ARWA SALIH’S THE PREMATURE:
GENDERING THE HISTORY OF THE EGYPTIAN LEFT

By Hanan Hammad

This article examines the intellectual legacy of the Egyptian Marxist Arwa Salih (1953-97) in order to trace an intimate history of the Egyptian left. Gender relations among comrades have underpinned the movement that has enveloped women’s rights in the folds of national and class struggles. In her short life, Salih was a veteran underground activist and, from 1972-73, a key leader of the most effective student movement in modern Egypt. She translated Marxist and feminist literature into Arabic and composed works in diverse literary genres. Viewing the leftist movement from the gender edge, I provide a reading of Salih’s biographical works, al-Mubtasirun (The Premature, 1996) and Saratan al-Ruh (Soul Cancer, 1998). I study Salih’s texts under the rubric of biographical writings, although it might be difficult to categorize those texts as such. They are neither autobiographies nor memoirs in the strict sense of those terms. Rather than providing a chronology of life events, the texts offer a deep and intimate reflection on Salih’s experience as a female communist intellectual, activist, and frustrated Marxist believer who spent her last days in psychiatric clinics. Salih offers

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an unprecedentedly harsh critique of Egyptian communists from gender and generational perspectives. She broke taboos about sex and intimacy among comrades and cast doubt on her male comrades’ morality and sexual exploitation of female colleagues. Leftists in Egypt have blamed the demise of their movements on the ruling regime’s repression as well as the right-wing Islamists’ ideological ascendance. Salih broke with this rhetoric. Her vision and legacy pose important questions as to how emotions, gender relations, moral regimes, and sexuality shackled the political potency of the Egyptian left. Salih’s experience is comparable to that of US women in the civil rights movement and women participants in Latin American revolutions. In all three instances, women came to feminism by rethinking private relations in their progressive movements, by confronting the issue of sexual harassment, and by refashioning public and personal politics among male and female activists.2

While there are works on labor history and the history of the nationalist movements in the interwar and post-colonial periods, Egyptian communism in the later twentieth century has not been subject to academic inquiry.3 Scholars who are not affiliated with the party confront a lack of primary sources. The communist movement’s documents and literature remain confined in the custody of the police and the state security department, or Amn al-Dawla. These authorities have refused to catalog confiscated material and denied scholars access to that part of the national memory. Communist intellectuals and labor activists have produced a handful of history books on the movement. However, their commitment to leftist ideologies and movements informs their writings.4 Subjectivity and factionalism colors their work, which provides organizational histories of their parties. More importantly, all of these writers are male and they do not recognize gender as a category of analysis. As Joel Beinin rightly points out, activist-historians have offered significant insights into the social and political conditions of Egyptian communism and communists’ ability to mobilize popular support by linking the issues of national and social liberation.5 Their writings have not, however, illuminated the social base of Egyptian communism or the experience of being a communist. Women’s participation and women’s issues have been absent from the historiography of the Egyptian left. The lack of meticulous documentation, of an analysis of women’s contribution to the communist movements, and of women’s perspectives renders the story of
Egyptian communism: a story of male communists and their great sacrifices. Such narratives obfuscate the impact of emotion, anxiety, aspiration, and frustration that inspired both thought and practice.

These gaps in the literature are not reflective of the rich material that Egyptian communists produced. In particular, biographical writings, a flourishing, but understudied genre emerging in the last few years, offer insights into gendered experiences. Salih’s two biographical works stand out in this broader corpus of literature for their candid discussion of sexual fancies and relations. Al-Mubtasirun and Saratan al-Ruh reveal how comrades gathered together not only to participate in labor resistance and intellectual debates, to write socio-political slogans and programs, and to analyze class struggle, but also to connect and promote themselves as individuals through social networks and marriages. Underground and semi-underground circles of activists and intellectuals fomented a rebellious attitude against the bourgeoisie and its structure of relationships among classes and between sexes. Clandestine activism provided meeting points where love and attraction fermented. Despite the restrictive social norms in Egypt that frowned on sex outside of marriage, the rebellious ethos that activists cultivated enabled some to engage in sexual relationships. These socio-political and personal dynamics of romances and marriages among interclass comrades are central but seldom discussed. Salih’s writings demonstrate that some men privately allured colleagues to engage in open sexual and love relationships that were free from social obligation. Yet not all who sought free love or interclass marriage did so out of ideological commitment or rebellious idealism, for the sake of love or desire. Some leftists went to great lengths to achieve social mobility, manipulating social norms and engaging in class aspirations, gender restrictions, and sexual trespassing. Some also maintained traditional, classist, and sexist values. Salih also shows how some male comrades used subversive rhetoric to hide their active reproduction of unjust gender relations and their aspirations to middle-class comfort.

Malak Hifni Nasif (Bahithat al-Badiya), ‘A’isha al-Taymuriyya, Huda Sha’rawi, and Nabawiyya Musa are a few examples of Egyptian female intellectuals and activists who articulated and understood the intertwined connections between the personal and the political. Their feminist consciousness took shape in family contexts where they witnessed and experienced ills as
daughters, wives, and mothers. When Salih exposed her male comrades’ exploitive practices toward women and youth, she was the first activist to openly articulate her experience of the contradictions between private sexual practices and public activism. Leftists exploited their comrades subject to authoritarian state persecution. Like US women in the civil rights movement in the late 1960s who influenced the rise of “radical feminism,” Salih elicited greater openness and engagement by challenging women to address issues they usually considered private and nonpolitical.

We cannot discuss Salih’s legacy as an important Marxist figure in the last decades of twentieth-century Egypt without examining the emotional fluctuations, bitterness, and depression she experienced. It is imperative that we also highlight the emotional outbursts that her colleagues and fans narrated during her life and after her tragic death. Her eventful life resembles the rise and demise of Egyptian communism, a journey highly charged with passion, pride, regret, and depression. These emotions influenced Egyptian communism during the last four decades when Marxists fought against legal obstacles and social defamation, fluctuated between isolation and short-lived momentum, and struggled for popular acceptance while fighting over nationalist or socialist causes. Salih explained her coming-of-age as a Marxist as arising from a passion for justice that made her, along with many others, join the “greater march” toward the perfect world. She calls that passion “the leftist kitsch.”

After the student and popular movements lost their momentum in 1980s, and leftist kitsch lost its influence, the crisis of the left overwhelmed her. This crisis manifested itself in years of voluntary exile and suicide attempts, the last of which succeeded. In the mid-1980s, she became detached from underground activism and went into voluntary exile in Spain. She reemerged with the translation of Tony Cliff’s important work *Class Struggle and Women’s Liberation* in 1991. More importantly, she published contemplations on her experiences in the student movement in the book *al-Mubtasirun: Dafatir Wahida min Jil al-Haraka al-Tullabiyya* (*The Premature: Notes of a Female from the Student Movement Generation*) in 1996. She committed suicide, throwing herself from the eleventh floor of a Cairo building in 1997. Her friends published her collection of poems and essays entitled *Saratan al-Ruh* (*Soul Cancer*) posthumously in 1998, with an introduction revealing that many of Salih’s literary essays and translations remain unpublished.
The Short Life and Long Legacy of an Activist

Born in 1951 in Cairo, Salih studied English literature at Cairo University. After graduation, she worked as a school teacher for a short time, then as a translator for the state-owned Middle East News Agency and the Saudi-funded economic newspaper *al-‘Alam al-Yawm* (*The World Today*). Under pseudonyms, she authored many socio-political essays. Her translations of Marxist literature circulated in the internal and secret pamphlets and newsletters of the underground organization, Hizb al-‘Ummal al-Shuyu‘i al-Misri, or the Egyptian Workers Communist Party (EWCP).

Salih was a figure in the early 1970s student movement, which arose in response to the 1967 defeat, the un-democratic practices of the ruling regime, and the social injustices that the majority of Egyptians faced. Comprised of male and female activists, the student movement challenged the regime and energized explicitly oppositional politics under a coalition of leftist leadership. The first wave of the student movement broke out in 1968 with demands for a trial for those responsible for the military defeat in June 1967. That wave was short-lived because students took to the streets as a spontaneous response to the lenient verdicts against the leaders of the air force. The regime successfully absorbed the opposition movement by co-opting some of its leaders and arresting and intimidating others. Although the wave lost momentum, the popular movement made significant strides toward achieving some of its goals, namely the relaxation of authoritarian policies on freedom of expression. Students benefited from greater freedom of association, expression, and movement by forming groups that expressed dissenting views. Student groups hosted political forums, circulated printed leaflets and pamphlets, performed plays, and issued wall posters. All of these activities facilitated the dissemination of ideas and thoughts and, eventually, the mobilization and recruitment of more students for political participation. In late 1971, a new wave of student movements gained momentum and gradually accelerated to a series of demonstrations and strikes in early 1972. These waves of political activism were particularly important, as they lasted longer than previous protests, had a wider effect, and gained public sympathy across the country.11

Anwar al-Sadat assumed power in 1970 and promised to wage a liberation war to recover land captured by Israel in 1967. But Sadat’s policies
of state withdrawal from social welfare programs and the suppression of freedom of speech provoked anger and fear among the public, particularly among university students. The state of no-war-no-peace between Egypt and Israel frustrated and confused many students. For them, maintaining the stalemate meant spending a prolonged period in mandatory military service with no hope of entering the job market. Former graduates who joined the military before and after the 1967 defeat continued to perform mandatory service of unlimited duration. Student movements grew more organized and found expression under the leadership of men and women who were still in their teens and early twenties. The movement accelerated throughout 1972 by circulating anti-regime essays in leaflets, pamphlets, and wall posters. As a result, members employed small media for a big movement, a practice which has parallels in the dissemination of the cassette and graffiti in the Iranian Revolution in 1979. Wall posters, leaflets, and handwritten statements gave students with limited financial capacity a voice on campus and off. With these small media, they communicated their dissenting views with no need to seek the state’s permission. They asserted their subjectivity under the authoritarian regime. The scene of police forces violently tearing down the wall posters and arresting student activists attracted the attention of students and non-students as well as many of the residents of neighborhoods surrounding campuses. It intimidated some. But for others it triggered sympathy for students and their causes and led to more anger against the regime. In the early 1970s, students often organized rallies and demonstrations on campuses in Cairo, Alexandria, al-Mansura, and other cities. Students boldly challenged Sadat’s authoritarian rule by occupying campuses for weeks and employing the machines and print supplies of the official Cairo University Press to print their statements. Police forces violently evacuated protesters and arrested leaders of the movement, who were mostly leftist students. Women were on the front lines, facing police brutality and jail sentences. Throughout the protests, female and male participants played similar roles. Arwa Salih and Siham Sabri led sit-in strikes in Cairo University and, along with many others, collectively composed essays for wall posters, crafted slogans, read poetry, and performed plays. When police stormed the campus on 29 December 1972, both female student leaders were arrested and spent time in jail. In late December 1972 and early January 1973, students occupied Tahrir Squire
in Cairo, in a scene that activists remembered and replicated in January 2011. Despite the state’s full control over the media and the lack of an independent domestic press, students gained support among the Egyptian public. The public in turn joined the calls for liberating Sinai from Israel, ending authoritarianism, and securing social justice. These young students, as Salih describes them, were “born leaders and became the first generation of leftists whom the entire Egyptian people greeted.”

In October 1973, Sadat initiated the war against Israel and realized military and political achievements. Sadat’s prestige and popularity as the victorious leader overshadowed the short-lived heroic image of the young student activists. While Sadat was moving toward an open market economy, *infitah*, and undoing the social policies of the Nasserist regime, leftist students failed to restore the momentum of their movement around class issues and social welfare rights. Salih calls those leaders of her generation *al-mubtasirun* (premature). This prematurity expresses Salih’s reflections on a generation of activists who had popular legitimacy and approval on nationalist platforms but failed to mobilize popular support of social and class issues. They rebelled against the bourgeois state but could not forge their understanding outside the system that produced it. According to Salih, student activists failed to acknowledge that their short-lived success in attracting mass support was due to demands of liberating national soil. That success was not a result of their ability to communicate their message. Indeed, they failed to develop programs centered on social justice. They could not maintain languages and tropes that appealed to the masses they claimed to speak for. They failed to become a truly popular movement that could challenge class inequity or demand capital redistribution. The student movement was the only jewel in the legacy of that generation. After severe pressure from the regime, the left lost its position among the public to political Islamist groups. The left’s crisis heightened as the middle and working classes suffered the *infitah’s* consequences: high prices, inflation, and unemployment.

**The Premature Demise of the Left**

After the student-led movement during 1972 and 1973, the Marxist left plunged into a deep crisis. Leftist organizations did not have a stronghold among the industrial working class, their expected audience. Hence, they
could not play a significant role in leading the major labor strikes that broke out throughout the 1970s in Hilwan, Giza, Cairo, Alexandria, and al-Mahalla al-Kubra. Workers in these major industrial centers protested the regime’s diminished welfare programs, its reduction of workers’ benefits, and the high prices and inflation it unleashed. They protested against policies that favored the rich at the expense of the working classes. In the meantime, the left was nowhere to be found. Marxist activists were divided between several competing organizations. One of the largest and most radical organizations was the Egyptian Workers’ Communist Party, of which Salih was a leader. Growing out of the student movement of 1972, the party’s program was radical. It was based on dissociation from earlier communist movements and rejection of the existing movement.\textsuperscript{16} Although many of its members were newcomers to politics, the party played a role in the 1977 uprising against Sadat’s open-market policies. Such activism led to the mass arrest of party members, the reduction of the party to scattered Marxist circles, and the cessation of publication of the party’s journal, \textit{Intifada}.\textsuperscript{17}

Although activists in the communist organizations called their organizations parties, these organizations were merely large circles of activists and intellectuals. They were leaders without members. No Marxist circle attracted more than few hundred members. These included individual militant leftists from Alexandria and provincial towns such as al-Mansura, Kafr al-Shaykh, and al-Mahalla al-Kubra. No organization managed to branch outside of Cairo or enjoy a popular base in large industrial locations. Rather than coordinating to form an alternative social program, these circles fought among themselves over theoretical issues. Factionalism and division into ineffective groups, each consisting of a handful of leaders without broad membership, now characterized the movement. Disagreement over theoretical issues, such as the nature of Egyptian capitalism and the bourgeoisie, the social base of the ruling elite, and whether the priority should be building socialism, national independence, or democracy, produced a rich corpus of theoretical literature.\textsuperscript{18} These debates did not lend themselves to mass mobilization. As activists became absorbed in their own disagreements, each circle suffered the illusion of representing the working classes and the poor. All these debates took place among isolated individuals who lived the illusion that they were real leaders. They failed to realize that they were leaders without followers. Their potential audience did not pay attention to or understand them.
The realities of the defeated dream of leading the masses to radical economic change and social justice became too unbearable. Some comrades joined the Islamist movement; others quit political activism and focused on their personal and professional lives. In the mid-1980s, Salih’s emotional pain became overwhelming. Pain and depression, instead of passion for justice, became the major force in her trajectory. She left for Spain, where she reflected on her experience and realized that she hated her clandestine organization as much as she hated male intellectuals. She did not hide her pain and revealed that she had resorted to psychiatric treatment. She expressed her anger toward “the ugly homeland,” “the despicable party,” “the despicable intellectuals,” and “the rude, abusive men.” Yet, she was never explicit about specific incidents that may have led to her depression. She provides no information on her marriages, familial relations, or upbringing. The brief accounts of her personal life come from her posthumously published book. One wonders if she would have ever published these writings herself.

She dedicated her first manuscript, which she lost and never published, to the patients in psychiatric clinics, whom she called “my people.” She repeated the dedication in her autographical text, “Strolling: Daydream of a Lonely Rover,” which was published posthumously. The dedication speaks of alienation from friends, family, comrades, and society; she belonged only among those who shared her psychological pain. In the autobiographical texts, mostly composed when she was suffering from depression, she reveals bitter memories. She exposes the dishonest practices of some male activists who did not mind violating female comrades’ privacy while pretending they were protecting them. When she was still a college student, her boyfriend, also a comrade in the clandestine organization, informed her that the party had instructed her to get rid of her diary lest the police seize it and use her personal accounts of relationships with men to humiliate her. The comrade burned her diary. Twenty years later, he admitted that it was his own desire, not party orders, that led to this invasive confiscation. Salih did not mention which memories she lost in this diary or whether they were fond ones, but the implication is that they contained accounts of sexual relationships. Through these narratives of confiscation, sexual exploitation, and seduction, Salih offers an entirely new reading of the Egyptian left’s profound failure.
Communist Gender and Sexuality

As a woman coming of age in the late 1960s, a leader in the 1970s, and a figure returning to public life in the early 1990s, Salih had firsthand experiences with three generations of leftist intellectuals. Each of these generations had its successes and failures. The older generation of the 1960s, who prided themselves on having suffered Nasser’s prisons, played a crucial role in shaping the cultural politics that supported Nasser’s Arab socialism. Yet these men and women dissolved their communist organizations, merged with and contributed to the regime’s authoritarian political instruments, and failed to develop more radical social programs that were independent from the state’s vision and programs. The 1970s generation faced the paradox of quick success and dramatic failure in facing Sadat’s open-market policies and the ideological hegemony of Islamism. Throughout the 1990s, the Egyptian left directed most of its energy at internationally funded civil society organizations such as the New Woman Foundation, the Legal Aid Center for Human Rights, the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, and the Land Center for Human Rights. The leftists succeeded in bringing human rights issues to the forefront of political activism and the public sphere nationally and internationally. But their ability to act independently of the state and Western organizations, including USAID and the Ford Foundation, was limited.23

Salih dealt with male leftists from these three generations as colleagues, lovers, and spouses. After her final decision to break away from the party, she eventually decided to write her memoir to document her experience in the 1970s. She did not delve into her private life. Her goal, as she stated, was for the 1990s generation to benefit from the experiences of the past. The leftist publishing house Dar al-Nahr released the manuscript, *The Premature*, five years later. As a result of this delayed publication, Salih had to write a new introduction, which provides a fascinating and incisive analysis. She admits that upon rereading the manuscript, she was shocked at her alienation not simply from her earlier political positions but from the very impetus to profess a political position. Salih honestly engages her changing understandings of the self in relation to public discourse. By disavowing the text we are about to read, she places the whole experience within the parentheses of history.
Salih derided herself and her comrades as premature. She critiqued their failure to develop a well-informed social program and to communicate with the masses whom they claimed to represent. Leftist groups found comfort in blaming their failure on Sadat’s manipulation of Islamists, but Salih held the movement itself responsible. She blamed the 1960s generation for corrupting and sabotaging the 1970s generation. She divided the 1960s generation into two categories: those who served the Nasserist regime and those mired in their own failure and bitterness. Leftists in the first group dissolved their independent organizations and accepted Nasser’s Arab Socialist Union as the leader in the realization of socialism. Nasser’s regime co-opted these talented people, but they succeeded in contributing to art, literature, and intellectual life. She metaphorically describes their achievements as “the performance of a half-chanting song inside Nasser’s cage.”

Far from condemning those who cooperated with the authoritarian regime of Nasser (1954-70) and accusing them of betrayal, Salih appreciated their cultural contribution and exempted them from her bitter critique. Talented intellectuals showcased their aptitude in the state-controlled media. Important names found their way to publicity and fame through the state’s publications and cinema production. People like ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Khamisi, Salah Jahin, ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Sharqawi, and many others became the stars of the vibrant cultural ethos of the 1960s and later. Their talent and creativity produced important literature and film despite their confinement to regime guidelines. Salih did not glamorize this group of intellectuals. They themselves did not hide behind any radical façade. Thus, this group did not intersect with Salih’s activism or become the target of her condemnation.

She focused her criticism on the second group, whom she called the mediocre or the half-talented. This group passively rejected Nasser’s regime while failing to produce a viable alternative. These pacifist failures were self-defined radical revolutionaries. They were, they claimed, the progressive leadership of the working class and the Egyptian people. In reality, their mediocrity was a source of repulsion to the masses who rallied around Nasser. The mediocre wasted their time in cafés, chewing their bitter defeat and cursing the talented ones.

Salih suggests that the student movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s offered these intellectuals, who she calls “static, useless unemployed leaders,” an opportunity to compensate for their lost time. The meeting
between the young leaders of the student movement, who belonged to the petite bourgeoisie and had little life experience, and the old Marxists, who were dragging their defeat from Nasser’s age, was “a disgusting tragic comedy that left its victims so bitter and ashamed that they became good for nothing.” The old Marxists nursed the young leaders on their poisoned milk of disunity. For Salih, the mediocre Marxists used the young student leaders as objects rather than subjects of the leftist movement. The new generation was little more than human fuel that fed old battles. The mediocre generation treated the young activists as an inheritance to fight over. They were, as Salih describes, apprentices to masters who had failed to be rijal or “real men” under Nasser. She repeatedly employs such highly gendered language to undermine the masculinity of, and to emasculate, those who failed to face Nasser’s regime and those who exploited women. Thus Salih herself drew on an arsenal of gendered conceptions to wage her critique. In addition to the pressure of the authoritarian regime, intensive anti-leftist propaganda in the official press and the rise of Islamist ideologies and activism, leftist activists—old and young alike—weakened their movements through factionalism. The result was that these young leaders disintegrated into internecine hatred and endless dogmatic discussions while they were unable to communicate among themselves or with others.

After the 1973 war, the EWCP exhausted itself in debates analyzing which social class students belonged to or whether students formed a particular social class. The organization preoccupied itself with the need to establish a political party for students. Calls for popular uprisings against Sadat’s victorious regime, at the peak of its popularity after the 1973 October War, demonstrate that EWCP leaders had lost touch with reality. They lived an illusive dream in which they had the support of the masses. As these calls failed, the rifts widened between various factions: al-Mu’tamar, al-Matraqa, the 8 January Communist Party of Egypt, the Socialist Revolutionary Vanguard (Shuruq), and the Trotskyites. In addition to the theoretical disagreements, some rivalries were extensions of personal competition and disputes of the 1960s generation. Those 1960s leaders, as Salih depicted them, were isolated Stalinists who used the naïve leaders of the 1970s for their own entertainment. They established what she compares to relationships of “slavery” among people supposedly connected through volunteer relationships and associations seeking to liberate the entire world.
concludes that the young leaders of the 1970s, including herself, became fascist elitists:

We put ourselves above the masses while we were unable to communicate with and be effective among those masses. The revolution became a long daydream [. . .] It was paradoxical and even a tragedy that groups of young men and women put themselves for years under police surveillance, became chased runaways, sacrificed personal futures and promising professional lives, wasted promising talents and even lived under unbearable conditions, read revolutionary publications, the most recent of which was printed in the nineteenth century. All these noble sacrifices were to satisfy the sick desires of the deluded leaders of the sixties, to turn their midget selves into giants [. . .] in that farce, the older revolutionary intellectuals made us tools for their entertainment, our relationship with them, which should have been a volunteer association among fighters for freedom, became like a slavery relationship.32

Thus, excellent students skipped their college exams because the older leaders ordered them not to go. Taking advantage of the lack of transparency in an underground organization and the fear that the police would arrest them, young students blindly followed orders to leave their homes and abandon their schooling for no reason but to submit to the leadership.

Salih captures another important aspect of the communist circles: the hierarchal structure based on seniority in age and authorship. The person who authored a published work, regardless of its quality, gained an authoritative position in his/her circle. In a social culture that valued appearance in the media, authorship validated one as an intellectual with promises of fame and prestige. Meanwhile, working in clandestine circles under authoritarian rule did not entail any recognition of the strategies, talents, and bravery of organizers. Thus, publishing authors became more powerful than the effective activists. Relationships between those authors and the rest of the group became a caricature of those between a Sufi master and his disciples. In this twisted hierarchy of power, authors, even if recognized only in their own small circles, became hegemonic. They deemed any disagreement with their views as tantamount to heresy punishable by virtual execution. In a bitter assessment of such leaders and their followers,
Salih called them “fools” who “deserved hustlers to mount [them as riding animals].” The tragedy came when leaders of the 1970s awoke from that fantasy and then “we collapsed as dust, as mummies.” Many activists abandoned their faith. Others invested their history of activism in the past into building relationships with international “humanitarian” agencies in order to receive financial support.

Civil society in Egypt expanded in the 1990s with the establishment of many non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The presence of the former Marxist student leaders, particularly from the EWCP, within the leadership of a variety of internationally funded NGOs in the 1990s has been a controversial phenomenon. Some have seen it as a continuation of activism and a successful engendering of human rights in Egyptian political culture. According to this view, foreign funds are the only viable source for financial support because the Egyptian rich are too stingy to donate or limit their donations to religious charity work. Others have seen relying on Western funds as a symptom of socioeconomic and intellectual corruption because those activists had to change many of their critical views on imperialism in their quest to gain Western financial support. Some of these student leaders, however, continued their committed activism and tried to establish roots among the working classes in poor Cairo slums. Despite the validity of some of the critique, we should evaluate the internationally funded NGOs working in Egypt in the context of globalization wherein transnational activists exchange support among unequal parties. Scholars define globalization not only as unequal global relations but also as a complex process in which the movement of capital, peoples, organizations, and ideas takes place in an increasingly international context and creates dynamic global social movements. Communication between NGOs and other forms of social movements in the globalized milieu has not only given local organizations access to Western funds, but also has offered these movements, whether they are feminist, Islamist, leftist, or humanist, opportunities to exchange ideas and tactics to build coalitions, lobby governments, and advance their goals of social justice. Operating Western-funded NGOs in Egypt in the 1990s created socioeconomic hierarchies among activists. Chairs of these organizations reserved for themselves powerful positions wherein they could hire and fire activists in their bureaucracy. Novelist Fathi Imbabi, a former leader in the 1970s student movement, revealed that former comrades refused to hire...
Salih at their NGOs as retaliation for publishing *al-Mubtasirun*.39 The late leftist author Sana’ al-Masri confirmed that account in *Tatbi’ wa-Tamwil*.40 According to Imbabi, Salih needed to secure a job when her supervisor in *al-‘Alam al-Yawm* daily, who was also a former Marxist activist, persecuted Salih in retaliation for publishing *al-Mubtasirun* and to prove to the newspaper’s management his disavowal of his Marxist past.

**The Gender Edge Another Moral Collapse**

Salih married three times, twice to communist intellectuals and once, very briefly, to a poet of the 1990s generation, who was much younger than her. Although friends and colleagues in Cairo knew about the marriage, her last husband chose to hide it from his family in Alexandria, a good indication of the relationship’s fragility. Salih was also involved in different levels of intimacy with comrades from different generations. Salih never discussed her own marriages, although most of her biographical writings are commentaries on the intimate interaction in love and marriage relationships among comrades. *Saratan al-Ruh*, which was posthumously published, had more accounts of her intimate relationships, while her commentaries on romances among comrades in *al-Mubtasirun* are more abstract. Romance, love, marriage, and sex were a facet of political evolution and networking among many leftists. She reserved her harshest criticism of Egyptian leftists for the matter of how they treated women. Salih belonged to the first generation of leftists after the sexual revolution erupted in the United States and Europe in the 1960s and increasingly normalized premarital sex and sex outside of traditional heterosexual marriage. Egyptian activists discussed among themselves ideas concerning sexual liberation, among other ideological waves associated with the worldwide protests in 1968, but they did not circulate any commentary or translate any literature on gender and sexuality issues. The absence of serious debate or a vision about sexual regimes from Marxist literature does not come as a surprise. Issues related to sexuality and gender never attracted due attention and none of the leftist circles of the 1970s included women’s rights in their agenda. Not until the mid-1980s did some leftist women form associations that focused on women’s rights, such as al-Mar’a al-Jadida (*The New Woman*), whose members participated in the student movement. Yet Egyptian activists
had privately debated and exchanged thoughts on free love since the late 1960s. Discussions took place behind closed doors between individuals in underground circles. They were not part of a collective revolutionarily ethos. These private discussions did not theorize gender and sexuality in the Egyptian context or root those concepts in a broader social program. Meanwhile, some comrades engaged in open free love, seduction, and sexual exploitation, from which only female parties suffered social consequences such as ill repute and social marginalization.

Salih dared to give her personal account of intimate debates and practices among comrades after she detached herself from leftist organizations, but not from leftist ideologies. While she was only a fifteen-year-old girl playing among old communists from the Nasserite period, her first lover was a handsome writer who was twenty years older than she was. After old comrades were pampering her as a “miraculous child,” they suddenly became cruel to her. This sudden change in the way they treated her occurred because they thought “my lover took me.”

Her lover also treated her with cruelty. She wrote: “I realized they [the old leaders] were consuming me as they had been consuming anything they could get in their quest to taste life that had quickly seeped out their holed and hollow life.” Salih calls her experience ‘ishq rather than hubb. Both ‘ishq and hubb mean love in Egyptian Arabic; however, each word carries important nuances. ‘Ishq is more closely related to passion, yearning, and desire for physical intimacy. Hubb connotes emotions that transcend sexual intimacy. Hubb is a generic word that is used to express love and friendship in general. Salih relates that her painful experience with ‘ishq scarred her ability to feel and experience love (hubb). In fact, she had to abandon her first real lover because of her inability to actually love him. She realized the emotional obstacle that caused her to end the relationship after that young man died, which made her feeling guilty. “It’s very painful to be unable to apologize.” That lover, who died prematurely, was the promising young intellectual Baha’ al-Naqqash, to whom she dedicated her first book al-Mubtasirun.

The useless revolutionaries of the 1960s were not the only males who “consumed” female activists. Male comrades from following generations called themselves revolutionary fighters, although many of them, according to Salih, never went through serious confrontation with any regime. They spent time and energy in private conversations convincing female colleagues
that revolutionary change would become attainable when women had full control over their bodies and liberated themselves from social restrictions concerning sex. The subtext of these conversations was granting the male comrade access to a woman’s body. In practice, many male colleagues rejected a woman’s right to embrace social restrictions against having sex outside marriage. Those males also did not recognize a woman’s right to commit to one monogamous relationship with another man. According to Salih, if the female leftist denied the predatory comrade his perceived right to sexually enjoy her body, she became subject to cruelty and defamation. If she accepted the offer, comrades embracing reactionary values called her a tramp unworthy of being a wife. These practices, in addition to conservative social tradition that does not appreciate women’s engagement in politics, deterred some women from participating in leftist activism. Some young female activists abandoned the leftist movement and politics altogether. In one dramatic case, a young female leftist activist committed suicide in the 1980s when she became unable to face sexual defamation in leftist circles and beyond. Male and female activists remained silent out of fear of public defamation.

Female activists in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), one of the largest organizations of the US civil rights movement (1955–68), faced similar challenges a decade earlier. Against the backdrop of sexist practices, a SNCC woman slapped her male colleague in the Freedom House in Jackson, Mississippi, in the spring of 1964. Then, women in the Atlanta SNCC called a meeting of women and suggested a strike because “women would do absolutely nothing until men recognized that first of all they couldn’t grab your butts, couldn’t grab your breasts.” After a black revolutionary activist raped her, a Vietnamese activist in the French feminist and anti-racist movements cried in Les Temps Modernes in 1974, “Bourgeoisie and intellectuals, including leftist intellectuals, have shrewd tools to cover their acts of rape: money of the bourgeoisie and intellectual jargon for the intellectuals.” Discussion of sexism among the French comrades revealed the double standard of male activists in leftist, immigrant rights, women’s rights, and anti-imperialist movements. Male activists recognize class and ethnic discrimination and ignore the gender and sexual discrimination against women. “They struggle for liberating humanity outside home, while they persecute half of the humanity (women) in their homes.” Women activists in the guerrilla Faradbundo Marti Front (FMLN) in El Salvador
in the 1980s went through similar experiences. As female activists reflected on their experiences in the FMLN in the 1980s, they started to see the inconsistency of guerrilla men who sexually exploited and harassed them and the FMLN’s public commitment to social justice.\footnote{Critics of unfair gender and sexual practices do not function to undermine these movements but to strengthen them. No one can claim that by questioning the morality of the male communists and their sexual exploitation of their female colleagues Salih intended to undermine the theoretical foundation of social justice or to declare repentance. It was her way of rethinking the shortcomings of the generations of leftist activists. Moreover, it was a call to incorporate gender equality as a core value in all social justice agendas. Her critique poses important questions as to why feminism did not have a greater influence on leftists in Egypt and beyond.}

Salih’s memoirs and legacy reveal how some comrades played an important role in forming a closed world of the isolated and defeated left. In these closed, male-dominated circles, personal statements became easily and simply truth-producing history rather than subjects for debate. The self-proclaimed revolutionaries, who never took part in an actual struggle on the ground among the working classes, condemned the society and claimed naturally to possess the moral high ground. In a bitter and mocking tone, Salih wrote that the revolutionary intellectual rejects the existing regimes of morality of all classes of the society, so he can jump from the bourgeois morality to the paradise of freedom. He becomes free from any moral regime. Thus, that type of intellectual gains all corrupted morals of all classes, and then grows a beard and calls himself “alienated.” The smartest of them would employ his intellectual capacity to win a respectable position in the society. Then he would shave his beard and embrace nihilism (‘adam) as a religion and as the only truth in the world. This nihilism did not stop him from consuming luxurious food and drink at the tables of the upper classes that he joined.\footnote{Marxist intellectuals spent some time in detention under Nasser, and then the regime released them and gave them a position in its institute. They either joined the regime or isolated themselves in silence and in nihilism.} In this way, revolutionary statements led to alienation,
nihilism, and corrupt personal class aspiration. *Al-Mubtasirun* reveals the paradox that some intellectuals gain stature in the eyes of the very bourgeoisie they feverishly detest by performing the role of the alienated critic. These intellectuals become the beloved of the object of their condemnation and are gradually seduced into its orbit.

Salih traces the moral collapse of nihilist intellectuals when it comes to their treatment of women. She spoke openly of leftist intellectuals’ sexual hypocrisy and their exploitation of female comrades. “The male intellectual behaves toward women as a big bourgeois, as a lecher debauchee (*da’ir*), but he feels and thinks about her as an extreme conservative, as a little bourgeois.” In bourgeois material conditions, men provide money and women provide the social status based on capitalist exchange, not love. Relationships among intellectuals, however, became a lawless game. Salih depicts a date with an intellectual. The woman who dates a revolutionary intellectual does not hope for stylish good times. “The intellectual takes her to a depressing café, where he buys her a cup of bitter tea and sells her the progressive dreams that cost him only his cheapest commodity...his words.” He talks to her about social justice and the falsification of the bourgeoisie social values, among other things. His purpose is to enjoy the free love that does not require money to practice, love free from any risk for the man, and on the personal responsibility of the woman. In this model of free love, the intellectual enjoys courage and bravery that he otherwise lacks. At the end of the love story, which is usually short, the personal responsibility is the woman’s. The woman becomes a “slut” (*mumis*) in the eyes of the society and the man takes pride in his sexual victory. Male comrades use the rhetoric of sexual liberation to play out a more traditional “male thing about scoring, and sex as ego and how many women have you made it with or did you conquer this woman or not.” For them, according to Salih, women in real life are either stupid wives or shrewd whores, and do not deserve men in either case. Those men reduce women and judge them based on their sexuality. Male intellectuals romantically write about women as their beautiful goddesses. In reality, they continue to reproduce a gender order “similar to the slavery system in which slaves reproduce slaves.” She concludes that those men overlook the nobility of manhood and perpetuate a backward gender relationship and unjust social notions about women’s sexuality.
Despite her harsh critique, Salih uncritically uses traditional gendered language throughout her narrative and contradicts her own critique of mainstream masculinity. Mocking the failure of her old comrades under Nasser, she writes that they “failed to be real men.” To her, when bourgeois men had to face life’s realities, they experience “loosing” and even violation of virginity (bakara). She uses the Arabic term fadd al-bakara, which literally means hymen removal, a process that only the female body can undergo. Such expressions echo traditional understandings of masculinity and a sexual regime that equates failure with femininity and virginity with a pristine female body.

Salih argues that male intellectuals rebel against bourgeois values, but they build no progressive morality. While male intellectuals move across classes, they adopt each class’s worst moral values. In a society that expects only women to be shy, those immoral “male intellectuals enjoy the ability to talk about the most important issues while they are fixing their eyes on the lower part of women’s body [women’s genitals].” She speaks of the repressive dominance of a double standard that paternalistically judges women’s public behavior. Based on a rigid gendered moral code, this double standard tolerates, normalizes, and legitimizes the male gaze and the violation of the female body in public. Rather than fighting social hypocrisy, male intellectuals take advantage of it to prey on these bodies. Some comrades get married and eventually betray their belief in equality. They reproduce a bourgeois family that lacks gender equity and true love. Interestingly, Salih’s female psychiatrist recommended that she follow the same bourgeois social dynamics in which women maneuver and manipulate their lovers to be in control. Salih concluded from this encounter that the industry of psychiatry was built on hatred and the reproduction of inhuman relationships.

Depression, psychological pain, failed suicide attempts, and eventually her premature death all contributed to a romanticized reading of Salih as a noble hero who could not adapt to the realities of defeat, the failure of the left, and the moral disintegration of some of her former comrades. Under Mubarak’s regime (1981-2011), the student movements of the 1972-73 had become “a foreign country whose features are shaped by today’s predilections.” During Salih’s withdrawal from public life into self-imposed exile in the 1980s, leftist student activists juxtaposed their limited effectiveness
with the success of the 1970s movement under her leadership and that of her comrades. Her suicide in 1997 raised her persona to a mythical level among her comrades and the younger generation of the leftists. Salih’s tragic death triggered feelings of pain and loss, even guilt, among many of her comrades. As time and perspective interplayed to shape Salih’s legacy, those who thought and wrote about her for their own reasons formed new ways to make sense of her life. Many leftist intellectuals and activists juxtaposed her noble choice of death with the moral and intellectual disintegration of leftists who were co-opted by the regime and worked for Western-funded NGOs. Many comrades had accepted the Mubarak regime’s carrot, such as bureaucratic positions and financial rewards. Mubarak’s minister of culture, Faruq Husni, metaphorically described co-opting intellectuals as getting them into “hazirat wizarat al-thaqafa,” or the Ministry of Culture’s shed. Young leftists saw in Salih a needed model who maintained the moral high ground until death.

Salih’s death generated an emotional outburst and provoked intensive activities among leftists, particularly among her comrades and younger generations. Feeling pain, loss, and nostalgia, the comrades held several private and public meetings and issued a few publications. Yet big dreams and promises of building a united and strong movement had irrevocably faded. Even though divisions among activists of this generation were too large to overcome, Salih’s persona towered. Shortly after Salih’s premature death, Ahdaf Soueif raised her to an iconic figure in the novel The Map of Love that she published in 1999. Soueif and Salih studied together in the English Department at Cairo University in the early 1970s. Soueif’s novel ties generations between the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries and uses historical events to create a realistic text that gets readers emotionally invested. Salih’s presence in the novel provides an activist’s commentary on the 1990s intellectual and political scene in Cairo. In that respect, the novel acknowledges Salih’s relevance and importance despite the left’s weakness in the 1990s, when Islamists formed the only effective opposition to the ruling regime.

In his book, al-Sab‘iyyun (The 1970s Generation), Fathi Imbabi published the longest eulogy for Salih without mentioning her name, except in the dedication. Imbabi held Salih’s comrades, including himself, responsible for her depression and suicide. Thirteen years after her death, the poet
‘Abd al-Mun‘im Ramadan wrote an affectionate essay calling Salih the pure and the precious. Before narrating his intimate friendship with her, Ramadan admitted that he was one of many fascinated by her iconic image and the controversy surrounding her. In the isolated circles of intellectuals in downtown Cairo’s cafés, people never tired of talking about Salih, who was in self-imposed exile. “For some she was a shining moon; for others she was dirty dirt.” They not only recalled Salih’s politics and activism, but also gossiped about her sexual life. They fabricated myths about her sexuality. They gossiped about her frequent marriages and depicted her as “the divorced woman who never gets satisfied.” This type of gossip was a manifestation of many of the plagues that Salih wrote about. The shameful practices of gossip, particularly sexually centered gossip, and the abuse of one’s reputation in the intellectual circle provoked the journalist and poet Ahmad Isma’il to romanticize Salih’s legacy in a long poem. Isma’il condemned the tendency among some communists to sexualize women, particularly their female comrades. His verses about fake intellectuals tossing around big empty words, while they were “criminal pirates consuming her flesh,” are sharp and bitter. This poetic condemnation resonated with Salih’s own representation of “communist sexuality.” Salih herself was a pioneer in disgracing her comrades’ moral contamination. She opened the closet on the leftist intellectuals, exposing them to public examination when she published *al-Mubtasirun*. She directed acerbic and uncompromising criticism at herself, her contemporaries, and the left in general. Salih shouted what generations of intellectuals and activists had refrained from uttering. She did not fear accusations of replicating right-wing propaganda that sought to stain the left’s reputation. She only cared about communicating her experience to another generation of intellectual leftists and humanists. She posed a new agenda for thinking about the trajectories of the Egyptian left and its activists’ paths of disengagement.
ENDNOTES

1 The phrase “view from the gender edge” is inspired by Richard W. Bulliet’s *Islam: The View from the Edge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).


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Imbabi, Shham Sabri; and Kamal Khalil, Hikayat min Zaman Fat: Sira Dhatiyya min Khilal al-Ahdath (Cairo: Bayt al-Yasmin lil-Nashr wa al-Tawzi', 2012).

Ismael and El-Sa'id, The Communist Movement in Egypt, 131-147.


Salih, Saratan al-Ruh, 17.

Ibid., 17-19.

Ibid., 15.

Ibid., 17.


Salih, al-Mubtasirun, 45.

Ibid., 45-47.

Ibid., 48.

Ibid., 45-57.

Ibid., 49.

Al-Mu’tamar was a splinter group of the Egyptian Communist Party, the largest communist organization in 1970 and 1980s. The al-Mu’tamar group split in 1976. The 8 January Communist Party of Egypt was established in 1975, and consisted of a small, ultra-secret, and tightly knit group of communist activists who never accepted the dissolution of the communist party in 1965 nor participated in the Socialist Union under Nasser. A group of activists in the early 1970s called themselves the Socialist Revolutionary Vanguard and issued a monthly magazine called Shuruq. The group itself became known as Shuruq and, by the mid-1970s, it merged with the Egyptian Communist Party. The Trotskyites, also known as the Marxist League, appeared in 1975 among radical student activists who offered the harshest critique of the Soviet Union. For more on the communist organizations during 1970s and after, see Khalil, Hikayat min Zaman Fat, 118-122, 286-295 and Ismael and El-Sa’id, The Communist Movement in Egypt, 127-150.

Khalil, Hikayat min Zaman Fat, 122.

Salih, Mubtasirun, 54-56.

Ibid., 52.

Ibid., 57.

Ibid., 57.

al-Misri, Tath’i wa-Tamwil. See also Fathi Imbabi, al-Sab’iniyyun: Jil Ghadara bihi al-Aydiyulaiyya wa Shakhira minhu al-Zaman (Cairo: Mu’assasat [15/3] lil-Nashr wa al-’Ian, 2009), 156-158, 168.

Valentine Moghadam, Globalizing Women: Transnational Feminist Networks (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); and Valentine Moghadam and Fatima Sadiqi, “Women’s Activism and the Public Sphere: Introduction and Overview,” Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies 2, no. 2 (Spring 2006), 1-7.

See Valentine Moghadam, Globalization and Social Movements: Islamism, Feminism, and

38 Moghadam, Globalizing Women.
39 Imbabi, al-Sa’finiyun, 143-163.
40 Al-Misri, Tathbi’ wa-Tamwil, 225.
41 Salih, Saratan al-Ruh, 27.
42 Ibid.
44 Salih, Saratan al-Ruh, 26.
45 Hogan, Many Minds One Heart, 95.
46 Ibid., 96.
48 Ibid., 177.
49 Kampwirth, Feminism and the Legacy of the Revolution, 16.
50 Salih, al-Mubtasirun, 25.
52 Ibid., 79.
53 Ibid., 87.
54 Ibid., 88.
55 Hogan, Many Minds One Heart, 190.
56 Salih, al-Mubtasirun, 90.
57 Ibid., 88.
58 Ibid., 49.
59 Ibid., 74.
60 Salih, Saratan al-Ruh, 91.
61 Ibid., 20–21.
63 On the cultural politics of Mubarak’s regime and Faruq Husni’s tenure at the Ministry, see Samia Mehrez, Egypt’s Culture Wars: Politics and Practice (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2010).
64 Ahdaf Soueif, The Map of Love (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), 221, 388.
65 Imbabi, al-Sa’finiyun, 143-189.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.