

Continuous Quest for Identity: Egypt Nubians from Civilization to Marginalization

Naglaa Fathi Mahmoud-Hussein
Howard University
SRA 2014-2

“I know a woman by the name of Fat’hiya Galal,” the poet Faisal Al-Mawsly said to me on the train from Aswan back to Cairo. He continued, “She is an amazingly beautiful writer. Her only downfall is her laziness and inability to commute all the time to Cairo. Let me see if we might be able to reach her on the phone. I helped her publish some of her short stories but I lost hope that she would produce any more.”

“He entered the café as an osta [derogatory term a for poor laborer] and he came out an ostaz [a teacher, mentor, a scholar],” remarked Dr. Hamza Al-Baqr, a longtime professor of geography at Khartoum University, when asked about the famous Nubian writer Mohamed Khalil Qasim. He then explained, “When Qasim was released from prison, he walked by a place on the Corniche near what is now known as Maspero. There used to be a café there where most artists would hang out and play the flute and sometimes they would sell instruments. Qasim decided to stop by. He was wearing disheveled and mismatched clothes that clashed with that downtown elitist place. When he sat down with the audience, they were talking politics. Qasim proceeded to voice opinions that made a deep impression on all those within earshot. They were astonished at his knowledge and his profound insights. So at the end, they said, he arrived as an osta and he left as an ostaz”.

“You know doktora [a title for respect], a big businessman from Cairo offered me a million pounds to buy my house but I refused. I refused because this is my land, my wealth, my life, and if I lose my house and my boat, I have nothing else to work for,” explained the boatman Ahmad in front of his house on Heisa Island, Aswan.

These are anecdotes from a contemporary generation of Nubian intellectuals and villagers telling the stories of the indigenous Africans who settled thousands of years ago around the Nile valley area, between the regions now known as the first cataract near Aswan, Egypt and the third cataract near Khartoum, Sudan. In the 20th century, these communities were displaced, relocated and then forced into a mass exodus. The first quote above reflects the status of living Nubian women artists and writers, and their struggle to get published and read. The second quote captures the memory of an intellectual who was arguably the most influential Nubian writer of the modern era. The third quote is an example of the younger generation of Nubian villagers’ struggle against capitalistic endeavors to devour the beauty and history of these ancient lands.

The impact of displacement and relocations on indigenous people’s way of life is tremendous. Communities are forced to migrate, abandon and transform their rural habits to adapt to the new urban industrialist system; rural Nubian women are under the societal pressure to remain in the New Nubia relocated villages. Younger generations grew up steeped in nostalgia for their lost lands and their ancestral histories. The mass exodus of

the Nubian Egyptians after the building of the Aswan High Dam in 1968 resulted in the displacement of over 150,000 Nubian families. The politics behind the new wave of industrializing post-independence African states is divisive. While some older Nubians yearn for the lost peaceful way of living, others argue that, if left alone by the state, Nubians could become permanently alienated from the rest of Egypt's national aspirations. By relocating Nubians into the area north of Aswan, they were seeking out their role in the building of the nascent post-independence Egyptian state.

In order to explore these Nubian themes of autonomy versus assimilation, tradition versus industrialization, indigeneity and Egyptian nationalism, I turned to Nubian literature and living oral history. The central goal of my research is to compare Mohamed Khalil Qasim's literary and artistic descriptions of the lost inundated village of Qattah in his masterpiece *al-Shamandoura* with the social and political realities of modern day Nubian villagers of Qattah and some neighboring villages including Ibrim, Ineba, Al-Genana wa Al-Shubbak and Ballanah. Contemporary Nubian villagers such as Haj Hassan Awad and Al-Haji Sayed Al-Hassan remember Qasim and cherish the platform he has given to Nubians assert their presence within the Egyptian national discourse. They acknowledge the channel that Qasim opened up through his literature to give voice to the underrepresented often-silent villagers of Nubia.

Haj Hassan Awad (the oldest sheikh in the village of Qattah) recounts that Qasim was sitting by the Nile when he saw a ship about to sink. The ship embarked on the western shore of the Nile and villagers used *al-shamandoura* (the buoy) to save those on board. *Al-shamandoura* is thus a symbol of Nubian life in its stillness and its movement, explains the Arab-Nubian poet Faisal Al-Mawsaly. Nubian Egyptian villagers are connected to life by the water and the arable land. Neda Amir, a Nubian from Calabsha, told me about *qashrangeik*, a plant that used to grow in the older land of Nubia. Because of the nutrition that the silt from the Nile fed to this plant, Nubian cattle were productive and lived sustainably without need for modern manufactured products like fertilizer. Palm trees are another essential source of income that no longer exists for Nubian Egyptians. Mohey Ahmad's mother, an elder who was relocated to a village in Luxor, remembers how sweet those dates from the short trees were.

The SYLFF research abroad grant enriched my knowledge about the writer Mohamed Khalil Qasim and his extraordinary down-to-earth character. Through this grant, I was able to interview activist writers and community elders in person. I broadened my network and encountered spontaneous opportunities that arose from this model of engaged, community-oriented research. Some of the most memorable stories I recorded were activists' accounts of prison and their political writing during the 1940s and 1950s in Egypt. The communist movement in Africa was a widespread model of resistance amongst Nubian activists. Many intellectuals refused the falsehood of post-independence nationalisms.

The artist Khalid Hamza was particularly knowledgeable about Qasim's struggles. He was a comrade of Qasim in prison in the period between 1947-1958. He recounted that Qasim was known amongst prisoners as "the headmaster" because of his leadership and sense of justice. Hamza mentions in a recorded interview that Qasim taught the police guard in prison how to read and write. He was an educator and an amazing writer. With a grin on his face, Hamza remarked that the prison years were beautiful years. He recalled how prisoners established a theatre, cultivated a farm and educated each other

about languages. Qasim mastered German and Russian during his decades in prison. Another political figure who mentioned the productivity of life in prison is Sayyed Ishaq, the author of “Searching for *Al-Shamandoura*” and the first to write a tributary to Qasim. However, Sayyid Ishaq clarified that prison came with its tolls: he recounted the torture Qasim faced there and asserted that Qasim passed away soon after he was released because of the exhaustion it caused his heart and physique.

The contemporary generation of his student writers such as Tala’at Radwan, Hassan Nour, Ibrahim Sharawi and Hagag Oudoul mentioned how Qasim inspired them both intellectually and personally. Qasim is the first Nubian writer to transcend the tribe of his own village and call for the establishment of Nubian cultural associations, now prolific across downtown Cairo, to get Nubians together. He used to collect younger students and teach them how to write. He held many writing workshops and offered community service. These stories are not mentioned in any publications about Qasim but they live on in his students’ memories. The power of these memories – as told by elders who witnessed and participated Qasim’s struggle and activism both within and outside of prison – can never be adequately captured in a work of anthropology or history. It will be my challenge to convey them in my own writing.

Daria Sakina, the strong Nubian woman character in Qasim’s novel *al-Shamandoura*, is currently manifested in the modern day situation of Nubian women. The way in which Nubian women have responded to the compounding effects of the forced migration of 1964, economic migration into Cairo, and the more recent decline of the touristic industry after the January 25th uprising constitutes another area of interest for my field work. My mentor Anne Jennings (an anthropologist and author of “Nubian women of West Aswan: Negotiating Tradition and Change”) connected me with her family in West Aswan so that I could visit and ask about their life after the fall of the touristic economy in recent years. The day I decided to visit Zoba in West Aswan, I took a ferry from the eastern shore to the western one. On the boat I had a chat with a woman who noticed that I am a stranger and told me that she is a stranger too. Her strangeness and her alienation from the Nubian community stems from the fact that she is upper Egyptian (Saidya) or Jorbatiya as the Nubians call her. Over the course of the ferry ride she complained to me about how she lives in a lonely state amongst the Nubian women and commutes everyday to Aswan city for work. She helped me locate Zoba and her house. It was a long walk in the heat of the Aswan summer. Once I reached Zoba’s house, I started to breathe. The entrance corridor of the house was empty and the door was open. I kept walking and calling Zoba’s name until I reached a room inside where Zoba’s mother slept on a bed. I was hesitant to wake her up but I had travelled a long time just to talk to her daughter. I have to say that she was so excited and happy to see someone knocking at her door after the decline of the usual tourism. I asked Zoba how she lives with no tourist business there. She mentioned to me that she has a pension and her son is taking good care of her. She asked me to write more about her house and her village so that tourists would come visit and she would sell her embroideries. I promised I will.

My field research added to my knowledge about the burdens that Nubian women in Egypt routinely confront. Rural Nubian Egyptian women embrace multiple identities that make them unique yet oftentimes triple their burdens. Alongside their Arab Egyptian counterparts, the Nubian woman struggles against patriarchy and the stigmatization of rural life by the urban elite. Moreover, she is burdened with the ongoing stigmatizations

associated with Africans, blackness, and the racialization of her identity. However, while she confronts these challenges that both African and Arab Muslim women face, very little is known about the Nubian woman, let alone her representation in her own literature. In addition to belonging to an underrepresented group, the Nubian woman journeys a difficult path to survive. Until recent decades brought a greater number of African immigrants and refugees to Egypt, she alone could testify to the experience of color prejudice against black beauty.

Her blackness is set in contrast to the whiteness of Cairo, the cosmopolitan city that drags her children into servitude and many times never returns them. Her confrontations with the patriarchy are often discussed in conjunction with the Arab version of Islam that came to Africa around the 14th century. The marginalization of several publications that discuss the Nubian woman and her identity crisis in either the African or Middle Eastern context owes to the scarcity of literature and accessibility that many Nubians encounter. In other words, the centrality of Cairo as the source of artistic production and the travel difficulties facing Nubian women caused the literary production of many Nubian women to remain buried in the city of Aswan in the far south of Egypt. During my research visit to Aswan and Cairo, the notion of gender and migration and its relevance to Nubian women increasingly became the subject of my observations. I came across two examples of the binaries in writers' receptions and readership by meeting Fatihya Galal from Aswan and Samar Nour from Cairo. Galal's artistic production is extraordinary, yet seldom published or otherwise accessed by an audience. On the other hand, Samar Nour – a younger woman of Nubian origins who made her way into Cairo scene – is celebrated in Cairo magazines and artistic venues. The Nubian woman – whether she is a mother, a daughter, a sister or just a member of the community – is grappling with tensions, disparities and financial and social insecurities.

In reflecting back on the value of my recent research facilitated through the SYLFF grant, I once again wish to emphasize the importance of recounting the Nubian experience as a living history that continually expresses itself in Nubian cultural production. It strikes me that the discussion of Nubian Egyptians is always centered on certain disciplines such as anthropology and archaeology. The community is either cast as a relic of the past or romanticized as an indigenous community without giving voice to the complexities of the Nubian experience in the Egyptian state context. The insertion of Nubians' literature into the discussion on post-colonial Africa is long overdue. In the existing published works, the investigation of political, social and economic contexts of certain literary texts does not go beyond library research. However, the case of my dissertation topic on identity politics of nation and land in the literature of Nubian Egyptians is unique. For one thing, finding published literature by contemporary Nubians is difficult let alone a writer who passed away almost sixty years ago. This is the importance of multidisciplinary approach of combining literature, history and memory, and anthropology in seeking knowledge. The SYLFF research abroad enabled me to perfect this task and planted seeds into more deep and insightful research outcomes.