

Faten Hamama and Hind Rustom:

Stars from Different Heavens

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One of the current topics in critical discussions on the Arab cinema is the gendered nature of nationalist and national themes. It has been repeatedly said that in the Egyptian cinema, Egypt itself is often represented by an idealized woman. Both Viola Shafik (1998) and Lina Khatib (2006) make much of this idea, and investigate it with reference to particular films. In this context the idealizing title *sayidat al-shasha al-arabiyya*, (i.e. the lady of the Arab screen) has been universally granted to Faten Hamama, the grande dame of the Egyptian cinema and one of the most prolific of its actresses, and thus she is the ideal embodiment on the screen not only of Egyptian and Arab womanhood, but also of Egypt's view of itself and of the Arab world. To study the output of Faten Hamama is to have an idea of how Egyptians – and perhaps all Arabs – like to see themselves, and especially their women. But to arrive at a clearer idea of the self-definition of the Arab world and its fantasy of the feminine ideal I believe it would be helpful to contrast her work with that of Hind Rustom, who both in her physical appearance and the persona she represents on screen is almost directly antithetical to Faten.

In preparation for this article I have seen more than two dozen films, and of course drawn on decades of experience with the Egyptian cinema. For want of space I shall not write about all of them, or even list them all, but shall use only a handful of them selectively to make the points I wish to make about the performances of these two great actresses.

The first and most obvious contrast between the two actresses under study is in their appearance. While Faten Hamama is petite, with dark hair and eyes, Hind Rustom is larger, taller, bigger, fleshier, and, most importantly, a blonde. The blonde Hind suggests a foreign or alien identity while the dark Faten seems more homemade, more authentically Egyptian. Her hair tends to be cut close to her head, not very short but rarely long: it is neatly coiffed, often covered, never untidy, tousled, or loose. This is visual reinforcement of the impression created by almost all of her roles as a character that is reserved, restrained, self-possessed, and sympathetic. These characteristics have come to suggest in a cinematic way virtue and righteousness. This impression is compounded by the invariable modesty of her dress. She has never, as far as I know, appeared in an oriental dance, which is very sensual and sexually evocative.

Hind Rustom on the other hand has often danced on screen, wearing the classic oriental dancer's costume, her feet, legs and midriff naked, and her upper torso barely covered – all of which emphasize the inherent sensuality of the characters she plays.

Her long hair is almost always tumbling unrestrainedly over her face like an element of nature; she swings her hips seductively. Her voice is loud and open, and though obscenities are never permitted in the Egyptian cinema one can as easily imagine the characters she portrays uttering them just as one can be sure that those that Faten portrays would never do so. Thus, Hind's film persona suggests physical abandon, as well as absence of restraint and of inhibition.

If it is commonplace to see the blonde Hind as the epitome of all that is sinful but at the same time desirable, especially in her sexuality, and dark-haired Faten as the epitome of virtue and domesticity, the inevitable conclusion is that Faten represents authentic Egyptian (and by extension Arab) culture and morals, while Hind represents the dangerous magnetism of a kind of tantalizing, summoning, but alien depravity.

The respective acting techniques of the two women emphasize the difference in their appearance. Samir Farid (1995) writes in his book on Faten Hamama that she, above all others, learned and mastered the art of cinematic acting early on in her career (p. 51). He points out that she successfully translates innermost feelings into visible outer signs using restrained and understated gestures. He offers as one example a scene in *Sayiddat al-qasr* (i.e. the lady of the palace) directed by Kamal al-Sheikh in 1958, in which she plays an extremely poor young woman who marries a wealthy man. When she enters his house for the first time, she is overwhelmed by the signs of his wealth, so much in contrast with her own modest home. Faten Hamama, points out Farid, brilliantly portrays her character's background, her modesty, and her discomfort in these alien surroundings with the simple gesture of sitting gingerly throughout the scene on the edge of the chair to which she has been shown.

In sharp contrast to this subtle form of acting, Hind Rustom employs in many of her roles an emphatic, even overstated, style. In almost all her films, her loud voice denotes self-assurance and aggressive physicality; she swings her hips assertively as she walks, denoting a very explicit kind of sensuality. Yet in her best films, Hind Rustom is also capable of fine acting even while playing the usual sexy temptress.

In Youssef Chahine's 1958 film *Bab al-hadid* (i.e. the iron gate), one of the masterpieces of the Egyptian cinema and one of her best performances, she plays Hanouma, who sells soft drinks at the train station. Hanouma is engaged to the virile and dynamic porter Abu Siri' (Farid Shawki), and she is completely unaware of the destructive power of her overt sexuality on the lame newspaper seller Qinnawi (played by Chahine himself), whom she treats with teasing contempt, not recognizing (realizing) the intensity and desperation of his obsession with her. In the end, beside himself with frustration and misery, Qinnawi is driven to murder and insanity. In the unforgettable role of Hanouma, Hind Rustom acts with finely nuanced understatement, without in any way undermining the natural sensuality of her character.

In *Sira' fi al-nil* (i.e. struggle on the Nile) directed by Atef Salem in 1959, she plays the dancer Nargis, sent by a gang of thieves onto a boat owned by the town elder's son, Mahassib, (played by Omar Sherif) who has just come to manhood and who is carrying with him a large amount of cash entrusted to him by the people of Luxor, his hometown, to buy a more modern boat in Cairo. An older and more experienced sailor,



Young Faten Hamama

Mujahed (Rushdy Abatha), is sent along to watch over the young man and the money he is carrying, as well as to oversee the purchase of the new boat. Nargis's task is to find out where the money is hidden, and to steal it, which she easily does by seducing Mahassib, whom she marries as part of the plot against him. Mahassib, in his innocent youth, is an easy target of her seductive powers. His first sight of her is on stage in a country fair. As she enters, dancing wildly, she takes his breath away, as she does ours: it is an entrance of pure and wild sexuality, full of the vigour and vitality of sex rather than of a subtler eroticism. Even as she succeeds in her endeavour, she falls in love with Mujahid, who is no less attracted to her, and the story becomes one of intricate sets of betrayal. Though Nargis's wicked machinations almost destroy the relationship between the two men, and the livelihood of the people of Luxor, not to mention the safety and harmony of life on the Nile boat, she herself is a victim of the gang of thieves for whom she works. Her fear of them shows the vulnerability of the lone woman facing male brutality, greed, and violence. In the end, her love for Mujahed redeems her, and in the final scene of the film, she atones for her crimes by taking a fatal blow to the head meant for him, and thus unintentionally saves his life.

In film after film, Hind Rustom plays the seductress, the fallen woman. Often, however, her character, though apparently wicked, is in fact a victim. A typical role is *Banat al-layl* (i.e. girls of the night) directed by Hassan al-Imam in 1955, in which she plays Naima, a drunken prostitute, who though she comes from a good and notable family, has been brought to her life of sin by a divorce which left her helpless and desperate. She is about to be rescued by the love of a good man (played by Kamal al-Shinnawi) when she discovers she is pregnant from an earlier lover. She gives up her *fiancé* and her child, and thus loses all chances of happiness. In the end, just as she is about to recover both child and *fiancé*, she dies. In this sort of melodrama, Hind Rustom is always astonishingly dynamic, full of life, feeling, and energy, a sexual magnet who not only fatally attracts men but creates in us a deep sense of moral malaise: is she a victim of society or a representative of its wickedness?



Hind Rustom and Abdel-Salam Nabulsi. Egypt/Cairo. Photographer, anonymous. Collection Phaysal el-Atrash
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In two of her best-known films, *Shafiqah al-qubtiya* (i.e. Shafiqah the Copt) and *al-Rahiba* (i.e. the nun), both directed by Hassan al-Imam in 1963 and 1965 respectively, she plays characters seeking redemption from their previous lives. The first, infinitely superior to the second in its subject matter, script, direction, sets and art production, as well as in her performance, has more depth and more subtlety in its content. Playing a woman whose parents, of modest means, disown her when she takes up a life of vice and depravity as a dancer and drug addict in the sinful centre of Cairo wealth and privilege, Hind Rustom's acting grows in intensity as the film progresses, and she plays the dark as well as the lighter moments, such as they are, with subtlety and intelligence. The film itself is sombre, and many of its scenes are dark. Indeed, most of the film takes place at night, either in the artificially and garishly lit palaces she dances in – which only emphasizes the moral darkness of these places – or in the dark interior of her parents' house. In one particularly memorable scene, we see Shafiqah covered from head to toe in a black *milaya* (i.e. cloak) standing plaintively in front of her seated and unbending parents in their dark and bare living room, full of ominous shadows. They reject her thoroughly, refusing the forgiveness she yearns for, and eventually she turns and leaves, her head bowed and her sorrow visible. It is one of the bleakest scenes that I know of in the Egyptian cinema, and is made utterly unforgettable by the sheer power of Hind Rustom's presence, this time not exploding into explicit sexuality as it so often does, but on the contrary, denied, covered over with shame, humiliation, sorrow, and remorse. The film seems to argue the parallel between the calculated wickedness of immorality and corruption on the one hand, and the inhuman coldness and cruelty of unforgiving morality on the other.

Al-Rahiba takes place in Lebanon, which often in the Egyptian cinema is depicted as a place of happy honeymoons, beautiful scenery, and innocent fun. In this case it is also a place of depravity and vice. Hind Rustom plays an *ingénue*, Hoda, a young village girl who is at first duped into a life of sin, and then takes it on professionally, having moved, predictably, from the village to the city, from relative modesty and simplicity of

life to wealth and power. She plays now by the rules of that urban game of corruption and betrayal. At the end of the film, she comes to understand the extent of her moral collapse, which had led to the death of her mother and the ruin of her sister, and she enters a nunnery to make up for her sins.

If in the roles she plays Hind Rustom seems to represent a force of nature, creating in the viewer a storm of contradictory impulses, and though her screen presence is overwhelming, there is a certain uniformity in her performances. She has never played, as far as I know, the role of a virtuous, quiet, dignified, modestly dressed, repressed housewife or mother, who lives out her life in the protective walls of domestic life, and to whom nothing much has happened outside it. On screen, she is always a woman of the world, and almost always also a woman familiar with the uglier side of that world, though often redeemed by an enormous capacity for love and for life itself.

In contrast, though Faten Hamama has played a wide range of social roles, she has never, to my knowledge, played a wicked, vicious, or sexually intemperate woman. Much has been written about her virtuosity, and of the subtlety of her skills as an actress, in comedies, tragedies, melodramas, and political thrillers. Yet the characters she plays are almost always virtuous and basically innocent of any calculated wickedness or immorality, or even of the forgivable moral ambiguity in which many of Hind Rustom's characters thrive.

This is not to say that she never plays the role of the social outcast, or especially the "fallen woman": she does, and does so brilliantly, as in two of her greatest roles, namely, *Du'a al-qarawan*, (i.e. the nightingale's prayer) based on the novel by Taha Hussein, and in *Al-Haram* (i.e. the sin), both directed by Barakat, in 1959 and 1965 respectively. But in both cases, the fallen woman role she portrays is really that of an innocent victim of a man's vicious nature, and of the cruelty and hypocrisy of an immoral society. She is not, as so often Hind Rustom's characters are, a victim by virtue of her own sexuality.

In *Du'a al-qarawan* Hamama plays a young village woman who seeks employment with the man who had seduced her sister and led to her being killed by their uncle as punishment for staining the family's honour. Her plan is to kill him in order to avenge her sister. Instead, however, she falls in love with him, and though in the end he pays with his life for his sin, it is not she who kills him. In *Al-Haram* she gives birth to an illegitimate child, conceived when she is raped. As she tries to stifle the infant's cries so as to keep its existence a secret and thus cover up her shame, she inadvertently kills it. The unforgettable scenes of the birth in the field, and of the killing of the baby are among the most dramatic and moving in Faten Hamama's long repertoire of great moments.

It is almost inconceivable to imagine Faten Hamama playing the part of a truly wicked woman, a truly corrupt or a truly violent one. The basic innocence of her characters, and the purity of their motives, offers space, even when they stray for forgiveness and for redemption. In *La anam* (directed by Salah abu Saif in 1957), which is a kind of distant and feeble echo of *Othello*, she plays a young woman, Nadia, who deliberately misleads her father into doubting the fidelity of his virtuous new wife, of whom she

is intensely jealous. So successful is she that her father divorces his innocent wife, whom he had loved deeply. Later, however, Nadia regrets her actions, and, full of remorse, tries to undo the damage she has done. Nadia's actions are not motivated by any inherent evil on her part, but by her loneliness, and her genuine love for her father, whose affection and attention she craves. In *Tariq al-amal* (i.e. the path of hope) directed by Izzeddine Zulficar in 1957, she plays the part of Saniyya, who has killed the would-be rapist of her friend Laila, but refuses to explain her motive to the court so as not to tarnish Laila's honour. In the end, Laila admits the truth, and Saniyya's reputation is restored.

More interesting than her dozens of roles in melodrama are those that Faten Hamama played as head of a large family. In these roles – and they are quite numerous – her status can be seen as political, and the little domestic kingdom that she runs can be seen as suggestive of – or even a model for – the larger nation outside the doors of her house, whether that is a village hovel or a villa in Maadi. The best known and most written about of these roles is in *Embaratoriyat mim* (i.e. m's empire), directed by Hussein Kamel in 1972. Mona is a well-off widow with many children, who works as an inspector in the Ministry of Education. She tries to keep her large brood under strict control to ensure that they are well behaved. As the children grow older she begins to lose control over them, and to see that her attempt to maintain it is not only a mistake but also a destructive illusion. Demanding more democratic house rules, her older children wish to have a say in their own development, and in the end she is forced to agree.

In *Afwah wa aranib* (i.e. mouths and rabbits) directed by Henri Barakat in 1977, as well as in *Yawm murr, yawm helu*, (i.e. bitter day, sweet day) directed by Khayri Bshara in 1988, she plays the role of a desperately poor woman trying to keep a large brood under control, which is made almost impossible because of the inequitable economic circumstances they find themselves under. She punishes her wayward children mercilessly, at all times trying to keep them in line with her standards of morality and truth telling. Though strict, her character in both these films (and others like them) is always faithful, loving, loyal, strong, unbendingly moral, a model of the ideal governor, whose only failing is often her absence of perception: she often does not see or understand what is happening right around her.

In *Afwah wa aranib* Faten plays the part of the unmarried Ni'mat who lives in the village with her sister, Gamalat, and her husband Abdel Maguid, played by Farid Shawki, a foolish and irresponsible pair, for whose numerous progeny Ni'mat helps provide. Ni'mat is the one who holds the family together, disciplining the children and at the same time providing them with the affection and attention their parents have neither the time nor the good sense to give them. The pivotal scene of the film is when Abdel Maguid signs a marriage contract on her behalf but without her knowledge, falsely claiming that he has her consent. Unaware that she is now married, she leaves the village to escape the attentions of the odious Mualim Battawi, and finds work as a grape-picker on the estate of Mahmoud Bey (Mahmoud Yassin). One thing leads to another. She gradually impresses Mahmoud Bey with her skill and virtue, works her way up in his household, moves with him to Cairo, and at last of course, marries him. In the final scenes she rescues her sister's family from its hopeless poverty, and carries them away from the village to prosperity and happiness.

In *Yawm murr, yawm helu* Aysha lives in the impoverished and crowded Cairo neighbourhood of Shoubra, a widow with five children who is struggling as a dressmaker to pay off the debts left by her late husband. Her house is blanketed in layers of hopelessness. In her love for her children, and her anxiety to keep them under control and obedient to the social norms that she never questions, she actually mistreats them. We often see her beating her children, and though they love her, they try, each one in his or her own way, to escape her ministrations. As the film progresses we watch Aysha and her children suffer endless problems; sickness, abuse, betrayal, overwork, suicide, a runaway child, fire, prostitution, and so on. It is only in the final scene of the film that we see the “sweet day” promised in the title of the film when her beloved only son returns to her after a long absence, though by then several of his sisters have met dreadful fates.

I have elsewhere described *Yawm murr, yawm helu* as an anti-feminist film because of the nature of the character played by Faten Hamama, and I believe the same could be said of many of her films. For in all the troubles she faces, however bravely, and stoically, we almost never see Aysha rebelling against the reality that has placed her in the position she is in: like so many other of Faten’s characters, she accepts the world as it is, no matter what it does to her.

In one of her most brilliant roles, however, Faten’s character does rebel and take up arms against the corrupt and vicious world that has victimized her and her people. In *Laylat al-qabd ala Fatma*, (i.e. the night Fatma was arrested), directed by Henri Barakat in 1984, she plays another woman in charge of a poor and fatherless family. This is an explicitly political film, in more ways than one. The early scenes take place during the British occupation of Egypt, and Fatma’s young brother Galal has joined the national resistance. When the moment for his participation in an operation arrives, however, he fails to show up, jeopardizing not only the mission but also his comrades. Fatma courageously takes his place, but later begins to understand that he is a morally failed individual. Eventually he becomes an important man in the now independent state, and we see him in action, corrupt, vicious, selfish, and cruel. In the meantime Fatma, from the moment she took charge of her orphaned younger siblings, has postponed her own happiness until they grow up. Her long engagement to the fisherman Sayyid, whom she loves deeply and who loves her as well, is jeopardized just as they are about to marry at last. He is arrested and imprisoned for fifteen years for a crime he did not commit. When she discovers that it is her wicked brother who has framed Sayyid, she confronts him in his grand villa in Cairo. Not only does he refuse to undo his wickedness by seeing to Sayyid’s release, but he has her mercilessly thrown out of his house. When she pursues her demands for justice, he claims that she is mad, and we see her being dragged away by the police to a mental hospital, where she continues to resist the injustice. In the end of course, he is exposed and punished, and she and Sayyid are reunited at last, both of them now grey-haired and bent.

This film is a severe and explicit indictment not just of individual immorality and weakness, but of public affairs and of the politics of the post-colonial independent state, built, as it appears to be in this film, on a web of corruption, deceit, injustice, and violence. Thus some of Faten Hamama’s films go beyond Hind Rustom’s in their implications. She made some films to specifically address social problems, the most

famous being *Uridu hallan* (i.e. I want a solution) directed by Said Marzouk in 1975, in which the injustice of the Egyptian divorce laws as they apply to women is explored and illustrated.

It is on this political level that Faten Hamama's place in the Egyptian cinema differs greatly in the final analysis from that of Hind Rostom. While the latter seems often in her roles to represent nature and natural forces in all their destructiveness, disarray, and catastrophic results – and also in all their beauty and power – Faten represents the virtuous life – self-sacrifice, discipline, honour, fidelity, sincerity, morality – which, though it is fraught with its own weaknesses, is seen as the only force that can withstand nature and provide protection against its dangers. Paramount among these dangers is the individuality that threatens the cohesiveness of the group, and the well being of society – and this is most often present in its natural embodiments, that is, sexuality and greed, the temptation to pursue the selfish desire for pleasure and power, regardless of the moral implications, and despite the damage that may be done to society.

If Faten Hamama has been dubbed *sayyidat al-shasha al-arabiyya*, I believe it is because we like to see ourselves as we see her persona, a nation to which many misfortunes and even catastrophes have befallen, one which has often been betrayed and maltreated, which has made mistakes and even occasionally strayed into error, but which in the end is basically virtuous, moral, decent, and strong, inevitably heading, as long as it is true to itself, for survival and success. In this view of ourselves, we have expunged all that is wicked, immoral, and anti-social – qualities so often inherent in the characters played by Hind Rostom – as elements alien to our nature, present in our society as temptations, but always resisted and in the end denied and defeated.

But is there not inherent in the title *sayyidat al-shasha* an admission that there is a touch of fantasy in this self-definition? In the 1920s Safiah Zaghoul, wife of Saad Zaghoul, leader of the nationalist revolution against the British, was dubbed *umm al-masriyyin* (i.e. the mother of the Egyptians). In Faten Hamama's title on the other hand, the reference is only to the movie screen, to an actress, to someone who works in make-believe, in an invented world, a world of outer appearances. In *Afwah wa aranib*, Ni'mat comments on Mahmoud Bey's erstwhile fiancée, a blonde woman much given to travel in Europe and to European clothes, whom she will eventually supplant: *min barra hala hala, min guwa ya'lam allah!* (i.e. on the outside hohoho, on the inside, God only knows!)

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