Arab culture has often become a synonym for Islamic fundamentalism in contemporary culture, from movies to news to social theory. In contemporary American and Egyptian films (1980-2000), Islamic fundamentalism is used in many ways to validate both the American and the Egyptian nationalist identities and agendas. Gender has been an essential part of the Orientalist discourse. Our traditional notions of the “Arab world” are infested with ideas of sensual and submissive females (“the harem”) and violent, yet succumbing males (“the colonized”). The nation has been traditionally closely linked to gender. The female is often used as a symbol of the nation, and the male as an active embodiment of it. However a closer look reveals a more complex view. There is a major axis dividing how the American and the Egyptian nations are represented and gendered in their respective cinemas. The Middle East has generally invested the female with the task of being the moral gauge in society. The female’s role thus goes beyond symbolizing the morals of the family and into being the bearer of the nation’s values. The nation as female could be praised for its virtue, or condemned for its sin. This dichotomy is present in the films dealt with in this paper, as the Egyptian nation is represented as a virtuous, virginal female who does not pose a threat to patriarchy. On the other hand, the Other nations in the Egyptian films, Israel and the United States, are symbolized by sexually permissive females who are presented as summarizing the moral depravity of the enemy. The representation of Islamic fundamentalists in this context is again different. Here we are introduced to sexually and psychologically repressed men and women. With Egypt imagining itself in terms of honorable, subdued femininity, it is no coincidence that Egyptians call their nation the “mother of the world”.

Hollywood presents a different perspective. Here the American nation is imagined through the representation of the virile, conquering male. The American nation is represented as the world policeman, helper, and savior. The Other in this context is also represented as male, making the conflict between the United States and Arab countries in the films one between masculinities.

I. Background

**Characteristics of Islamic fundamentalism**

Islamic fundamentalism has three characteristics, which are at importance when examining it in the context of Egyptian and American cinemas’ representation of politics. First, even if it is a religious movement, Islamic fundamentalism is also a political one that aims to establish a “polity of believers” (Hamzeh 1998). This conflicts with the idea of a secular nation-state, adopted in many countries, such as Egypt, where fundamentalism exists. For example, Sayyid Qutb—an Egyptian fundamentalist guru—has been quoted to say that a “Muslim’s nationality is his [sic] religion” (quoted in Faksh 1997, p. 10). Indeed, Qutb has himself engaged in an active opposition to Nasser’s nationalist-secularist regime, which ended in Qutb’s execution in 1966.

Second, Islamic fundamentalists believe in Islamic authenticity, juxtaposed with what is seen as Western hegemony, which in turn is believed to threaten this...
authenticity. Western hegemony is not confined to Western countries; it also applies to secular people in the Muslim world who are seen as even worse than the “foreign infidels” (Faksh 1997, p. 9). They are seen as “representing the interests of the... former... colonial powers” (Taheri 1987, p. 16). Again this has resulted in conflict between secular governments such as in Egypt and fundamentalist groups.

Finally, fundamentalist groups seem to agree on the necessity of Jihad (holy war) in order to preserve the Muslim community. However, the groups differ in their interpretation and application of Jihad. While some like the Muslim Jama’a (Group) see Jihad as non-violent, others like the Islamic Jihad Organization view Jihad as being military.

Castells sees the Islamic fundamentalist identity as a resistant one, and describes it as an expression of “the exclusion of the excluders by the excluded” (1997, p. 9). He sees the Islamic fundamentalist identity as being defensive against the dominant institutions/ideologies. Indeed, Islamic fundamentalism may have been a reaction to the state in countries like Egypt, but Castells’ description excludes cases like pro-Western Saudi Arabia where Islamic fundamentalism is itself the dominant ideology. However Castells’ view of fundamentalism is useful as he points out the construction of the Islamic fundamentalist identity as opposing “failing ideologies of the post-colonial order” (1997, p. 17), like nationalism, capitalism and socialism. Yet what Castells misses is the cooperation between fundamentalism and these ideologies themselves, as, for example, fundamentalism was used in Egypt to support the nationalist project in the 1930’s. It was a means to rally the masses against British rule. In the case of Saudi Arabia, we can also see no conflict between fundamentalist ideology and capitalist business ventures. Thus, Castells’ supposed net/self binary is challenged.

**Islamic fundamentalism in Egypt**

Egypt is formally an Islamic democracy; Islam is used as a source of legislation (started by Sadat in 1971), and is the religion of the majority of the population. Islamic fundamentalism started in Egypt with the establishment of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928 by a teacher called Hassan al-Banna. The Brotherhood aimed at moral, social and economic reform and at eliminating British (foreign) influence on Egypt, a cause it declared a jihad against in 1951 (Hiro 1988). In the 1940’s the Muslim Brotherhood became a politicized movement aiming at establishing a Muslim polity. In the 1950’s this clashed with Nasser’s nationalism, the latter—being socialist—seen by the Brotherhood as a departure from Islam (Hammoud 1998).

Fundamentalists tried to assassinate Nasser in 1954 (Hiro 1988). Nasser responded by oppressing his fundamentalist challengers, incarcerating them and executing their leader Sayyid Qub in 1966 (el Saadawi 1997). The fundamentalists were not deterred and conspired against Nasser after the defeat of the Six Day War in 1967 (Said Aly and Wenner 1982), which they viewed as holy punishment. The 1967 defeat resulted in many people resorting to religion for solace, and Nasser released hundreds of imprisoned Brothers in 1968. But Nasser’s continuous oppression resulted in the sprouting of various militant Islamic fundamentalist groups, which relied on violence to achieve their aims, the latter ultimately being replacing the state (Hammoud 1998). Thus, the Islamic Jama’a—a among others, like al-Takfir wa al-Hijra (Excommunication and Emigration), Al-Najun min-al-Nar (Saved from the Inferno), and the Islamic Liberation Party—was born (Sackur 1994).
Sadat tried to gain favors with the fundamentalists, as he wanted to depart from Nasser’s socialist regime into a capitalist one. He projected an image of himself as the “believer president” by praying publicly, using his first name Mohammad and wearing gallabiyyas. He allowed the fundamentalists to operate freely and publicly. However, Sadat’s pro-Western economic and political policies, especially his open-door policy that resulted in inflation, and his signing the Camp David accords in 1978 (which he got a fatwa (religio-legal counsel) for from Muslim ulama), led to fundamentalist dismay (Ayubi 1982). One group, the Islamic Liberation Group, attempted to overthrow Sadat’s regime in 1974 but failed. Sadat retaliated by refusing to recognize any fundamentalist groups as political parties in the 1976 parliamentary poll (Hiro 1988). Eventually, Sadat was assassinated by another group, Tanzim al-Jihad, in 1981.

Mubarak has adopted a free-market approach that has encouraged foreign investment. This resulted in the creation of the nouveaux riche whose consumerism and control of the economy (mainly as agents for multinational corporations) has left the rest (and the bulk) of Egyptians behind. With the resulting growing unemployment and the decline in social services, largely due to the peasant migration into Cairo, the Islamic fundamentalists’ popularity has grown as they provide an alternative to the government’s inefficient services (Hyman 1985). The appeal of Islamic fundamentalism in Egypt thus lies in its call for economic, political and social reform. This has attracted students and intellectuals who are eager for change due to their dismay from the existing corruption, and also the urban poor, mainly the unemployed youth (Faksh 1997). Among the employed, fundamentalism prospers among young professionals—doctors, lawyers, teachers—who are in constant demand for more rights at work. An interesting point here is that Egyptian cinema portrays Islamic fundamentalists as living on the edge of society, thereby ignoring the fundamentalists’ considerable participation in the work force.

Mubarak has tried to integrate the Muslim Brotherhood into the system by letting its members participate in union elections, many of which they have won. He however, like Sadat, did not allow any fundamentalist groups to run for parliamentary elections and did not recognize any as a political party in an election law issued in June 1983. The fundamentalists have found their way around this by nominating their candidates under secular parties’ names, such as the New Wafd Party in 1984 and the Socialist Labor Party in 1987 (Sackur 1994; Moussalli 1998). An important observation about the parliamentary elections is how they were rigged. The election of April 1987, for example, featured the arrest of

“750 opposition supporters, chiefly fundamentalists... ballot boxes... stuffed with the votes of the dead, absent and under-age for the ruling National Democratic Party, and... polling stations in many villages... closed several hours ahead of schedule to prevent legitimate voters from exercising their right. Yet the Brotherhood-led Alliance gained seventeen per cent of the popular vote and sixty parliamentary seats, displacing the New Wafd as the main opposition party”

(Hiro 1988, p. 86).

Moussalli (1998) and Hammoud (1998) both see the formal exclusion of fundamentalists from parliamentary politics as one reason behind the militarization of some of their groups. Militarization is seen as the only way left for them to participate in politics. These militant fundamentalist groups, such as al-Jama’a al-Islamiyya (the
Islamic Group) and the Jihad Organization, were described by president Mubarak in 1993 as being “not really Islamists but a group of mercenaries who belonged to whoever paid them” (Sackur 1994). The government has thus adopted an “Islamic” stance to beat the fundamentalists at their own game.

These militant groups have engaged in various forms of anti-state violence. They have attacked, among others, government officials, writers (such as Naguib Mahfouz), Copts (seen as infidels), and foreign (mainly Western) tourists in an attempt to cause terror and impose more economic hardship (tourism being an important source of revenue for Egypt) which they hoped would result in more popular revolt against the system (Moussalli 1998; Sackur 1994; Hammoud 1998). By the 1990’s, in many areas in and outside of Cairo, the militants operated largely independently from the government, imposing their own rules and moral codes. On May 4, 1992, Islamic fundamentalists killed thirteen Copts in Asyut. Mubarak retaliated by passing an anti-terrorism legislation in July 1992, introducing the death penalty for terrorist organization membership (Hammoud 1998). Mubarak also appealed for Western attention to what he now labeled international terrorism, intensified after the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993 by followers of the Egyptian Sheikh Omar Abd al-Rahman, leader of the Islamic Jama’a (Sackur 1994; Faksh 1997). Mubarak also tried to flag the Egyptian government as Islamic by promoting Islamic programs and publications, while at the same time labeling the fundamentalists as heretics (Faksh 1997). Here it is important to note that Islam in Egypt’s media is still “a religion made of externals, of gestures shorn of values: prayer, fast, pilgrimage” (Sivan 1985, p. 5).

Egyptian cinema is one way in which the Egyptian government is disseminating its anti-fundamentalist message. One of the most prominent figures in this context is the actor Adel Imam, whose films Terrorism and Barbecue, The Terrorist, and Birds of Darkness all oppose Islamic fundamentalists. This has led to his receiving death threats from fundamentalist groups who declared him an enemy of Islam (Faksh 1997). His 1994 movie The Terrorist even witnessed intense security outside the cinemas showing it (Sackur 1994).

Islamic fundamentalism and the United States

Hollywood generally tends to link Islamic fundamentalism with Lebanon, perhaps as a result of various anti-American attacks conducted by Lebanese fundamentalist militias in the 1980’s. This may imply the equalization of Lebanon with Islamic fundamentalism, thereby disregarding the fact that Lebanon is comprised of a large number of ethnic and religious minorities, and hence the difficulty of the dominance of one particular group. The Islamic fundamentalist groups that exist in Lebanon have been influenced, either directly or indirectly, by those existing in more uniform countries such as Iran and Afghanistan. The most recent incident linked to such groups is the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, connected to Osama bin Laden’s al-Qa’ida group. Thus, the Lebanese Sunni Jama’a Islamiyya (a militant group) is based on the teachings of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, while the Shiite Hizbullah is directly linked with Iran (Khashan 1998). What links these fundamentalist groups is their belief in an unconcessional struggle against Zionism and the American support for Israel. They see violence against American and pro-Western governments as a sacred duty (Hamzeh 1998). Thus the activities of the Islamic Lebanese militias tend to be as part of the larger Middle East
crisis, as opposed to those of the Egyptian ones, whose actions tend to be focused on domestic issues.

Hizbullah is considered Lebanon’s most active Islamic fundamentalist group. Formed on February 16, 1985, its manifesto

“described the West as the ‘tyrannical world set on fighting us’. It accused the West of collaborating with the Soviet Union and waging war against the Muslims, charging that they had purposely defamed Hezbollah’s reputation by labeling it as terrorist to ‘stunt and deform our great achievements with regard to confrontations with the United States’. Hezbollah regards the West, and particularly the United States, as its staunchest enemy after Israel”

(Jaber 1997, p. 55).

Jaber (1997) explains that Hizbullah’s opposition to the United States stems from the US’ support of Israel during its 1982 invasion of Lebanon. I add to that the anti-US sentiment in Iran—Hizbullah’s supporter—occurring with the Iranian revolution in 1979. Jaber cites the Gulf War in 1991 as one reason why Hizbullah’s popularity has grown. She says that it was a result of the contrast between the US’ supportive attitude towards Kuwait and its silence towards Israel’s occupation of Lebanon (Jaber 1997). Lately Hizbullah’s popularity has grown even more with the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the South of Lebanon—credited to Hizbullah by many. Hizbullah has openly declared that it will continue its anti-Israeli jihad with Palestine still being a conflict area. Hizbullah reject peace with Israel and claim that Israel ultimately has expansionist plans in the Middle East that aim at regaining the “Promised Land”.

Hizbullah has also been alleged to engage in military activities against the United States or its citizens, including the killing of the president of the American University of Beirut, Malcom Kerr (Nacos 1994), and the kidnapping of the American bureau chief of Associated Press in Beirut, Terry Anderson. Hizbullah has denied some of these allegations, but it has openly declared its support of those acts, perhaps for increased propaganda (Martin 1990).

However, Hizbullah openly declared its responsibility for the hijacking of TWA flight 847 from Athens to Beirut in 1985. The plane was hijacked by members of the Amal and Hizbullah Lebanese militias, who demanded the release of 700 Lebanese Shiites held in Israel. Thus, we can see that the US has been primarily attacked as an Israeli ally, and that the attacks have mainly taken place in Lebanon by Lebanese militias (Threat Analysis Division, 1987). However from the end of the eighties anti-American Islamic fundamentalist attacks expanded beyond Lebanon, with terrorists like the Saudi Osama bin Laden and the Egyptian Sheikh Omar Abdul-Rahman, both held responsible for the World Trade Center bombing in 1993. This bombing has been viewed by both Egypt and the USA as an act of international terrorism (Moussalli 1998), therefore constructing Islamic fundamentalism as a common enemy. Thus, from an American perspective, largely from a foreign policy perspective, we can see that fundamentalism is regarded as an enemy. Moussalli cites the American Department of Defense as looking at Islamic fundamentalism “as an ideological and geopolitical threat that had to be eliminated” (1998, p. 4). The U.S. blames Iran for the propagation of Islamic fundamentalism, and on the website of the Department of Defense it states that “Iran poses the greatest threat to the stability of the [Middle East] region and to U.S. interests” (Defenselink 2001).
Moreover, the Soviet Union has been blamed for supporting various “terrorist”
groups worldwide, including Arab ones (Romerstein 1981). The American view has
been that of seeing communism as a threat to democracy, and of looking at the Soviet
support for “terrorism” as a “form of surrogate warfare—a substitute for traditional
warfare” with the US (McForan 1986, p. 168). Schlagheck argues that the “two
superpowers... carried their rivalry into the turbulent politics of the Third World”
(1990, p. 177). With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Islamic fundamentalism has
been viewed from a similar angle to communism (Moussalli 1998). Both are seen as
totalitarian forces that cannot achieve their aims without relying on military action
(Romerstein 1981). In this sense, Islamic fundamentalism is regarded as the new
“Other” after the Cold War.

II. Islamic Fundamentalism in Hollywood

Against this historical/political backdrop, it is understandable that Hollywood
equates Islamic fundamentalism with terrorism. Connolly (1989) argues that terrorism
is an Other which is essential for any state’s self-definition. Thus, Hollywood has
constructed a fixed image of the fundamentalist. Bhabha argues that this is a feature
of the ideological construction of otherness in colonial discourse. He points to the
contradictory nature of this “fixity”, connoting “rigidity and an unchanging order as
well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition.” (1983, p. 18).

Tough American Men/Nation

The United States in the films is represented by tough action heroes. These heroes are
characterized by both physical prowess (True Lies, Navy Seals, Hostage, Rules of
Engagement) and high mental capability and expertise (Executive Decision,
Programmed to Kill, The Siege, The Delta Force). A good illustration of the superior
American male is Samuel L. Jackson’s character Childers in Rules of Engagement.
The film’s controversial portrayal of Arabs led to its ban in most Arab countries, as
the film justifies the mass killing of the Arabs by showing that even the women and
the children are armed and attacking the United States. The film stages an attack by a
crowd of Yemenis (men, children, women) on the American embassy in Yemen, to
which Childers responds by shooting at the Arab crowd. Jackson is consequently
charged with breaking the rules of engagement, to which he responds by persistently
fighting his case in court until proven right. In this way, Jackson’s position as
protector of the nation is redeemed. A striking scene in the film is one where Childers
steps out of court after one his hearings to see a troop of American soldiers saluting
the American flag in the leafy forest nearby. Childers’ image joining the salute zooms
on that of the raised American flag; the shot is then cut to that of Childers’ saving the
American flag that is being shot by terrorists in Yemen, risking his life in the process.
Childers’ rescue of the American flag is later used in the trial as proof of his
patriotism. The film ends with the redemption of America’s glory and the justification
of its “mistakes”, while celebrating the masculinity of the black man who risks his life
to rescue the American ambassador, the American flag, and American soldiers. The
symbolic battle between nations as presented by the films thus is one about
strengthening the American national identity as invincible. The films eliminate any
doubt about the validity of the United States’ political/military actions, maintaining its
position as a righteous world policeman.

Arab Fundamentalists
Hollywood equates fundamentalism with killing, kidnapping and torture (**Executive Decision, Hostage, Programmed to Kill, The Siege, The Delta Force**). In doing so, “[d]eath... is called forth to secure the commitment” (Fortin 1989, p. 193) of the viewer to the films’ supposed antiterrorist argument. In particular, Hollywood represents fundamentalists executing their terrorist attacks against (American) civilians, including children (**Programmed to Kill, Hostage**), the elderly (**The Delta Force, The Siege**), and women (**Hostage, Programmed to Kill**). This “language of antiterrorism” as Fortin calls it problematizes “issues of world order and conflict... as issues of everyday life. The threats are universal and localized” (1989, p. 189). The fundamentalist terrorist threat then becomes more than an abstract threat to the world; it becomes a threat to “us” and “our” children.

This terrorism is conducted by the figure of the primordial, Oriental “Other” who is at the same time despotic, rich, degenerate, and primitive (**Hostage, The Siege, Three Kings**). The iconic version of this mythical Other (Karim 2000) can be seen in **The Siege**. The opening sequence of the film sees a terrorist sheik riding in the desert. The old, bearded man in a Mercedes recalls the Saudi international terrorist millionaire Osama bin Laden, who has been linked with terrorist activities such as the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993 and its destruction in 2001, and attacks on tourists in Luxor in 1997, and who has blatantly “threatened attacks against Americans who remain on Saudi soil”, as well as declaring in 1998 “the creation of a transnational coalition of extremist groups, the Islamic Front for Jihad against Jews and Crusaders” (Esposito 1999, p. 278). In **The Siege**, the image of the sheik in his traditional dress riding in the desert is juxtaposed with that of American intelligence agents in Western clothing monitoring his journey via radars. The desert is thus used to signify Arabia or the Orient; the sheik’s traditional dress signifies primitiveness; and the Mercedes indicates the vulgar materialism often associated with, for example, the classical Orientalist representation of African tribal kings with leopard skins and Rolexes (**Coming to America**)—all contrasted with the “civilized us”.

Whether the Arab’s political agenda is known or not, the films seem to use Arabs as token enemies, essential for the strengthening of the central hero, and consequently the American nation. In fact, one could easily replace the Arab “bad guys” in those films with anyone from any other background, as their threat and operations are not culture specific. What is fixed about these Arab men though is their essential Orientalist representation as backward, savage and materialist Others. This masculinity manifests itself in the representation of the Arab terrorist who is on a mission to attack the United States. This terrorist can be a plane hijacker terrorizing the elderly and religious figures (**The Delta Force**), women (**Executive Decision**), or children (**Hostage**); a maniac kidnapping an American family (**True Lies**); or a street militant set on attacking American troops (**Navy Seals**).

The terrorists in the films are characterized by extremism, ignorance and lack of sympathy. An illustrative case here is that of Abdo Rifa’i in **The Delta Force**. A rugged, dark figure with a heavy accent, Abdo launches an attack on the passengers and crew of a “TAW” flight (paying homage to the 1985 TWA hijacking). Abdo’s reasons for the hijacking are stated by him as being to fight Zionism and American imperialism. However, Abdo’s ignorance is highlighted when he forces the German hostess to read out the names of those he believes are Jewish passengers, assuming that all Jews are Israelis. With mad hair and gun in hand, Abdo orders his captives to gather near the cockpit, and mistakenly forces a Christian man of Russian origin to comply as well because he thought the man’s name was Jewish. When an elderly
priest tries to calm Abdo down, he also ends up joining the on board “concentration camp”. Abdo’s political case is therefore stripped of any credibility, and instead we are faced with a representation of a ruthless man who poses a threat to the unity and integrity of an all-encompassing American nation, where people from different backgrounds live in solidarity. This is exemplified in the Russian man’s statement that the United States has treated him well.

The representation of the Arab men in general serves to justify the position of the US in world/Middle Eastern politics. However, this justification does not always follow actual political events. An illustration of this can be seen in Navy Seals. Navy Seals deals with the intricacies of the Lebanese civil war, pointing out the large number of participants in this war: the “Shuhada” (a fictional Shiite terrorist group mentioned in the film), Hizbullah, Amal (a Shiite militia), the Druze (a religious group), Israel. Thus, the film pays homage to the idea of Lebanonization—how the situation of Lebanon during the war was one about tribalism rather than nationalism. The film portrays one Shiite militia leader saying they kill in response to American hostilities. However, the film gives no explanation for the complexity of the situation, nor does it provide much historical grounding, leaving the conflict in Lebanon as a given: something emanating from the intrinsic nature of Lebanon. The argument then is a classic Orientalist one about the issue of nature versus culture as highlighted by Hall (1995).

The American intervention in the film is accounted for as through Navy Seals, anti-terrorism marine troops appointed by president Kennedy in 1962, which the film shows are sent to Lebanon in the eighties to claim American missiles. The film fails to tell how the American missiles got to the hands of Shiite terrorists in Lebanon, and does not portray American intervention from any other angle. The Americans’ presence in Lebanon in the eyes of Navy Seals, then, is one linked with a single military activity, and does not necessarily replicate the US’ participation in Middle Eastern conflicts in general. Yet the film’s portrayal of Lebanese militias is not central. None of them is a main character. They just symbolize another threat to the United States, although what they might be capable of is unexplained in the film. This way, the Other masculinity is ambiguous. It operates as an abstract threat to the American nation.

III. Islamic Fundamentalism in Egyptian cinema

The Egyptian films use gender to vilify Israel, the United States and Islamic fundamentalism. They also employ it to strengthen the Egyptian (and Arab) national identity. The main aspect of how gender is used in those films is that the nation, whether American, Israeli or Egyptian, is symbolized by females. Islamic fundamentalism in the films is portrayed from different angles. What links these angles is how fundamentalism in this cinema is portrayed as an Other. The portrayal of Islamic fundamentalists in Egyptian cinema is in line with the way Islamic fundamentalism is viewed by the Egyptian government as a threat to nationalism and to democracy. The films explicitly portray the Egyptian government jailing Islamic fundamentalists. Nasser depicts the way president Nasser imprisoned his Islamic fundamentalist opponents in the fifties after they conspired against him. The way fundamentalists are treated at present is also represented in the films, with Birds of Darkness depicting the government’s arrest and imprisonment of an Islamic fundamentalist political activist. In such films fundamentalists are contrasted with the image of the government, which is portrayed as being “good”. However this does not
negate the existence of government criticism; *Terrorism and Barbecue* criticizes the functioning of government services. But the film at the same time subtly blames Islamic fundamentalists for this malfunctioning through the depiction of an Islamic fundamentalist man who spends his day in the office praying instead of working.

*Idealized masculinity/femininity and Egyptian/Arab nationalism*

The Egyptian films are mainly melodramas focusing on the feminine, private sphere, where family honor and nation honor are signified by idealized, wholesome women. Thus the females symbolizing the nation tend to be devoted mothers who sacrifice for their husbands and their families. Such a representation is a reaffirmation of patriarchy. Kaplan (1992) maintains that the mother who sacrifices for her husband can be “blameless and heroic… she has ceased to be a threat in the male unconscious” (p. 124). Yet, such a paradigm “uncritically embodies the patriarchal unconscious and represents woman’s positioning as lack, absence, signifier of passivity” (Kaplan 1992, p. 124).

Such characteristics are seen in the character Tahiyya, Nasser’s wife, in *Nasser*. Not only is Tahiyya a devoted mother who takes care of her children and husband, she also sacrifices her own personal life with Nasser for his sake at one level, and for the nation at another. Hence, she is ascribed a “heroic” status. This status is maintained in her portrayal as being obedient, yielding to Nasser’s wish to work long hours despite her concern over his deteriorating health. At the same time, she excels at her role as typical housewife, making dinner for Nasser’s guests and disappearing as soon as they start discussing politics. The film’s depiction is closely based on the doctrines of the real Nasser. According to Hatem, Nasser was passively ambivalent “regarding the impact of the roles assigned to women in modern society” (1993, p. 39). Officially, Nasser was committed to “the integration of women in the public sphere” (ibid.): Despite the shortcomings of the unchanged personal status laws, among others, Nasser’s government gave women the right to vote and distributed education and health benefits equally, which women gained from. Yet, Nasser quelled the public Egyptian feminist movement during most of his ruling period, accusing it to be too leftist. This was in line with his suppression of all other independent political groups (Badran 1993).

Nasser’s revolutionary struggle relied upon “using Islam to rally the masses for the liberation of their occupied land” (Majid 1998, p. 327). Majid explains that such a “form of Islam was obviously infused with a patriarchal spirit” (ibid.). As Khan puts it, “these politicized, frequently anticolonial, anti-West movements exert increasing social and sexual control on the symbolic and chaste women centered at the core of an identity politics” (1998, p. 468). Moghadam calls such a type of revolution a “Woman-in-the-Family” model (qtd. In Wilford 1998, p. 6).

A strikingly similar status to Tahiyya’s lies in Naji’s wife in *Naji al-Ali*. We almost only hear her speak when she is talking about her husband’s health and safety. She shuns away from politics, leaving it to her husband, who in turn, seems to ignore her concern about his safety, thus preferring to sacrifice himself for the nation (Palestine) as well.

However, the women’s role in this context is more complex than that of men, in that while men and women may sacrifice themselves for the nation, it is the woman who is a symbol of the nation itself (and/or the nation’s honor) (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1989; Joseph 1999; Wilford 1998). As a woman’s morality extends to the nation, Tahiyya becomes a symbol of the pure, nurturing, virtuous Egypt, just like Naji’s wife is of Palestine. Yet the two women’s political uninvolvment validates
Delaney’s point, “women may symbolize the nation, but men represent it” (1995, p. 190, italics in original).

The female Other/Nation

The Arab-Israeli conflict in the Egyptian context has taken many shapes. The situation has shifted from blatant opposition to Israel pre-1978 to “naturalization” after Sadat’s signing of the Camp David accords in 1978. Sadat started a long process of peace talks with Israel, ending in 1989, with Israel returning Sinai and other Egyptian territory it had occupied some three decades earlier. Yet, while the Egyptian state’s stance towards Israel since then may have been accepting, the general mood in Egypt has not always been the case. Even with peace with Israel being established, this popular anti-Israeli sentiment is expressed in cinema. All the films portraying various aspects of the Arab-Israeli conflict used in this paper represent Israel as an essential enemy. Gender is at the heart of this representation.

These films can be divided into two categories. The first represents the Egyptian national identity as defensive, presenting the venomous Israel as attempting to usurp “our” youth and culture. This is found in Love in Taba, Girl from Israel, Execution of a Dead Man and Trap of Spies. The second category is more defiant in the face of the Israeli threat, as seen in Naji al-Ali, 48 Hours in Israel and Road to Eilat. The films thus tackle the Egyptian national identity from various angles. What links those angles is the casting of Israel as a threat to this identity.

The first set of films was produced either before or just after peace between Israel and Egypt was established. Execution of a Dead Man and Trap of Spies are similar in their treatment of the subject of Egyptian spies working for Israel in the seventies. They both introduce young Egyptians allured by the money and status that being a spy gives. The Egyptians in both films hide what they are doing from their families, who in turn would condemn the spies when they discover what they do. The spies in the films are also similar in their “immorality”. Both films rely on females to represent this immorality. In Trap of Spies, the female Egyptian spy who betrays her country even after being caught by the Egyptian secret service is a blatant representative of Israel’s reliance on duplicity to achieve its aims. She is a symbol of the immoral Israeli state that is attacking “us” from within and that “we” should guard ourselves against.

In Execution of a Dead Man, Sahar also gets caught by the Egyptians yet continues working for the enemy. However, her immorality is amplified in that she gets pregnant after having an affair with another Egyptian spy. Here we see the classical use of premarital sex as a sign of moral degeneration. In this context, women become “the sign for the sexual desires and fears of men. The phantasm recurs, an image of mystery, essential otherness and, very often, violence and deceit” (Mulvey 1989, p. 57).

The other two films present a different story. Away from the world of spies, the films show how Israel’s decadence has infested the Egyptians’ every day lives. Love in Taba and Girl from Israel both tackle the issue of naturalization between Egypt and Israel after peace was established. With Israelis now being able to wander freely in Egypt, the films represent an indirect threat: that of the Israeli women. Set in the newly freed land of Taba in Sinai (previously Israeli-occupied), the films send a warning message to young Egyptian men, showing them that coupling with Israeli women will only lead to their own destruction.
Love in Taba represents this literally. Egyptian men in the film are seduced by Israeli women in the picturesque, newly acquired Taba. Little do they know that the women have left them with a lifelong trace: AIDS. The message is that Israel as symbolized by those women may be attractive yet is diseased, luring “our” men and then destroying them. Girl from Israel sends the same message, with an Israeli woman sleeping with an Egyptian man, promising him money and status if he leaves his family behind and goes to Israel. These women are essentially different from the Egyptian ones, who are presented as the epitome of “morality”, and thus serve as an icon for the “moral” Egypt. This is again seen through the casting of premarital sex as an icon of degeneracy. The Egyptian women do not have sex before marriage; the Egyptian men are attracted to the opportunity of having sex with the foreign women with destructive results. The “moral” Egypt as represented in this film is thus chaste and honest. Israel, on the other hand, is unchaste and deceitful (the Israeli women hide their HIV status in the first film, and pretend to be American in the second). In this way, there is also a focus on the contrast between the artifice of Other women and the “naturalness” of the moral Egyptian women. It can be said that the Other women’s artifice is a symbol of the artificiality of the state of Israel itself as portrayed by the films. Established in 1948, the state of Israel is seen by the majority of Arab countries as an artificial state that they do not recognize—an impostor attempting to replace the “real” Palestine. Thus, sexually aloof Israeli women are used as an embodiment of the enemies of the Egyptian nationalist project.

The emphasis on the use of women as symbols of the moral/degenerate nation continues in the “defiant” films. Both 48 Hours in Israel and Road to Eilat present women who are a symbol of the “moral” Egypt/Arab world. They are both fighters going undercover to Israel in order to accomplish missions that would aid in the preparation for the 1973 October war against Israel. They both use seduction to achieve their aims, alluring Israeli men (Road to Eilat) and working as a showgirl (48 Hours in Israel). Both films use elaborate shots of the women’s bodies in action, with a whole dance sequence in 48 Hours in Israel, and a scene of Maryam’s body being caressed by an Israeli man in Road to Eilat.

Mulvey (1989) argues that women’s sexuality is the condition that makes them visible in a male-dominated world. It is this sexuality that makes those women visible in the male-dominated Egyptian films. The display of the women’s bodies means that they no longer become sex objects for foreign men only (Enloe 1990); in this “nationalist movement”, “the native continues to retain the same essential characteristics depicted in Orientalism, but nevertheless imagines himself [sic] as autonomous, active and sovereign” (Yegenoglu 1998, p. 123). Thus as Yegenoglu (1998) argues, nationalism, sustains the legacy of Orientalism and its view of Oriental women as objects of men’s gaze.

But Maryams’ role is not confined to seduction. The film explains her participation in the struggle by reciting her story. The time line of the film is 1969, during which Palestinians were seeking refuge in Jordan as a result of the harsh conditions of being under occupation. These conditions resulted in several traumas ranging from illiteracy to lack of hygiene, and consequently “heightened political consciousness among [Palestinian] women” (Dajani 1993, p. 114. Some of these women “have broken through traditional prejudices to become fighters” (Holt 1996, p. 190). Road to Eilat follows Sayigh’s explanation that at the end of the sixties there was a “‘revolutionary tide’ generated by the defeat of the Arab armies in 1967” (1993, p. 176). Sayigh points out how Palestinian women underwent military training as members of the Resistance Movement, something which Maryam exemplifies. She
is shown carrying a gun, wearing military uniform just like her male counterparts, and actively participating in missions for the Egyptian Marines (hers is to go undercover to Eilat as an Israeli).

A number of women had joined the Resistance Movement due to the encouragement of male kin (Sayigh 1993), but Maryam in the film, rather romantically, explains that she joined after her brother died for the Resistance. By replacing her brother, Maryam belongs to the stream of “stronger”, more independent women who are just as good as men. Maryam is thus portrayed as being equal to men, which is one of the prevalent themes in the actual Resistance Movement that took place in the late sixties and early seventies. This resonates Majid’s point that “it was the national struggle… that brought women out of their confined, privatized social spaces into the public sphere” (1998, p. 351). Sayigh sees that the Resistance Movement gave women a “promotion” (1993, p. 177) from their previous status as mothers. Krause, on the other hand, points out that the betterment of women is not a spontaneous result of their participation in nationalist movements; instead, Krause argues that “women frequently support nationalist causes because they hope that in so doing they will significantly advance the position of women” (1996, p. 232). Yet, Wilford adds that “fighting alongside men to achieve independence does not provide a guarantee of women’s inclusion as equal citizens” (1998, p. 3). Tasker (1993) adds that the film’s presentation of the incident that has caused Maryam to become a fighter serves as a justification of her actions, and hence a reassertion of her femininity as well.

Maryam’s role in the Egyptian marine’s operation, for most of the film, tends to be complimentary to that of her male colleagues. She spends most of the time encouraging her male colleagues and taking care of them in a sisterly way (for example, she pulls out a photograph of her deceased brother and shows it to one of the men emphasizing the resemblance between him and her brother, and they strike up a quasi-sibling relationship). Moreover, when Maryam is in a military uniform, she does not fight, and when she is carrying a gun, she does not shoot. Thus the film follows Anthias’ and Yuval-Davis’ explanation that “in national liberation struggles… generally [women] are seen to be in a supportive and nurturing relation to men even where they take most risks” (1989, p. 10). Thus, in the film as in reality, the women’s traditional image as mothers and carers still prevails (Afshar 1989; Holt 1996). Moreover, Maryam’s display of emotions serves to tone down her toughness and to “reassure the audience that… [she] is a “normal” woman” (Inness 1999, p. 98). Moreover, looking at how Maryam’s character is portrayed, we find that she generally acts in reaction to men’s schemes: we do not see her planning, but executing her male leaders’ strategies (Tasker 1993; 1998). Thus she can be said to be a sidekick, and not a central character, despite the length of time she spends on screen.

Suad in Naji al-Ali is another woman “fighter”. Suad is perhaps the closest we can get to what Doane calls “woman’s film” (1999, p. 71), whereby the woman is a central protagonist, instead of an object to be looked at. Resisting the proposals of her ex-fiancé, who offers to “protect” her from the perils of her job as a journalist during the Lebanese War, and dedicating herself to the cause of anti-Israeli Palestinian/Lebanese/Syrian resistance, running fearlessly along battlefields, and engaging actively in political debate, she epitomizes female power and confidence. Stacey explains that such a character serves to “[offer] women fantasies of resistance” (1999, p. 201). However, we see her helpless in the hospital staring at Naji who is lying in a coma after his assassination attempt. Tasker argues that the woman’s role in
this representation is merely to provide “an audience for the hero’s suffering, his powerlessness emphasised by her gaze” (1993, p. 26).

Both Maryam and Suad are single women, which might be analyzed as them not accepting “the responsibilities of adult womanhood” (Tasker 1993, p. 14), or as strengthening their tough image (Inness 1999). This is emphasized in the character Suad, who is not only single, but has left her fiancé for her political involvement. She is also a “tomboy” sometimes in the way she acts (and sometimes dresses) (Inness 1999). Maryam also fluctuates between being “feminine” in her swimming suit and “masculine” in her military uniform. This cross dressing can be seen as “part of a negotiation of the presentation of women’s (aberrant) bodies [as fighting bodies] in relation to women’s [traditional non-fighting] role” (Tasker 1998, p.??). It can also be seen as emphasizing their toughness yet reaffirming their femininity (Inness 1999). Suad and Maryam are both the only women in all-male environments. While this can be seen as highlighting their strength, their contrast with the other women in the films, who assume more traditional roles, emphasizes their portrayal as being exceptional women, and hence “their toughness is understood not to be a common trait of women” (Inness 1999, p. 97).

Thus, despite Suad and Maryam being strong characters at face value, they are a “revised stereotype” (Tasker 1993, p. 19) of women in cinema, strong but with their toughness undermined (Inness 1999). Perhaps because Naji al-Ali does not want to “shock” its patriarchal viewers, it is Suad, the only woman in the party, who makes the cake to celebrate Naji’s safety. This not only reaffirms Suad’s femininity, but also undermines her toughness. The same can be said about ?? in 48 Hours in Israel, where she disguises as a dancer. Inness explains this use of disguise by saying that the woman’s “toughness can be seen as only another example of her play with disguises; we need not fear her if we can believe that underneath the tough exterior a “true” woman resides” (1999, p. 35).

As Enloe (1990) argues, this depiction of women in nationalist movements descends from nationalism being masculine and patriarchal to start with. Schulze explains that nationalist movements do not erase the view of women as inferior to men: “when they are needed they may carry arms and fight, but ultimately they are still seen as ‘other’ “ (1998, p. 159). This Otherness is reflected in cinema, and the woman/Other, expectedly weak and powerless, becomes a symbol of the ability of “apparently… powerless people to fight back” (Waylen 1996, p.?). Indeed, the Egyptian nationalist identity is imagined not in terms of “exceptions”, but in terms of understated and supportive femininity, epitomized by Nasser’s wife Tahiyya, as will be discussed in the following section.

The Other tackles another “Western” Other: the United States. The film represents the imperialist United States as a devouring mother. A wealthy American business woman indulging in a world of fraud, Margaret serves as a classical villain: Her unholy alliance with Islamic fundamentalist terrorists, her selfishness, “immorality” and total immersion in a constructed cyber world detach us from any identification with her character, and highlight her contrast with Egyptian purity and simplicity as seen in the character Hanan, Margaret’s daughter-in-law. Margaret sees the Egyptian people as an Other: She is outraged when Adam, her son, donates blood to Egyptian victims of an explosion: “why give blood to ‘them’?”.

Margaret follows the idiosyncratic character of the devouring mother who swallows her children while the father is factually or symbolically absent (for example, Psycho 1960). In The Other, Margaret is obsessed with her son and tries her best to be number one in his life, casting on him the “duty” of compensating her the
romance she never had with her husband. Unlike Hanan’s mother, Margaret does not suffice by sublimating her desire though her son; she projects her unfulfilled desire on him (Kaplan 1992; Mulvey 1999). That preludes Margaret’s latent rejection of Adam’s marriage to Hanan, and her consequent endeavors to undo the multiethnic coupling (Adam being a Christian Egyptian-American and Hanan being an Egyptian Muslim). The inevitable and classical outcome of this drama is that Margaret ends up destroying her child. Throughout the film, Adam and Hanan’s anti-essentialism is caught up between the poles of imperialism and fundamentalism. This entrapment is epitomized in the film’s tragic ending. In front of Margaret’s eyes and amidst a shoot-out between the fundamentalists and government military troops, the loving couple die holding hands.

In the final third of the film, we find out that Margaret is an alcoholic. She is also portrayed as having a derogatory view on other women, whose purpose, in her eyes, is merely for (sexual) pleasure. Margaret’s role is ultimately as a symbol of the United States in all its degeneracy. This symbolism is stressed towards the end of the film in a conversation between Margaret and her Egyptian husband. We hear Margaret reminding him that he would be nothing without her, and at the same time, she declares, “he who leans on me, I bust him”, while throwing her whisky bottle at a TV set. Using the only distinguished avant-garde technique in the film, the scene is then cut to that of missiles being launched—obviously a sign of destruction.

Oppressed masculinity/femininity and Islamic fundamentalism

As if appearing out of nowhere, a sultry woman in a revealing red dress, with big hair, lots of jewelry and lots of makeup appears on the screen. She taps her feet gleefully in a short dance routine, then, to the background of non-diegetic cabaret music, sachays slowly down a flight of stairs, smiling at the people in front of her and swaying the frills of her dress, like a diva who knows is making a big entrance. Jaws drop at the sight of her, with her colorful aura contrasting to the greyish-yellow background of the place and the dull outfits of the crowd. She explains that she was getting interrogated for a prostitution accusation.

Yousra’s above scene from Terrorism and Barbecue is one of many in which her call girl character is used to juxtapose that of the Islamic fundamentalist Rashad (whose jaw drops in the above scene as well). That call girl is a classical example of cinema’s seductive, “immoral” whore. She epitomizes Rashad’s suppressed desires, and is an object of the men’s gaze, both in the film and in the audience. She literally walks into an armed protest against the government led by the ordinary man Ahmad inside the 13-storey ministries complex. She joins the protesters, and when Ahmad asks her why she did that, she answers that she is too shy to say, to which he reacts, “do you feel shy like we do?”. Ahmad’s spontaneous response epitomizes the call girl's “essential otherness” (Mulvey 1989, p. 57), and the expectation that she—being an “immoral” call girl—is all evil and emotionless. “We” in this case are the simple, innocent, moral Egyptian people who, in a comedy of errors, find themselves being labeled as terrorists; whereas she is different, both in the way she looks and in her “immorality”. But this call girl is not used to signify Egypt’s immorality; she is used to point out the Islamic fundamentalist Rashad’s moral dissolution. Gazing hard, eyes almost popping out, at the call girl’s breasts, Rashad “advises” her to “go back to the right direction”, saying “wear a long dress and a veil and you will be virtuous.” The veil thus becomes the passport that will legitimate the fundamentalist’s action on his desire. This desire
remains forbidden otherwise, and all the man can do is stare (the call girl wonders, “is this look on your face that of an adviser? And how come you are not advising the rest of the people?”).

The scenes containing the call girl in Terrorism and Barbecue provide what Mulvey refers to as “scopophilia”, defined as “pleasure in looking” (1999, p. 60). The way the camera traces her footsteps as she walks down the stairs, the way it caresses her face while she looks empathetically at the desperate suicidal man who falls for her, the cheesy non-diegetic music that we hear every time she moves, her husky voice, the slow pace of her speech, her bright red dress and the way she uses her bosom to store her makeup and accessories, all work to emphasize her sex appeal and therefore intensify the gaze of both the male audience and the male characters in the film, especially Rashad (Mulvey 1999; Tseelon 1995). The call girl is therefore used to strengthen Egypt's morality in opposition to the corruption of Islamic fundamentalism.

A similar example is Fat'hi's sexy neighbor in Birds of Darkness. All we know about her is the way, squeezed into a tight dress that emphasizes her ample breasts, she enters Fat'hi's house submitting her chest to Fat'hi to pat in front of his Islamic fundamentalist friend Ali as a form of greeting, goes straight to Fathi's bedroom and starts undressing on his bed, all the way laughing and calling Fat'hi to join her, disregarding the presence of a stranger. Thus the anonymous woman is shown to know her place, which she accepts and submits to robotically and without protest. After Ali asks Fatihi, both lawyers, about her, we find that Fat'hi used to be her lawyer and saved her from prosecution for murdering her husband. The woman has apparently made a deal with Fat'hi: He proves her innocence, and in return, she gives him sexual favors. This immoral woman is later used in the film to juxtapose Ali's suppressed desires with Fat'hi's gratified ones. Ali enters Fat'hi's bedroom only to find the woman's red bra left on the bed.

A comparable ambivalence is found in The Other, where a virtual cyber meeting set in Paris finds the fundamentalist Fat'hallah in the presence of Parisian prostitutes in the Eiffel Tower. Being virtual, we know that the presence of the prostitutes is the product of Fat'hallah's fantasy. However, his overt reaction is saying how wishes to eliminate the presence of these women, whom, in such a realistic fantasy, he can only gaze at. These points ring a bell about Orientalism, and the way the West looks at the Oriental woman as an Other (Kofman 1996). With fundamentalism, the female—in the same way—is still an Other, to be desired and controlled (Tseelon 1995). Moreover, as Khan puts it, “both poles [Islamism and Orientalism] essentialize the ideal Muslim Woman and reduce her to the same symbols and icons” (1998, p. 469).

Fundamentalist men are thus portrayed as looking at women as objects of desire. This desire oscillates between being forbidden and being permissible. Ali in The Terrorist is a man with sexual desires like everybody else. Ali is convinced by his leader that the “possession” of the women of “infidels” is permissible, and so does not hesitate to follow his leader's suggestion and makes a sexual move on his host's daughter, which she blatantly rejects. Ali is also torn between his religious commitment and his voyeurism. In one scene Ali walks down the street behind a woman wearing a tight dress. The camera displays Ali's gazing at her bottom, which the camera then zooms on giving us Ali's perspective. At home, Ali peeps from his window at the woman, now wearing a low cut red dress, and is on a lower floor in the building opposite him. Ali fantasizes about having the sex with the woman—
something that disturbs him and drives him to seek refuge in vigorous exercise and prayer.

Tseelon analyzes such gendered acts of looking/being looked at by saying that in such a distinction “there is an assumption that one position, that of the onlooker, is inherently more powerful than the other” (1995, p. 68). In the first case, the object of the gaze (the daughter) is visible. Tseelon argues that being visible does not mean possessing power: “visible as objectified is powerless, but visible as prominent and dominant [here, Ali] is powerful” (1995, p. 68-69.). In the second case, both the woman and Ali are invisible to each other. In the same way, Tseelon argues, “[i]nvisible as ignored and trivialised is powerless, but invisible as the source of gaze... is powerful” (1995, p. 68). Hence, invisible or not, the woman as an object of the gaze is always powerless.

In this way, the films dealing with fundamentalism in this paper show that in fundamentalism, the woman is commodified. In *The Terrorist*, fundamentalist leader Ahmad promises Ali a wife if he performs a terrorist activity. In *The Other*, the fundamentalist Fathallah promises his friend to let him marry his sister (Hanan) if he helps him get her divorced from her husband. Thus, we see that the woman has no say, and that she is used merely as a product in exchange for services. To summarize, Other women are used in the films as indicators of the corruption of Islamic fundamentalist men. This serves to de-validate their political agenda while at the same time strengthening the Egyptian nationalist agenda that sees Islamic fundamentalism as an Other.

Moreover, the films portray the oppression of Islamic fundamentalism through the image of the silent, veiled woman (Afshar 1996). Almost always, with the exception of religious historical films, any veiled woman in Egyptian cinema is connected with Islamic fundamentalism. Not only are Islamic fundamentalist women always veiled; they are also portrayed in such a way as to present how the “ideal” Muslim woman should be according to fundamentalism. The epitome of oppression can be seen in *The Terrorist*, where such women are shown to be obedient to men. There is a scene in which Ali, the fundamentalist terrorist, knocks on the door of his fundamentalist leader, Ahmad. The first shot is that of Ahmad eating with his 4 chador-wearing wives. We hear knocking on the door, and Ahmad quickly dismisses his wives with a wave of his hand. Words are not necessary for the women to understand where their place in the hierarchy is. In *Birds of Darkness*, however, the oppressed, veiled woman steps out of the house. But that does not take her beyond any “expected” female roles: she is either the fundamentalist lawyer Ali’s secretary, or a messenger who gives Ali a letter from his opponents. These women are contrasted with other women in the film, who are seen a successful business women—even if they had either literally or metaphorically “inherited” their businesses from their fathers/(male) partners. The film tries to put across the message that despite their political “involvement”, fundamentalist women are still oppressed. But it fails to recognize the similar status it gives to the unveiled. Here it is interesting to note that the notion of veiling a la fundamentalism in these films tends to always be that of the long, loose black chador, perhaps because of its dramatic look (as opposed to a mere colorful head scarf, for example, associated with traditional baladi women in Egyptian cinema).

There are multiple assessments of the meanings behind the “uses” of the veil, especially the one about the veil being a sign of resistance (El Guindi 1999). However, the Egyptian films seem to concentrate on only one: the veil as a sign of backwardness and oppression. In all these films, we hear the veiled women speak, but
their relative passivity sends the message that in essence, they are silent. In contrast, the films' depiction of the businesswomen shows that it is unveiling and “liberation” that gives the woman a say in society—hence, being “advanced”. This view is resonated in Nawal El Saadawi's argument that “Islamic fundamentalist groups are trying to push women back to the veil, back home, back under the domination of their husbands” (1997, p. 95, my emphasis).

Despite the veil being one of the most dominant features of Islamic fundamentalism in Egyptian cinema, El Saadawi warns that “there are many other symptoms that are less visible but more dangerous” (1997, p. 95). El Saadawi cites the veil becoming fashionable and women veiling “as an anti-Western protest” (1997, p. 96) as two “symptoms”. It is interesting that El Saadawi uses the term “symptoms” when referring to fundamentalism. Saadawi's terminology is in harmony with the moderate view—epitomized in Egyptian cinema—that sees fundamentalism as a disease. El Saadawi argues that the use of the veil as an anti-Western banner is dangerous as “the authentic identity of a Muslim woman is not to be veiled” (1997, p. 96). Afshar offers the opposite argument that some Muslim women accept the veil as “a liberating, not an oppressive, force” (1996, p. 124), in that it lets women be “the observers and not the observed” (ibid.). But the veil as a means of liberation (also in Enloe 1990) is definitely not depicted in the Egyptian films used in this research.

Nor is the famous statement about the veil and Orientalism. Various authors such as Malek Alloulı (1986) and Meyda Yegenoglu (1998) have discussed the veil as an eroticized sign of a hidden yet desired Orient. The veiled woman thus becomes the epitome of the colonizer's urge to possess the Orient through her evocation of sexual desire. In Egyptian cinema, as in real life, the veiled woman is an Other (Yegenoglu 1998), but is anything but eroticized. Perhaps this is because she is seen as looking—from behind her veil—at the rest of “us” as an evil other as well. This underlies the view of Islamic fundamentalism as a whole, seeing (or at least pretending to see) the otherwise “moderate” society as corrupt and sinful (El Saadawi 1997). Moreover, the veil becomes a sign of the sexual and psychological repression of the fundamentalist identity—an identity deemed foreign to the Egyptian one. Gender is thus one tool in which the films Other Islamic fundamentalism: A case of the Orient having its own Others.

Fundamentalism as an Other serves to emphasize the Egyptian identity as the films see it. Nasser is an icon of this identity in Nasser. He is portrayed as a moderate man who is against corruption, and a religious man who is against extremism. The same applies to the “normal” Egyptian people in the films, the non-fundamentalists. They are portrayed as engaging in various daily activities, from going to work to fighting with their wives, while at the same time enjoying the pleasures of life such as music and alcohol. The films do not condemn the activities of these people, but seem to emphasize them as being the norm.

This norm is then contrasted with the lives of fundamentalists. We do see the fundamentalists performing everyday activities, but even these activities tend to be “different”. While the “normal” Egyptian man has dinner with his wife and children, the fundamentalist man eats dinner with his four wives whom he communicates with they way he would with animals, not speaking to them but shouting and gesturing at them (Terrorism and Barbecue, The Terrorist). While the “normal” Egyptian woman goes to work freely at night, her fundamentalist sister is confined to working as a secretary or a messenger (The Terrorist, Birds of Darkness). In other words, while the modern Egyptian woman is portrayed as being active in her choices, the fundamentalist woman is confined to executing orders made by her male superiors.
The use of women here falls into the general view of women as symbols of the nation and the meter that measures the nation’s morality and modernity. By portraying Egyptian women as modern and independent (and not silent, the way Islamic fundamentalist women are portrayed), yet respectful of values, the message sent by the films is that about the Egyptian identity being as such. Islamic fundamentalists are used as tools to emphasize this moderate, non-corrupt identity.

This parallels Shapiro’s view of films as “identity stories” which form “the basis for a nation’s coherence” (1989, p. 47). Shapiro argues that identity stories by nature must create a boundary between “us” and “them” and “impose a model of identity/difference” (1989, p. 48). A complication of the above model occurs when the Other shares some of the characteristics of “us”. In the case of Egyptian fundamentalists, the facts that they are Egyptian and Muslim, living in the same society as the Egyptian “us” perplexes their projected difference. Yet the films continue to try to demark the two sides. This is done in a variety of ways. Fundamentalists are portrayed as living on the edge of society as opposed to participating in it fully. The films make use of space to emphasize this point. While fundamentalists in Hollywood always operate outdoors (deserts (The Siege), planes (Executive Decision), destroyed cityscapes (Navy Seals)), in Egyptian cinema they are mostly confined to interior landscapes, staying in a dark room while a joyful neighbor laughs and sings outside (The Terrorist), and talking about the outside world with ambivalence while spending all their time indoors (The Other).

The films’ attempt at showing that the fundamentalists are utterly different recalls Shapiro’s argument that “the claim to distinctiveness has required an energetic denial of otherness within.” (1989, p. 54). This denial is part of the effort to preserve a national identity that simply does not recognize the fundamentalist’s right to be represented. Still, the representation of Islamic fundamentalists in Egyptian cinema—from an Egyptian nationalist point of view—remains heavily reliant on “metaphors” which attempt at “fixing” the Egyptian culture as essentially anti-fundamentalist, thereby denying the dynamic nature of culture itself (Shapiro 1999). Shapiro argues that this “alleged cultural unity” is one way in which the modern state seeks legitimacy (1999, p. 112).

Conclusion

Through the above analysis we can see that the two cinemas converge in many ways. A distinct feature of the convergence between the portrayal of fundamentalists in Egyptian and American cinemas is that the two cinemas share the same “set of visual signifiers” (Karim 2000, p. 68) of Islamic fundamentalism: beards, white skullcaps and gallabiyyas, chador-wearing women. Thus, both sides use the same “sensationalist stereotypes” that are “meant to... reinforce a myopic vision of reality” (Esposito 1999, p. 220) about Islamic fundamentalists. The way Islamic fundamentalists are depicted to dress, in particular, serves to portray them “as ‘medieval’ in life-style and mentality” (Esposito 1999, p. 220), in contrast to the civilized “Us”. Also, both Egypt and the US in the films are portrayed as being “defensive, responding with counterattacks” towards the Islamic fundamentalist “instigators” (Esposito 1999, p. 221). This serves to increase the legitimacy of the two states, despite their respective government criticism (The Siege and Terrorism and Barbecue).

Thus, both cinemas seem to rely on clichés in their representations of “us” and “them”. In this sense the two cinemas can be said to be colonial towards Islamic
fundamentalists, constructing the colonized (the fundamentalist) as a degenerate Other in order to justify their conquest of this figure. In their construction of the fundamentalist as an Other, the two cinemas seem to project the fundamentalist image as “a fixed reality which is at once an ‘other’ and yet entirely knowable and visible” (Bhabha 1983, p. 21). Both cinemas use similar techniques in their treatment of this Other. One is their reliance on the “myth of historical origination—racial purity, cultural priority” (Bhabha 1983, p. 26). The two seem to present the fundamentalists as alien and inferior to their culture, which in turn they see as being pure and uniform. They also rely on the ideas of lack and difference in their portrayal of fundamentalists, the latter lacking “our” morals and being essentially different from “us”. At the same time, the cinemas’ representations of fundamentalists are complex and paradoxical: the fundamentalist is “mystical, primitive, simple-minded and yet the most worldly and accomplished liar, and manipulator” (Bhabha 1983, p. 34).

Both Egyptian cinema and Hollywood use their Others to strengthen their respective national identities. In her analysis of the extremism of P. Hansen, Ien Ang warns that the danger lies in how any such argument is too essentializing. For Ang, “the national... is not to be defined in terms of ‘identity’ at all, but as a problematic process; the national is to be defined not in terms of the formulation of a positive, ‘common culture’ or ‘cohesive community’ but as the unending, day-to-day hard work of managing and negotiating differences” (2000, p. 9). This is the climactic link between the Hollywood and the Egyptian films. In their strong national parade, both tend to construct communities devoid of Others. And this is where the two sides end up telling different versions of the same subjective “Truth”, and where the “East” and the “West” seem not to be divided that much after all. Thus, Said’s discourse on Orientalism is complicated as the East tries to exclude a part of itself as an Other just like the West excludes it.

Both cinemas rely on gender as a tool by which the two nations define themselves and others. The way masculinity or femininity is represented in the films can dictate political statements. In Hollywood, as we have seen in the context of Middle Eastern politics, gender has been used to vilify the Other Arabs. A similar situation exists in the Egyptian films, with women being the battleground on which political contests are fought. Just like the male stands in for the nation in the Hollywood films, gender is manifested in the Egyptian ones in the use of females as symbols of the nation. Whether it is the “immoral” West or the “moral” Egypt/Arab world, it is women who bear the nation’s honor. The women however remain an Other in a nationalism built on patriarchy. Despite their “active” participation in political struggles, the women are considered as outsiders who belong to the private sphere of the home, and not the public sphere of politics. Yet we can argue that the generic slant of each cinema has predisposed the construction of the nation as male in the American action films, and as female in the Egyptian melodramas.

While the representations of the enemies in the two cinemas may differ, with the American films portraying primordial yet submissive Others and the Egyptian films portraying essential materialist and sexually permissive ones, the two films rely on gender to convey those messages in a similar manner. Thus, the list of Others in the films grows. Not only is the “Orient” an Other according to Hollywood; the Orient itself has its own Others, signified by either indulgent women (the West) or repressed ones (Islamic fundamentalists).

At the same time, it is important to pay attention to the way the nation is configured in both cinemas. The female nation of Egyptian cinema and the male
nation of Hollywood represent clashing political and cultural stances. The American focus on individuality and consequently individual freedom is absent from the Egyptian agenda. While the latter’s agenda is more consumed with issues of familial/national morality that are manifested in the feminine subservience to this larger-than-one’s-life cause, the American nationalist agenda in the films focuses on the other extreme, the masculine crusade for freedom. Hollywood thus has both created and appropriated what can be seen as global narrative transparency, setting its individualism stories as a striking, more resonant contrast to Egyptian cinema’s apparent totalitarianism. That is not to say that the two cannot overlap, as argued above. Rather, the divergence in national and political imagery represents a difficulty in establishing an understanding between the two nations. What is lacking here is dialogue, an approach that would recognize that images are constantly renegotiating (nationalist) identities, and that identities themselves are constantly restructured. Instead the two cinemas have a black and white nationalist nature, revolving around a strong East/West dichotomy.

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