

CESA NABARAWI

Cesa Nabarawi, the doyenne of Egyptian Feminist militants celebrated her eighty-eighth birthday on January 31st 1981. She was one of the first Egyptian women to dare to «show her face in public» more than half a century ago, when «decent» young girls and ladies were supposed to be heard but not seen.

Madame Cesa is still actively campaigning on issues ranging from women's rights to nuclear disarmament. But she is worried about what she sees as evidence of regression in the movement for women's emancipation in Egypt.

«Everywhere», she protests with mixed anger and dismay, «I see veiled girls and women, peering at life through narrow slits in Ku Klux Klannish hoods, reverting to the humiliating, alien custom my companions and I discarded nearly sixty years ago. It is incomprehensible.»

Cesa Nabarawi was twenty eight, in 1923, when she and Hoda Shaarawi, founder of the Egyptian Women's Movement and fifteen years her senior, caused a social earthquake by appearing in public sans veil.

The momentous event occurred on their return from attending an International Conference of Women in Rome.

She recalls with mischievous glee, that, on the train journey from Alexandria to Cairo, she and Madame Hoda conspired to take the plunge then and there.

At Cairo Central station, where their families, friends and a large crowd awaited their arrival, they stepped off the train unveiled, smiling, radiant.

The sight of two pretty female faces shamelessly revealed outside the hareem caused a furore. Madame

(1) This article is based on an interview by the author, Irene Beeson.



Cesa Nabarawi decorated in 1972 by Aisha Rateb, Minister of Social Affairs.

Shaarawi's husband divorced her. There were outraged denunciations from religious and bourgeois circles.

Yet, Cesa Nabarawi explains, the gesture was symbolic. Several years previously, at the time of the 1919 revolution, Egyptian women had joined the men in demonstrations and on the barricades, in protest against British occupation. When the British army was called out to put down the revolt, the women had refused to budge, had torn off their veils and waved them as banners of independence.

In those early days, she explains, Egypt's pioneering women were deeply involved in politics. «For how could women hope to gain their freedom when Egypt herself was not free?»

1923, year of the Rome conference, was the year Hoda Shaarawi established the Egyptian Women's Movement. The Women's Union was formed a year later and «L'Egyptienne», the first Egyptian woman's magazine, appeared in 1925. Published in both French and Arabic, it informed Egyptian women of their rights and of the aims and activities of the women's movement. These were linked with international organizations and movement: campaigning for women's rights, world peace, conventional and, later, nuclear disarmament, free trade unions, democracy etc.

Looking back, Cesa Nabarawi considers that the most important achievements in the field of Egyptian Women's rights, in the early days of the movement was the granting, in 1925, of equal rights of education

Gibran's Year A message

1981, besides being the year of the Handicapped, is also the year of Gibran, commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of his final «sleep».

Just as the year of the Handicapped carries a message of renewed hope to a large number of suffering people, so does Gibran's year carry a message of reevaluation and deeper understanding of his works by his numerous readers.

It is characteristic of the work of art that it continues to live and grow after the departure of its author. Advanced study and further criticism may shed new light on the artist and bring about a new interpretation of his message.

During the dark years which we have had to face, many of us have recalled inspiring passages from the Prophet, such as: «Your pain is the breaking of the shell

that encloses your understanding»; «You shall be free indeed when your days are not without a care nor your nights without a want and a grief. But rather when these things girdle you and yet you rise above them, naked and unbound.»

The great thought emanating from the whole text is the one stated by Mary Haskell who understood Gibran more than any of his friends: «You are far, far greater than you think and all is well.» It is a forceful call to self-reliance, to a firm belief in our potential as individuals and as groups. When we are abandoned by every one, we still have ourselves to seek and to rely upon. We are thus compelled to search deeper into ourselves and exploit our latent capacities. Like our ancestors who had to confront barren soil and bare rocks and to extract from apparent barrenness good fruit and living water, we are bound to strive and find our own road to salvation. This road lies within us, shaped by our history, our heritage, our moral values, our constant endeavor. Material wealth is of brief duration. Ours is a more lasting wealth.

The message of Gibran's Year is one of optimism, endurance and universal prospects

for Egyptian girls and raising marriage age of girls to sixteen. «They used to marry girls off at twelve or thirteen», she adds. «We succeeded because there was no parliament in those days. Had there been, the traditionalists and reactionaries would have voted overwhelmingly in opposition. Further reforms in laws governing personal status, marriage and divorce were, however, blocked for many more years — as was Egypt's own «emancipation».

The great leap forward came with the 1952 revolution. Women were granted the right to vote, to be elected to the National Assembly, of membership of the Arab Socialist Union (the official political «party»). In 1962 the first woman cabinet minister (of social affairs) was appointed, Al Azhar university was «persuaded» to admit girl students and all stages of education were opened to women, free of charge. «Bait el Ta'a» (The House of Obedience) regulation was abolished. This had empowered a husband to compel his estranged or runaway wife to return home and cohabit with him, resorting, if necessary, to the police to drag her back by force. Woman was granted the right to divorce a polygamous husband. Female circumcision was outlawed. The veil vanished totally.

The current Muslim «nouvelle vague» started with the regime's switch from the (Arab) socialism of the Nasser era, towards capitalism and «Americanization». It is actively encouraged by the religious establishment and, apparently, acquiesced in by the regime.

Public protest and demonstrations are strictly banned in Egypt. Yet, in 1974, a procession of several thousand students and members of the Al Azhar staff marched unmolested to the People's Assembly, in protest against long-debated reforms in the marriage laws. Their slogan was «no to socialism, no to nasserism, yes to Islam».

That year the Sheikh of Al Azhar sought to wreck the national family planning programme by proclaiming in the government-controlled Al Ahrām that birth control was forbidden by Islam. Yet, when the programme was launched in the mid-sixties, the previous sheikh had affirmed that, not only did Islam not forbid birth control, but actually recommended it in certain cases — to protect a woman's health and to ensure the happiness and welfare of the couple and family.

Regression in family planning meant regression in all aspects of women's rights and emancipation, the Egyptian Women's Movement protested in 1974.

It was at that time that the great leap backward first became apparent, with girls and women concealing and «separating themselves from the world of man» behind veils and slit-eyed hoods. The trend has since gained momentum.

So, while she and her fellow activists look back with pride and a sense of achievement, Cesa Nabarawi celebrating the fifty eighth year of her own release from purdah, wonders with some apprehension whether their movement is being systematically undermined by male chauvinists, traditionalists and the religious ghouls. Is Egypt going the way of Saudi Arabia? Of Iran?