society was predicated on their own control of it was now a matter of debate. In reality, popular perceptions suggested that women could not control themselves if they tried. At the same time, individual men were also no longer to blame for society’s moral failings. Responsibility in that regard had shifted to the State, which, one

could argue, was a new form of collective masculinity.

Conclusion

Comparing media representations of two cases involving morality and citizenship thus leaves us with a confusing picture. The discourse of sexual danger embodied in the figures of women remained constant throughout the period, yet women became increasingly visible in the streets and markets of Egyptian society. Maintenance of the moral order for the good of the nation remained of paramount importance to Egyptian commentators, but responsibility for that maintenance shifted from individuals to the collective (the State). Finally, the power and control of the Egyptian government was limited by the continued influence of the British; yet Egyptians repeatedly appealed to this government for help in legislating moral order — suggesting that popular perceptions of official power were an important part of public life in the 1930s Egypt. All of these contradictions suggest considerable ambiguity with regard to notions of sexual difference and their social, cultural, and political relevance in the 1930s Egypt. As Beth Baron has noted, those who called for women’s progress in the 1930s existed alongside conservative sectors of the population for whom sexual purity remained an important value.⁴⁴ Cases like the Fawzy murder had widespread relevance precisely because of the contradictions and ambiguities within popular and official gender discourse during the period. Imtithal Fawzy was, in some ways, the embodiment of this ambiguity because her behavior reflected both the benefits and dangers of modernity.

The inauguration of a new Egyptian constitution in 1936 — one that further limited the power of the British to intervene in Egyptian affairs — might be seen as having paved the way for social legislation designed to deal with both calls for women’s liberation and emancipation on the one hand, and concerns for the maintenance of moral order on the other. In reality, however, Egyptian feminists and progressive intellectuals continued to lobby unsuccessfully for suffrage and an end to legal prostitution. Meanwhile, more conservative elements also failed to secure wide-ranging legislation designed to reflect broad concern about female sexual danger. Not until the 1952 Free Officers coup that ushered in Gamal Abdel-Nasser and the ideas of socialism did the State truly intervene. The result was the abolition of religious courts, suffrage for women, and official sanction for the presence of women in the work force — not exactly what many calling for state intervention in the 1930s and 1940s had in mind.

Finally, then, we must consider the role of the press in helping to forge the gendered society that it represented on its pages. In the imaginary public of the press, dancers like Imtithal existed side-by-side with politicians,

activists, policemen, housewives, thieves, and myriad other people. In fact, people of all social classes, religious persuasions, and geographic origins existed in the shared public space of newspaper and magazine pages. In some ways, one could argue that the gap between the virtual public of the press, with all of its egalitarian trappings, and “real” Egyptian society was perceived to be narrowing in the 1930s as more people became educated, migration to the cities increased, and women became more visible in public, thus according to the stories found in the media even more influence in society. This influence was not lost on the press itself. An editorial dated August 15, 1936 and published in the weekly *al-Osba’ab* decried the failure of the press to maintain public decency on its own pages:

Lately stories have appeared that have no result except to usher immorality into the body of the community and erode the behavior of young men and women.... There is a need for news coverage of *hammadith* that builds [rather than erodes] proper behavior.⁴⁵

As Lisa Duggan has pointed out, “newspapers thus operate in the boundaries between public and private, political and cultural, working to define the meanings of such binaries for a national reading public.”⁴⁶ It seems clear that this was true in the 1930s Egypt, and that stories of murdered dancers and other seemingly non-political sensations played a role in defining the boundaries of personal, social, and political responsibility. For those who wrote, read, and heard the media in 1936, there was at least agreement on this point: dancing could indeed be dangerous, not only for those who performed, but also for the moral well being of Egyptian society as a whole.

NOTES

¹I would like to thank the Dissertation Colloquium in the History Department at the University of Michigan for their helpful comments regarding this paper. Thanks also to Mario M. Ruiz, who has read and heard several versions of this paper at various times over the past two years.

²For more on the Ripper murders, see Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). For an example of an American sex and murder scandal, see Lisa Duggan, *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence, and American Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

³Coverage of these two cases appeared in virtually every Egyptian newspaper and magazine during the period from 1999-2001.

⁴Important illustrated journals included *Al-Lata’if al-Musawwara* (1916-1936) and *Al-Kashkul al-Musawwar*. *Al-Abram*, Egypt’s newspaper of record then, and now, published its first crime scene photos in 1920.

⁵This definition is taken from Joan W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press,

1988), 25, 34.

⁶For more on Qasim Amin, see Qasim Amin, *The Liberation of Woman and the New Woman: Two Documents in the History of Egyptian Feminism* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1992).

⁷See Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

⁸See Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992); Fatima Mernissi, *Women’s Rebellion and Islamic Memory* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Zed Books, 1996); Denise Spellberg, *Politics, Gender and the Islamic Past: The Legacy of Aisha bint Abi Bakr* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

⁹Beth Baron examines the life and beliefs of an “Islamic Feminist” in “Labiba Ahmed’s Activism,” (paper presented at the Poverty and Charity in Islamic Societies Conference, Ann Arbor, Mich., April 1999).

¹⁰Lila Abu-Lughod, “Feminist Longings and Post-Colonial Conditions,” in *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, ed. Lila Abu-Lughod (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 3-31.

¹¹Abu-Lughod, “Feminist Longings and Post-Colonial Conditions,” 13-17.

¹²Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983). In the Egyptian case, where literacy rates in the 1930s were less than fifty per cent, there is nonetheless evidence to suggest that news of the biggest sensations filtered well-beyond the literate population. For example, in the 1920 Raya and Sakina murder case, huge crowds took to the streets in reaction to press reports about the murders. See Shaun Lopez, “Murder, Mayhem, and the Making of Gender: Raya and Sakeena and the Culture of Sensation in 1920s Egypt.” (Paper presented at the Middle East Studies Association Annual Meeting, San Francisco, Cal., November 2001).

¹³Despite the fact that most of those involved in the murders were men, the two sisters were singled out and centered in news accounts.

¹⁴I have written on the details of this case, and the ensuing media sensation surrounding it, in Lopez, “Murder.”

¹⁵See Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 116-134.

¹⁶Selma Botman, *Engendering Citizenship in Egypt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 40.

¹⁷Beth Baron, “Nationalist Iconography: Egypt as a Woman,” in *Rethinking Nationalism in the Middle East*, ed. Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 105-124.

¹⁸Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), as cited in Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 67.

¹⁹*Al-Musawwar* (Cairo), (29 May 1936), 16. *Al-Musawwar* included several photos of both Imtithal and her attackers in its initial coverage. All translations mine unless otherwise indicated.

²⁰*Beltagi* is often translated to mean “criminal.”

²¹*Al-Abram* (Cairo), (23 May 1936), 8. *Al-Abram* was one of the first newspapers to report the story in detail. This is particularly significant in that it was Egypt’s most important and widely circulated newspaper in 1936, as it is today. Although *Al-Abram* today is owned by the government, it was a privately owned newspaper until after the 1952 Free Officers coup.

²²*Al-Musanmar* (Cairo), (29 May 1936), 16.

²³*Al-Musanmar* (Cairo), (29 May 1936), 16.

²⁴*Al-Abram* (Cairo), (23 May 1936), 8.

²⁵*Al-Sabah* (Cairo), (12 June 1936).

²⁶*Al-Times al-Misri* (Cairo), (6 June 1936), 3. *The Times* published each issue in both Arabic and English, often (but not always) simply printing the same stories in both languages. In this case, I am citing from the Arabic.

²⁷Karin Van-Nieuwkerk, “A Trade Like Any Other”: *Female Singers and Dancers in Modern Egypt* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1996), 43-45.

²⁸*Al-Sabah* (Cairo), (12 June 1936), 3.

²⁹*Al-Sabah* (Cairo), (12 June 1936), 3.

³⁰*Al-Sabah* (Cairo), (12 June 1936), 3.

³¹*Al-Sabah* (Cairo), (12 June 1936), 3.

³²The Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU), starting in 1923, made the fight against prostitution a central tenet of their platform. Their efforts to “spread virtue and combat vice” were hailed by the *Shaykh al-Azhar* (the official leader of Egypt’s Muslim community). For more on the efforts of female activists to ban prostitution, see Badran, 198-206.

³³For a particularly obvious example, see “Fawdat al-Akhlaq,” *Al-Balagh* (Cairo), (25 June 1936), 10.

³⁴Selma Botman, *Engendering Citizenship in Egypt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), xi.

³⁵For an excellent theoretical discussion of gender and citizenship in the Middle East, see also Suad Joseph, “Gendering Citizenship in the Middle East,” in *Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East*, ed. Suad Joseph (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 3-30.

³⁶*Al-Masa* (Cairo), (3 June 1936), 1.

³⁷*Al-Amana Al-Qawmia* (Cairo), (14 August 1936).

³⁸*Al-Shafaq* (Cairo), (18 July 1936).

³⁹*Al-Musanmar* (Cairo), (9 October 1936), 16-17.

⁴⁰*Al-Shafaq* (Cairo), (18 July 1936), 8.

⁴¹*Al-Amana Al-Qawmia* (Cairo), (5 August 1936), 1.

⁴²*Al-Muqattam* (Cairo), (31 May 1936).

⁴³See Badran, 74-88.

⁴⁴For more on this, see, for example, Baron, “Labiba Ahmed’s Activism.”

⁴⁵*Al-Ushu’a* (Cairo), (15 August 1936), 13.

⁴⁶Duggan, *Sapphic Slashers*, 1.