Khul’ divorce in Egypt: public debates, judicial practices, and everyday life
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3 Films and cartoons: the second pen

3.1 Presenting: “urūdu khul’an”

1919: The year in which the first woman becomes active in politics

1958: Dr. Hikmat Abu Zayd becomes the first female minister in Egypt

1975: The release of the film urūdu Hallan leads to a modification of PSL

2001: Maha al-Shanawi becomes the first Egyptian woman who divorces her husband through khul’

These are the opening sentences of the film urūdu khul’an. In the film we see how an upper (middle) class woman by the name Maha al-Shanawi arrives home from work only to find her apartment in chaos. Her husband, who arrived before her, is very angry and castigates her for not taking care of her household and children (who were responsible for the chaos). She wants to tell him that she has won a prize for being the best teacher of her school but her husband, Tarik, does not want to hear about her work again. “Your children should succeed, not you,” he tells her and he forbids her to work again. Besides that he tells her that his uncle and his nephew from the village will be paying them a visit that night. While Maha prepares a meal for the visitors Tarik tells his nephew who will marry soon that the most important thing in marriage is that he will become ragil il-bayt (man of the house). “Kida (like this),” while pointing at Maha who enters the room to serve them tea. The other visitor – Tarik's uncle in gallabiya, who is ‘umda (chief) of an Upper Egyptian village - could not agree more.

The next morning as Maha looks out on the city from her balcony her female neighbour asks her why she is not working. After having listened to her story, the emancipated Samiha, who orders her own husband around, advises Maha to “drive Tarik crazy.”

In the meantime Maha’s younger brother goes to the bank where Tarik is the director. This brother by the name of ‘Amr was supposed to look after the children the day before but since he spent all his time behind the computer the children escaped his attention and subsequently turned the house into chaos. This led Tarik to expel ‘Amr from the house. ‘Amr, however, is not a man to be easily daunted and still approaches Tarik to ask him if he has a job for him at the bank. Tarik refuses.
In the late afternoon Maha takes Tarik and the two boys to the tower of Zamalek. Tarik, who suffers from acrophobia, is bad company until his eyes fall on a female business colleague. He immediately approaches her and greets her heartily. When he comes back he tells Maha that the woman is very nahga (successful). “What about me?” Maha asks him. “I want to work as well. I even have a right to work” she exclaims angrily. Tarik replies by saying that he has a right to protect his family and that her success does not mean anything.

The next morning Maha - accompanied by her brother ‘Amr and her neighbour Samiha - approaches a lawyer to help her divorce Tarik through khul’. The lawyer initially hesitates to accept her case because Tarik is a friend of his. But when ‘Amr tells him that this case will bring him a lot of success since it will be the first khul’ case of the country, he is easily persuaded. The next morning Tarik reads in his newspaper at work that his wife has filed the first khul’ case in the country and it suddenly dawns upon him why everybody at work was trying hard not to burst into laughter. He immediately leaves his office and when he meets the bawwab (doorman) to his apartment building, the latter, cannot control himself and laughs right in his face. To his dismay, Tarik finds out that his house is full of press people who interview Maha about her khul’ case. He shows them all the door.

Tarik’s situation is getting worse as the marital home has changed into a place where Tarik is only designated a small part of the house to sleep and dress in while ‘Amr -the brother of Maha- has arranged that Tarik can only enter the bathroom by entering a security code. When Tarik approaches another lawyer and tells him that he is denied acces to his own bathroom, this lawyer tells him that the law does not mention anything about a bathroom. It does, however, mention that in case of khul’ the wife has custody over the children and has a right to the marital apartment. According to the lawyer, Tarik will only get the dower. “How much did you pay actually?” he asks him anxiously.

In the meantime, we see how a group of fallahin (peasants from Upper Egypt), including the uncle of Tarik, is watching on television how a woman tells the interviewer that she does not care about the twenty-five piasters [which is the dower which she must return to her husband in case of khul’] but that her husband does not understand her and that her job is the most important thing in her life. Tarik’s uncle is shocked to recognize that this woman is the wife of Tarik. Was she not the one who had been submissive when he was recently visiting Tarik’s flat in Cairo? “I was so proud of you, what has happened?” the uncle asks Tarik the next morning after he and a few fellow country men have taken a service taxi to Cairo in order to find out what has happened.

Later in the evening, Tarik, the uncle and the other fallahin visit a qahwa (coffeehouse). After having listened to Tarik’s story, two of them ask in surprise: “can women divorce us through khul’? It is at this point that Tarik’s uncle
suddenly realizes what will happen to him if his own wife would divorce him through *khul’a*. In order to prevent his brothers and sisters from inheriting his land, he had put his land in his wife’s name. While the uncle takes measures to take his land back, Maha’s star is rising and when she gives a press conference in a chic hotel, the crowd recites: *isha tarik wi shuf, maha mish bitkhuf* (Tarik, wake up and see, Maha is no longer afraid of you).

In order to change the tide, the submissive male neighbour (husband of neighbour Samiha) advises his friend Tarik to try to be more romantic in his approach to Maha. “Why should I?” Tarik replies. “If only because of that flat of yours [which Maha is going to take away in the case of divorce].” However, when Tarik tries to be as romantic as he can be, reciting a classical Arab poet and by presenting Maha with a bunch of flowers in front of their childrens’ school, the guard of the school gets suspicious and asks Maha if the man with the broken classical Arabic and the bunch of flowers is disturbing her. Yes, she replies. In the next scene we see Tarik at the police station desperately trying to convince Maha to come there and prove to the police that he is her husband. “Isn’t prison for real men?” she asks him sarcastically. When she finally arrives at the police station, she confirms that Tarik is her husband but adds that he is “hanging.”

When we are taken back to the countryside again, Tarik’s uncle cuts the wires of the satellite disc, after he has noticed several times that his wife is watching television programs in which female-related issues are discussed.

In the next scene, Maha’s classical Arabic turns out to be as bad as that of Tarik and her knowledge of Islam does not fare any better - something which becomes clear when Maha (accompanied by her brother ‘Amr, Samiha and her lawyer) and Tarik (accompanied by his uncle and lawyer) stand in front of the three judges. The judge points out to Maha that the court is obliged to offer the couple a possibility to reconcile their problems whereafter Maha first tries to say something which she has learnt by heart but then takes a piece of paper out of her bag and reads aloud in classical Arabic that she is afraid to cross the limits of God were she to stay married to Tarik.

Back in Upper Egypt, the uncle chases away a female neighbour who reads aloud the newspaper to the uncle’s illiterate wife. The wife is in stitches when she hears the neighbour read her the story of the cloned-sheep Dolly. “We no longer need men,” she tells her husband, “because the female sheep got a baby without the interference of a male.” Notwithstanding his diminishing influence over his wife, the uncle manages to make her sign a document with a thumb-print which entitles him to take back his land.

Meanwhile Maha begins to regret what she has done. Her brother, however, sticks to his guns and in a meeting with Tarik and his uncle he tells them

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24 Most likely Maha was referring to the Arab saying “Prison is for real men” (*al-sign li-il gid’ar*).
that he will be able to solve the matter: *ti’ayinni fi-l-bank, wi tirga’ il-bayt malik* (give me a position in your bank and you will return to your home as a king). Again, Tarik refuses.

In preparation for the last meeting in court, the uncle orders his fellow country men to guard his house and to make sure that nobody [i.e. his wife] leaves the house until he has returned from Cairo. He turns the house into a prison by guarding it by a few dozen of *fallahin* who must ensure that his wife, who is behind bars, cannot leave the house.

In front of the judges Maha tells Tarik that she does not know how she could have let this happen and, much to the horror of her brother ‘Amr, they reconcile. The uncle is happy and invites them to his village. When they arrive in the village, the uncle cannot believe his eyes when he sees that his house has turned from a prison into a venue for a big conference which his wife is presiding. In classical Arabic she tells the large audience of both men and women *fallahin* that women constitute half of society and that this half of society is...While the uncle walks away in despair, Tarik gets angry with Maha for giggling. Maha’s brother ‘Amr comes between them and Tarik, who no longer can control himself, starts a fight with him.

3.2 Is *urīdu khul’an* a continuation of *urīdu Hallan*?

In the opening sentences of *urīdu khul’an* (see 3.1), which are based on reality, Maha al-Shanawi (the wife of Tarik) is presented as the first woman in Egypt who filed for a divorce through *khul’*. The credits of the film show that she is the (special) director of the film. Thus, the main actress in the film and the special director of the film have the same name. This creates the impression that the name of the main female actress in the film is in reality the name of the first Egyptian woman who filed for *khul’* and that the film has strong links to everyday life. There are several other reasons which underline such an assumption. As we have seen, the opening sequences of the film suggest that *urīdu khul’an* stands in a long tradition of women empowerment and that it is a continuation of *urīdu Hallan*. Ashraf ‘Abdalbaqi (who plays Tarik, the husband, in the film) denies that *urīdu khul’an* is the second part of *urīdu Hallan* (Sawt al-umma, 21 November 2005) but he is quick to emphasize that he is not a comedian and that *urīdu khul’an* is predominantly a realist drama blended with comedy (al-sharq al-awsaT, 11 October 2005).

At the same time, however, one cannot escape the feeling that the film is ridiculing *khul’* and that its portrayal of women who want to file for *khul’* does not nearly evoke the same feelings of empathy many viewers felt for Duriya and the other women in *urīdu Hallan*. What to think, for example, of the scene in which Maha is approached in court by an upper middle class woman whose hair is neatly
styled and who wears a lot of make-up and who proudly tells Maha that the
latter’s example encouraged her to put an end to a marriage which only lasted six
months. This starkly opposes the story of Duriya, who endured a bad marriage for
more than twenty years and who only decided to divorce her husband when she
felt she had finished her duty of raising her son. Besides, by having waited for her
son to leave the country (in order to study abroad), she made sure that the latter
would not be exposed to the scandal which going to court entails. Unlike Duriya,
Maha’s two very young children fully witnessed the fights between their parents
and one time they even appeared in court. In fact, in a review of the film it was
claimed that the director of urīdu khul’an –Ahmad ‘Awad- was firm in pointing out
the danger for children and he considered them to be the only victims of these
fights (al-siyāsa al-kuwaytiyya). Furthermore, Maha is not prepared to put her
career on hold in order to fully devote her time and energy to raising her two
children and running the household. Finally, Maha made extensive use of the mass
media to embarrass her husband in front of the nation while Duriya, endowed
with virtue and discretion, decided not to wash her dirty linen in public as a result
of which it was only during a secret session without the public, that she revealed to
the judge part of her reasons for wanting a divorce.

Possibly because of her reluctance to tell the court her full reasons for
divorce, the judge did not grant Duriya a divorce in the end. A divorce would have
changed her life completely as she would have been separated from a husband
who was adulterous, an alcoholic and who even abused her. While Duriya had
“good” reasons for the divorce, that is to say, reasons which would make her
eligible for a regular divorce case, in urīdu khul’an Maha becomes the first woman
of the country to file for khul’ “only” because her husband forbids her to work. I
say “only” because when a husband refuses to let his wife leave the house in order
to work, for the sake of the family for example, this does not constitute a legal
ground on which a wife can file for a judicial divorce. To the contrary, if she
disobeys his command and nevertheless leaves the marital home for work, she
runs the risk of being declared nashiz (recalcitrant) and of losing her alimony.73 In
muHāmī khul’ the picture is even worse. Here we find an incredibly wealthy
woman (played by Dalya al-Buhiri) who wants a khul’ divorce because her
husband is snoring and boring. In this case the marriage only lasted three months.
Arguing that these reasons will never make a judge (who—according to her

73 In an addition to article 1 of law no. 25 of 1920, law no. 100 of 1985 states that the wife will not lose
her right to alimony if she leaves the marital home without the permission of the husband in cases in
which this is allowed by the shar‘a, by ‘urf (custom), by necessity or when she goes out for lawful work.
Unless, the wife has misused this right or when this right is against the interest of the family and the
husband has requested her to refrain from using it (al-jarida al-rasmiyya, issue 27, 4 July 1985, 5). See
also, Fawzy (2004).
lawyer- is likely to also snore himself) grant her a *khul’* divorce, her lawyer Badr (played by Hani Ramzi) pressures her to file a divorce request on the basis of her husband’s *la ya’rif* (literally: he does not know. Here it refers to impotency).

Yet, what most convinced me that urīdu khul’an is critical of urīdu Hallan and women’s divorce rights in general is the scene in which Tarik meets an old man in court (played by ‘Abd al-Mun‘īm Madbuli) who is crying. Full of emotion, the old man tells Tarik that his wife divorced him after forty-seven years of marriage after he made only one mistake, a mistake of which the details are not given in the film. When Tarik searches his pocket for money to give to the old man, in the same way as Duriya wanted to give the old woman some money, the film continues on a supposedly comical note but which is not funny at all. The old man tells Tarik that he does not want his money: “I have a lot of money with me, thirteen piasters (less than two eurocents).” Instead of money he wants a handkerchief from Tarik so that he can dry his tears. When Tarik gives him one, he throws it away because he only wants perfumed handkerchiefs. This scene clearly imitates and ridicules the scene in urīdu Hallan, in which Duriya tries to console the old woman (played by Amina Rizq, 1910-2003) whose husband threw her out of the house in order to marry a younger woman, after a marriage of more than thirty years in which she had been devoted to raising their children and running the household. All in all, one cannot escape the impression that the film suggests that women are self-centered, ignoring their children and their household for the sake of work, and filing for *khul’* for frivolous reasons and/or because they are after their husband’s flat. While this may not be new, *khul’* now makes it impossible for men to exercise their natural authority to correct their wives’ behaviour and to protect the family’s honour, not even when patriarchal authority (symbolized through the uncle from Upper Egypt) intervenes.

3.3 Cartoons and films: notions of the “self” and the “other”

In chapter 2 I have mainly focused on the criticism in the press which targeted women activists, the government and the Sheikh of al-Azhar, and in which all were accused of being lackeys of the West and of sacrificing the principles of Islam for international donor money. However, both the fact that opponents often

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76 This is not in line with the idea behind *khul’* in which a woman does not need to prove to a judge her reasons for the divorce. It is enough that she claims that she hates living with her husband and that she is prepared to pay back the dower and renounce her financial rights.

77 Under the Egyptian legal system, impotency makes women eligible for a judicial fault-based divorce.

78 In a review of urīdu Hallan, Yusuf criticizes this scene since it was supposed to make people laugh while in actuality it did not make people laugh at all (al-‘arabī, 13 November 2005).

79 Although Amina Rizq never married herself, she often played the role of mother and even became the standard for the role (Darwish 1998, 22). According to Darwish, the great directors of Egyptian cinema “...saw in her face a strong peasant beauty which expressed the grace of Egyptian womanhood” (ibid).
criticized the law for only being for rich women and the discussion of *khul’* in Parliament already revealed that this was not the only criticism dominating the debate on *khul’*. In fact, in chapter 2 it seemed as if the controversies centered on conformity with Islam, Westernization and foreign influence, but it cannot be denied that deeply engrained beliefs about the perceived irrationality of women and men’s divinely ordained superiority were also greatly emphasized. The following statement of Su’ad Salih, a female scholar of *fiqh* of al-Azhar, not only shows that she feels that *khul’* is threatening the maintenance-obedience relation, it simultaneously makes clear that female religious scholars also had a voice in the public debate on *khul’*.

This well-known TV preacher and former dean of the women’s college of al-Azhar University aired her opposition to the law on various occasions. She claimed, among other things, that women who travelled without the permission of their husband were *nashiz* (recalcitrant) (al-sha’b 25 January 2000, 3) and that Islam accorded husbands *qiwama* (guardianship) and wives *ta’a* (obedience) (al-aHrār 1 January 2000). The issue of women’s obedience and men’s guardianship was a recurrent issue of heated discussion in newspapers, among the general public and, as we have seen, in the Parliament. It was often argued that women were too emotional to be given the right to unilateral divorce. They would only use it for frivolous reasons, worse even, to marry or run off with a more handsome or richer man and in the process they would destroy their families and undermine social stability.

Women activists rejected this critique. Where some like Hoda Badran (head of an Egyptian NGO by the name The Alliance of Arab Women) had claimed that the law would merely benefit rich women who could afford to forfeit their financial rights (see 2.1), responding to the heavy anti-women criticism the law was exposed to, she wondered when they would finally get away from the general stereotype that pictures men as strong and rational beings and women as weak and emotional creatures. According to her, this transpired on the insistence of several MPs to extend the legal arbitration period from sixty days to ninety days. In this way it could be verified if women really insisted on having a divorce, given that women were very impulsive and might apply for *khul’* only to regret it later, something which the film *urīdu khul’an* seems to confirm as the wife Maha states in the final court session that she regrets her wish to divorce her husband.80 Hence, where opponents to the law as well as some women’s activists had condemned *khul’* for being a law for rich women only, with regard to the anti-women rhetoric surrounding *khul’* they fiercely opposed each other.

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80 In this way, the film seemingly shows the success of reconciliation in divorce cases that are instigated by women. In chapter 5, I will elaborate in more detail on reconciliation in general and in the film *urīdu Hallān* and *urīdu khul’an* specifically.
Cartoons

This time, however, not only al-wafd and al-sha’b newspapers took up their pens to predict what would happen if women were given the right to unilateral divorce. State-owned newspapers such as al-ahrām and al-jumhūrīya which had refrained from using anti-Western and anti-governmental rhetoric, ran headlines also expressing strong criticism on women and khul’. Through khul’, men would turn into women and women would turn into men. At least this was the message which cartoons bestowed on the general public.81 One-panel cartoons provided a very popular means for those opposing reform of divorce rules to express their worries about the new “khul’ law.”

They often depicted brutish women who were twice as big as their husbands. Sometimes these huge women also had moustaches while their small and insignificant husbands were performing typically female designated tasks such as pushing prams and doing the dishes, while other cartoons depicted husbands obeying their wives and being punished by them. Some cartoons even depicted men being pregnant. All cartoons communicated the same message: once women were given the right to unilateral divorce, society would be turned upside down.

Figure 1: Cartoon “The right of the strongest”

The husband says to his wife: “This is not the right of khul’, this is the right of the strongest!”

‘Amr ʿUkasha, al-wafd, 31 January 2000

81 Although most cartoons were produced by al-wafd newspaper, many others were produced in (state-owned) newspapers and magazines as well.
What I found interesting is that the cartoons almost always portrayed women as westernized Egyptian women wearing no veil but instead wearing tight garments and walking on high heels. By not depicting veiled women and women in gallabiya-s or the typically muwazzafin outfits,⁶² it was as if the message they wanted

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⁶² The typical muwazzafin outfit often consists of a long, wide skirt; a long blouse that covers both the arms and part of the upper legs; and a headscarf which covers the hair, the neck and sometimes the
to communicate was that *khulʾ* would only be used by westernized Egyptian women from the upper class.\(^3\)

By presenting *khulʾ* women as classy and frivolous, the cartoons left no room for women from other backgrounds to apply for *khulʾ*. Looking at these cartoons, one could hardly imagine their good reasons for divorce.

Figure 3: Cartoon “The story of Nabawiya”

The story of Nabawiya and the voting card.

The Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights 2000, 41

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larger part of the chest and the back as well. Generally this outfit is quite plain and made of synthetic fabrics.

\(^3\) In comparison, I found it interesting that a women’s NGO (The Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights) had published a series of booklets by the title “Stories of Nabaweya” in which they used cartoons and simplified language to explain basic political and electoral rights to illiterate women. The figure of Nabawiya had to resemble the women of their target group and as such was depicted wearing the veil and a *gallabija* (see figure 3).
Figure 4: Cartoon “The constitutionality of khul’”

The High Constitutional Court confirms the constitutionality of the “khul’ law.” The wife says to her husband: “If you step out of this room, and go to the coffeehouse..I will divorce you through khul’.

al-jumhūriya, 22 December 2002
Although the cartoons did not fail to bring about a smile, after all it fits the genre of cartoons to present things in a comical way, they simultaneously suggested a society at risk in which using western dress was suggestive of moral decline and representative of the dominance of the West. In a study on cartoons in the Ottoman cartoon space of 1908-11, Brummett argues along similar lines when she states that “...[cartoons] imagined the extent to which the familiar old society would be altered by the new constitutional regime and by the increasingly pervasive influences of Europe” (1998, 17). The new was often embodied through the figure of the super-westernized Ottoman woman and dress markers in particular were used to signify a division between women who were supportive of the nation and those who threatened it (ibid).

We do not find this in Egyptian cartoons during the interwar period since they depicted Egypt as what Baron calls a “new woman” (2005, 70-1). This new woman was modestly dressed, with a head-scarf and a cloak but underneath her cloak she wore contemporary European dress and high-heeled shoes. Later, Egypt as a woman removed her veil and her cloak and dress became shorter. In this case, European inspired dressmakers were used to give Egypt an image of being educated, sophisticated and urban (ibid). Comparing these interwar period cartoons to the cartoons on khul’, the cartoons from the interwar period depict Egypt as a woman and the aggressor (England and Egyptian leaders) as male
while the cartoons on *khul'* depict Egypt as male and the aggressor as the Westernized Egyptian female. However, I also found a 1935 cartoon depicting a woman who looked like the women in the cartoons on *khul’*. This woman was also unveiled, walking on high heels, and using lipstick. The cartoon was accompanied by the following statement: “Brutish wives have been a favourite theme of cartoonists with irony (or misogyny) on their mind (al-Ahram Weekly 13-19 January 2000).”

![Figure 6: Cartoon “The new marriage contract”](image)

The husband (the people) says about divorcing his wife (the government): “I will never be able to divorce from her...... the authority is in her hands..!!!”

‘Amr ‘Ukasha, al-wafd, 13 June 1994

The cartoon presented above also shows that depicting Westernized upper class Egyptian women as the aggressor is not new in Egyptian cartoon history. This cartoon was published in al-wafd (13 June 1994) in the context of the introduction of a new marriage contract. Hence, the cartoons I have elaborated on above have in common that they all use sexual relations as metaphors for politics, but the way they represent the gender order differs. That is to say, in some cases women are presented as the aggressor and men as weak, while in other cases, women are weak and passive and men aggressive.
In addition, it is interesting to mention that in the Ottoman cartoons of 1908-1911, we find that the honour of the nation was not only embodied but also defended by the figure of the female peasant.\textsuperscript{84} Egyptian women-magazines of the turn of the twentieth-century also provide examples of female heroines. One of the most popular female heroines was of Western origin. Her name was Jeanne d’Arc (Joan of Arc) and even during the period following 1919, “the high point of popular resistance to Britain’s imperial presence,” Jeanne d’Arc’s biographies often featured in women’s magazines (Booth 1998). Being of peasant origin, Jeanne d’Arc “offered an impeccable representation of the peasant as pillar of the nation” (ibid, 188) in a period in which ‘Egyptian nationalism was heavily imbued with a “salt-of-the-earth” romanticism’ (ibid). The image of Jeanne d’Arc as both a woman and a peasant served to show what nationalism would lead to: the uplifting of peasants and the training of women (ibid, 189).\textsuperscript{85}

Apart from foreign female heroines such as Jeanne d’Arc, Egyptians also have Egyptian female heroines such as the wife of Sa’ad Zaglul who is called the mother of all Egyptians or the mother of the nation, after she continued the struggle for national independence following her husband’s and other leaders’exile (cf. Baron 2005, 78; Hatem 2000, 39). In sculpture it was also the fallaha (peasant woman) who emerged as the representation of the nation. The naḥdat misr (The Awakening of Egypt) forms an example in point (Baron 2005, 68-9). In the cartoons on khul’, however, we do not find a fallaha defending the nation. In fact, there is no hero(ine) at all. On the contrary, as we saw earlier, these cartoons portray the modernized Egyptian woman as the aggressor and the small and helpless Egyptian man represents the nation in danger. In the next section we see whether the absence of a hero(ine) applies to the films as well.

Films

In muḥāmī khul’ there is a slight notion of a heroine embodied in the figure of the mother of the lawyer Badr. In contrast to her husband, Badr’s mother is capable of connecting with the world of Rasha, the female main character (played by Dalya al-Buhiri) who wants to divorce her husband because he is snoring and who later falls in love with her lawyer Badr. Badr and Rasha even think of marriage and for that reason they are invited by Badr’s father - ‘umda (chief) of a village in Upper

\textsuperscript{84} This, I think, is also the case in Europe. Good European examples are the famous painting Liberty Leading the People (1830) by Delacroix (1798-1863) in which Liberty, in the form of a half-draped woman, leads the people in the French revolution of 1830, as well as the Peasants’ Revolt series of Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945), one of German’s most famous artists, which also show a woman who leads the troops.

\textsuperscript{85} Television serials from the end of the twentieth century also intended to uplift peasants and women (Abu-Lughod 2005, chapter three and four).
Egypt - to visit the village for three nights. Rasha, however, has never visited Upper Egypt and her tight clothes, leaving her shoulders and arms uncovered, are clearly out of place in the village. The mother of Badr, however, understands that women in Cairo dress differently from women in Upper Egypt, and that they use another language which Badr’s mother resorts to when welcoming Rasha. “How are you?” she asks Rasha in English with a heavy accent after which Rasha happily replies, also in English: “Fine, thank you.” The scene is significant since the only English that is otherwise used in the film is spoken by Rasha (as well as the female dancers and singers who perform at the numerous parties which Rasha organizes). Add to this the fact that the mother of Badr is the only peasant woman in the film who actually speaks, which seems to me an indication of her being an important figure. However, even Badr’s mother cannot prevent the scandal that was caused when Rasha, who cannot endure the heat and the mosquitos, puts on her bikini and takes a swim in the Nile.

Maha (played by ‘Ula Ghanaym), the female colleague of Badr who is in love with him could be highlighted as a female heroine as well. Like Badr’s mother, she is able to adjust to a different world, this time to the world of an Upper Egypt village. In order to put a stop to the romance between Badr and Rasha, Maha travels all the way from Cairo to the village in Upper Egypt. She appears in the village right after Rasha’s swim in the Nile has caused a scandal and has put the ‘umda - Badr’s father - in a very awkward position. By wearing a loose dress and a small veil Maha show that she knows how to dress according to Upper Egypt standards. She even saves Badr’s father from total embarrassment in the village and therefore seems to be an ideal marriage candidate for Badr. Badr, however, is not interested in marrying her and instead still prefers “to eat icecream with bread,” a phrase often used by Maha to blame Badr for dating and being maintained by women who are from a higher class.

Instead of presenting a female heroine who defends the nation, the film seems to suggest the opposite, namely: that the Egyptian nation is threatened by a westernized Egyptian woman. In this light it merits note that, in a study on popular Egyptian cinema, Shafik claims that in films which picture the encounter with Europeans or the Western Other, the Other is often imagined as female herewith indirectly re-coding the Egyptian nation as male (2007, 90-1). The difficulties which it takes to maintain a male self in such a context, engenders a kind of popular allegory of impotence (ibid, 93). Does male impotence also feature in muHāmī khul’, uridu khul’an and the cartoons, or do the films and the cartoons – in the absence of a female heroine - provide a picture of a male hero alternatively? In the case of cartoons the latter question must be answered in the negative. As we saw earlier, men are either not present or suppressed by female aggressors. What about the films?
3.4 Film and space: men’s maintenance and women’s obedience

Where the cartoons sketched a picture of men becoming women and women becoming men, and used dressmakers to suggest that khul’ was an external threat, from the criticism in the newspapers it became clear that notions of man- and womanhood were closely related to the concept of space as the proper place of men and women in society was to be understood literally. The term place was related to men’s role as providers in return for which women had to remain obedient, meaning that they should not leave the house without their husband’s permission. Hence, men’s proper place was outside the house where they would apply themselves to their task of earning a living for their families while women’s proper place was within the four walls of the marital home where they would perform their divinely inspired duties of mother and housewife.

The theme of space is significant in the film urīdu khul’an. In the beginning the husband takes on the role of a male patriarch who decides on his wife’s freedom of movement. In Egypt such a person is often given the nickname “Si Sayyid”, a reference to a character of Naguib Mahfouz’s trilogy who severely punished his wife who, without his permission, left the house in order to visit the shrine of a saint. I will return to the character of Si Sayyid later. At this moment it suffices to note that Tarik castigates his wife for neglecting their children and the household and no matter how much she excels in her job as a teacher, after their children turned the house into chaos during her absence, he forbids her to leave the house in order to work. Reluctantly Maha obeys her husband and so the maintenance-obedience relation is re-established. This situation is well approved of by Tarik’s uncle - ‘umda (chief) of a village in Upper Egypt. Soon after, the tide is turned since Maha starts to rebel against her husband.86

If we compare Maha to Duriya, we witness that from that point onwards their lives start to develop in different directions. First of all, while Maha stays in the marital home, Duriya is the one who leaves it, prompting her husband to lodge a ta’a complaint. In urīdu khul’an, a totally different picture emerges as it would make little sense for the husband Tarik to initiate a ta’a complaint since Maha had not left the marital home. To the contrary, she had obeyed his command to give up work and to stay at home to take care of the children and the household. Besides that, the legal consequence of a husband winning a ta’a claim is that the wife no longer has a right to be maintained by her husband. In the case of khul’, depriving

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86 Writer, scenarist and cinema critic Khayr Allah is of the opinion that the wife Maha is not rebelling against her husband. According to her, Maha is a superficial personality who only files for khul’ because her neighbour Samiha and her younger brother ‘Amr want her to do so. In her eyes, Maha is merely a person who follows and who does not really oppose the behaviour of her husband (ākhir sā’a 16 November 2005).
a wife of her right to maintenance does not make sense since *khul‘* is an absolute renunciation of all of a woman’s financial rights in the first place. Instead of leaving the house, Maha and her brother humiliate Tarik by turning him into a stranger in his own house. He is forbidden to enter the bathroom and the only place where he is tolerated and where he can sleep is a small corner of the house. In this sense the films resemble the cartoons where the perceived disturbance of the maintenance-obedience relation was also visualised by making use of the technique of gender reversal.

However, there is more to come. Like Maha, Duriya did not care about the financial consequences of a *ta’a* complaint but the humiliation Duriya felt when she needed to hide from her husband and the police is in no comparison to what happens in *urūdu khul’an* where, it is not Maha, but her husband Tarik who runs into problems with the police. We see Tarik at the police station where he is charged with harassing his wife. He tries to talk his way out by telling the police that he is the director of a respectable bank. This is to no avail as the only one who can help him out of trouble is Maha who needs to declare to the police that Tarik is her husband. She does tell the police that he is her husband but that he is a “hanging” husband. This scene deprives Tarik of his manhood in a way far more embarrassing than if Tarik had been confronted with a wife who had left the house without his permission. In another scene it gets even worse. Tarik is faced with the threat of expulsion from his own house as his lawyer tells him that his wife who has custody over their two small children is legally entitled to the marital flat in case of a *khul‘* divorce. The male patriarch Si Sayyid had lost control over his wife and children and was no longer *ragil al-bayt* (man of the house). What the future has in store for such men is illustrated by juxtaposing Tarik and Maha’s marriage with that of the neighbours Samiha and her husband. Samiha clearly is the one who has on the pants and her husband does everything to please her and make her comfortable. In this marriage, the gender roles are turned around which is symbolized by the fact that Samiha is in control of the remote control. When her husband is watching soccer, she simply grasps the remote control out of his hands in order to watch a woman’s talkshow, ignoring her husband’s objection to this. Tarik, still the “man of the house”, did the opposite: when his wife was watching a woman’s program, he took the remote control and started watching a soccer game. The same applies to the uncle from Upper Egypt who, by cutting the wires of the satellite disc, also wanted to remain in control of the television.

In *muHāmī khul‘* the theme of manhood is worked out more directly. It is not the remote control but the twining of a moustache which serves as the ultimate

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87 This is not totally true as law no. 100/1985 already states that in divorce cases a husband has a legal obligation to provide his wife and children with a dwelling which is of the same standard as the original marital home.
symbol of virility. Rasha, the female main character who wants to divorce her husband through *khul’* because he snores, owns the largest fashion company and confection factory in Egypt. Fashion-minded as she is, she wants her lawyer –Badr- to dress in a more modern way in court. She tells him that her lawyer must be the most elegant lawyer in the country and for that reason she also wants him to shave off his moustache. The next morning we see Badr entering his office in a fashionable white suit and without a moustache. When his colleague Maha sarcastically asks him whether he has shaven off his moustache, he asks her if there is anything wrong with that, after which she replies: “*il-‘aib innanak ta’ish ‘ala ‘araq il-niswan*” (it is a shame that you live of the sweat of women). Here Maha makes it very clear that it is wrong for a man to be maintained by a woman. By linking the moustache to a husband’s legal and social duty of maintaining his wife, it is suggested that a man without a moustache is not a man. This would be in line with what Mernissi says: when masculinity is defined as the capacity to provide the family with a salary, then this condemns men who, for whatever reason, are not able to work, “to perceive economic problems as castration threats” and “...a woman who earns a [bigger] salary will be perceived as either masculine or castrating. If the privileges of men become more easily accessible to women, then men will be perceived as becoming more feminine” (1987, 171).

In light of this I found it interesting that the female main character in *muHāmī khul’*, Rasha, who was making a lot more money than the lawyer Badr and who also had a much bigger car than he, was not depicted as masculine at all. In effect, the camera constantly shows a picture of a slim and, I would say, very female body. One of the film reviewers even said that Dalya al-Buhiri (who plays Rasha in the film) moved in front of the camera as a beautiful, tender and attractive girl (al-akhbār 2 October 2002). To a lesser extent the same applies to Maha in *urīdu khul’an*. Hence, notwithstanding the fact that both these women made their own money and did other male designated tasks, in contrast to the often ugly, plump and brutish women depicted in the cartoons, these two women were depicted as attractive.

This was different with the two male main characters. After Badr the lawyer had his moustache shaven off, his father literally addressed him by using the term *bint* (daughter), a clear reference to his physical integrity as a man being put into question. Hence, we do find Badr performing all kinds of female designated tasks such as ironing and also enjoying all the luxuries which the wealthy Raha has to offer him, personifying Badr as emasculine. This shows that *khul’* brought to light the problem of men’s sexual identity. In fact, both films seem to imply that the best place to find masculinity is not necessarily found in men. This manifestation of trans-gendered or differently gendered bodies is an effect of
the sex/gender system in crisis and transition (Noble 2004, xxvii). No man is automatically granted the status of manhood as the link between anatomy, identity and authority no longer holds (Noble 2004, iv-v). In the 1960s of urīdu Hallan, Duriya’s husband could still get away with behaving as a Si Sayyid. In urīdu khul’an the husband Tariks initially also sets out to behave as a Si Sayyid. This time, however, his bullying is backfiring as his wife starts to rebel with unexpected consequences. On this basis, I would argue that the films’ two male main characters: Tarik the husband and Badr the lawyer, do not provide the viewer with a picture of an Egyptian male hero. To the contrary, what they seem to reveal is Egyptian manhood in crisis and how it needs to be rescued by the peasants of Upper Egypt. In the following section, I analyze whether male peasants can be presented as saviours of the nation in general and Egyptian manhood in particular.

3.5 Film and space: the city- countryside dichotomy and religion

The city and the countryside

From what has been said above, it has become clear that space and its relation with behaviour is an important issue. Where in urīdu khul’an space was related to the house which became a live embodiment of change, there is a second way in which the concept of space is used in both the films muHāmī khul’ and urīdu Hallan and which is absent in urīdu Hallan and the cartoons. This time space is related to the city-countryside dichotomy, a dichotomy which Abu-Lughod also analyzes in Dramas of Nationhood, albeit in a different way. This will become clearer below.

In both muHāmī khul’ and urīdu khul’an it is the Upper Egypt countryside which takes up a prominent role in the lives of the main actors. Where in the written debate on khul’ the arguments put forward showed an attempt to redefine male superiority on a religious basis (it was often maintained that men’s superiority over women is divinely inspired and is proven by the fact that men are rational individuals, whereas women are highly irrational and emotional beings, the films do not explicitly speak of religion and instead seem to use the figure of the peasant to provide an image of the real man.

In muHāmī khul’ we see how Rasha and the lawyer Badr fall in love with each other. When Badr wants to marry her, Badr’s father, who is the ‘umda (chief)

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88 In Masculinities without Men, Noble argues that the twentieth century will be remembered as an interesting time for masculinity in which plays a central role the question as to whether we will need “more Ironing Johns, not more Iron Johns” or “more Iron Johns, not more Ironing Johns” (2004, iv). A good example of proponents of the “More Iron Johns, not more Ironing Johns” is the book The Dangerous Book for Boys which took the United Kingdom by storm in 2006. Proclaiming to be a guidebook for “every boy from eight to eighty” it emphasizes the rough nature of boys and their difference to girls. In the film muHāmī khul’ where the lawyer Badr irons his own clothes, the message is clear too: “more Iron Johns, not more Ironing Johns.”
of an Upper Egypt village, insists his son and his fiancée pay a three-night visit to the village. Although this is uncommon in Egypt, the father does not want to travel all the way to Cairo to see her and by inviting her to their village he wants to test whether she will be able to stand the mosquitos. As we have seen, Rasha cannot stand the heat and the mosquitos. Unable to resist the enticing cool water of the Nile which runs through the village, she puts on her bikini and takes a swim in the river. Her action causes a scandal and Badr realises that their relation will not last very long. This is exemplified by the scene following the bikini-scene in which we see how Rasha packs her bags while Badr tells her that “‘andina (we)…” whereafter she surprisingly asks him ”’anduku? (plural form of you)" Apparently Badr has come to realise that he cannot erase his roots which are still in the village. Rasha knows it well enough and, while Badr stays behind in the village, Rasha drives her big air-conditioned car back to where she belongs in cosmopolitan Cairo.

In urīdu khul’an the Upper Egypt countryside is also juxtaposed with urban life in Cairo and again we see how the saviour of the male main character (Tarik the husband) is a ‘umda from a village in Upper Egypt (Tarik’s uncle). After the uncle witnesses on television how his nephew is in danger of becoming the first makhlu’ of the country,88 he - like the father of the lawyer Badr - immediately travels in a service taxi from the village to Cairo. In both cases, the two ‘umda-s arrive in Cairo only to find the two male main characters bereaved of their manhood. As we have seen, in the case of muHāmī khul’ this is symbolically expressed by the scene in which the father addresses his son by the words “fayn shanabak, ya binti” (where is your moustache, my daughter). In short, in the two films the countryside represents the site where men and women still behave in accordance to a sex/gender system which is dictated by the maintenance-obedience relation and in which women need to be controlled or, if necessary, locked up (in urīdu khul’an) by their husbands. The countryside becomes the site of all that is authentic and for that matter good while in the city we find women who work outside the home and who are no longer controlled by their husbands, worse even, whose husbands have lost their authority. Thus, the city has become the site of all that is modern and thus bad.

In a study on politics and television in Egypt, Abu-Lughod shows how the Egyptian state promotes its modernizing project through television melodramas in which rural backwardness and urban modernity are presented as bad and good respectively (2005, chapter three). This notion of modernity is in opposition to the notion of modernity used in the two films. This becomes clearer when we compare the two films to state sponsored television campaigns which endeavour to eradicate: illiteracy; marriages of old men to young girls; and female circumcision. These

88 Makhlu’ derives from the same verb as khul’ and is used to refer to husbands who are divorced by their wives through khul’. It is very humiliating for a man to become a makhlu’.
campaigns, which were often broadcasted when I was doing fieldwork in 2003-4, showed how modernity and backwardness are situated in the city and the countryside respectively. One of the films starts in the countryside where a young girl is in tears because she cannot attend school. Through the help of a “modern” dressed female teacher without a veil, she is finally able to learn how to read and write. A few years later she is again in tears, this time because a man of her father’s age and who is dressed in gallabiya and ‘imma (turban) wants to marry her. Her parents –also in gallabiya- prevent her from marrying this man and in the next scene we see how the young girl has become a young woman who is marrying a man who is of her age and who is dressed in “modern” clothes. They are going to live in an urban environment where she gives birth to a girl. When the girl grows up the proud parents –in their “modern” outfits- and the grandparents –in their “traditional” outfits- attend her performance at school. One of the things which this television campaign shows is that, first, modernity (education and work for women) is preferable to traditionalism and that, second, the city and the countryside are locations of modernity and tradition respectively.

Religion

Before elaborating on this dichotomy in more detail in 3.6, I deem it important to mention at this point that according to Abu-Lughod the state’s notion of modernity changed somewhat in the second half of the 1990s when the state started to combat religious extremism through the use of mass media. For this matter, it pursued, among others, a strategy of recuperation of Upper Egyptian values such as their sense of honour and courage while distressing the new value of Islamic fundamentalism which the area had become notorious for (2005, 180-8). With muHāmī khul’ and urīdu khul’an also employing a notion of the countryside and its peasants as good, the question arises as to how the element of religion is employed in the two films. This question, of course, is especially interesting since in the public debate as described in chapter 2, (the language of) religion played an important role.

In contrast to al-wafd and al-sha’b newspapers that were critical of the West and the government because the latter’s introduction of khul‘ threatened the Islamic foundation of Egyptian society, the films did not explicitly present a picture of Islam being threatened nor did they present the Islamic alternative as as alternative to the official modernity project of the state. An implicit reference was made to Islam in a scene in urīdu khul’an in which Maha and her neighbour Samiha watch a woman’s program on television in which it is claimed that al-khul’, huwa

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90 It must be mentioned, however, that in a study on the fashion scene in contemporary Cairo, Abaza shows how the modern use of traditional dress has become fashionable among the upper classes (2007). The same applies to the fashion scene in Tehran, Iran (Balasescu, 2007)
al-hall (khul’ is the solution). This is speaking out against the Muslim Brotherhood and its slogan al-islam, huwa al-hall (Islam is the solution). Apart from this reference, the element of religion seemed to be absent in both films.

As for muHāmī khul’, its scriptwriter, the secularist Wahid Hamid, is said to be well-known for his opposition to the Islamic movement (IslamOnline 28 August 2002). He wrote a number of films (starring Adil Imam) and a television serial al-’ā’ila (The Family, 1994) which all criticize the Islamic movement harshly. Mabruk, who reviewed the film muHāmī khul’, noted how this time Wahid Hamid had not attempted to present the religious and societal elements of khul’ in the least. This led Mabruk to conclude that this time Wahid Hamid must have intended to present the silliness of Egypt’s upper class instead (IslamOnline 28 August 2002). Although I agree with Mabruk that the film did not explicitly set out to criticize the Islamic movement, it must be mentioned that the avoidance of religion or politics can also be seen as a way to criticize religion or politics. For instance, Chinese sixth-generation filmmakers focus on “reality” and leave the socialist discourse of their government behind as if it is irrelevant for daily life. It is this disengagement from the official political discourse that makes these sixth-generation filmmakers so controversial (Lau 2003, 13-27). Another example concerns the Egyptian television writer Tharwat Abaza who avoids any reference to Egypt as a nation and who uses stories from the Koran or from Islamic history as inspiration (Abu-Lughod 2005, 115). With Wahid Hamid being very critical of including religiosity in mass media (Abu-Lughod 2005, 172-3), it might not come as a surprise that in muHāmī khul’ he chose not to include religious elements and, by doing so, was making a statement against religion.

Besides, given the heated debates which the “khul’ law” aroused, I think a scriptwriter would not have been allowed to take as an example of the silliness of the upper class, a veiled woman who wants to divorce her husband because he snores as this would enrage the Islamists, nor would it have been possible to present the figure of the veiled urban Egyptian woman as a saviour of the nation against khul’. In any case, if we believe the veil to be “…the quintessential sign of Muslim resistance and cultural authenticity” (Ahmed, cited in Abu-Lughod 1998, 14), then the element of Muslim resistance was missing, whether consciously or not. Rather than following in the lead of Islamists who used the language of Islam to discredit the state and its modernizing project, the two films used other techniques to ridicule and criticize the state.

3.6 Ridiculing the modernizing project of the state
In the last section, we have seen that Abu-Lughod argues that through the use of television serials, the Egyptian state tries to promote a notion of modernity in which the countryside is characterized as bad and the city as good. This notion was
also animated the Egyptian film *Terrorists,* “…a privately funded film released in a coordinated government campaign against terrorism” (Armbrust 2002, 924). According to Armbrust, the Islamist cause had to be situated firmly outside of modernity, among other things by showing the male protagonist –an Islamist assassin- in the Upper Egypt countryside, stereotypical of backwardness (2002, 925).

Interestingly, in the same article Armbrust also pays attention to another film, *Closed Doors,* which was only shown abroad. Both *The Terrorists* and *Closed Doors* deal with Islamism but where in *The Terrorists,* Islamism is situated outside modernity –in the Upper Egyptian countryside- in *Closed Doors* the modern state is portrayed as failing since one of its most crucial institutions –education- is so debauched that it has become a breeding ground for Islamism (Armbrust 2002, 925). In what follows, I want to pay more attention to the issue of education since, through the use of language and music, education plays an indirect but significant role in especially *muHāmī khul’.*

**The educated and the non-educated: the use of language and music**

*muhāmī khul’* : Maha (the female colleague of the lawyer Badr) asks Badr over the phone: “Are you singing the ’andalib?”

‘Andalib’ literally means nightingale but in Egypt *al-’andalib al-asmar* is the nickname of ‘Abd al-Halim Hafiz (1929-1977), one of the most popular singers and actors in Egypt and the Middle East. When Maha asked the lawyer Badr if he was singing *al-’andalib,* Badr was watching a film starring ‘Abd al-Halim Hafiz. Apparently, he had seen the film many times as he knew it by heart and was singing all the songs which Abd al-Halim Hafiz was singing in the film. Hence, when he picked up Maha’s phone call, he was just in the middle of a song. His lying on the couch in a *gallabiya* watching films and singing songs of ‘Abd al-Halim Hafiz clearly linked Badr to the cultural heritage of Egypt. Where Maha immediately recognized in Badr’s singing the songs of Abd al-Halim Hafiz, this was not the case with Rasha who also calls him when he is watching the film. This seems to position Maha within and Rasha outside the popular cultural tradition of Egypt. In fact, Badr’s musical preferences are in contrast with those of Rasha which becomes clear after they start falling in love with each other. Under the cover of discussing Rasha’s upcoming *khul’* case, Badr starts to visit her palatial home in Six October (satellite city just outside of Cairo) several times. The first time he is treated with a live performance by an orchestra which plays in the classical Western music tradition. Badr is clearly unfamiliar with this type of music and when the violins suddenly come in with their characteristic high-pitched and powerful sounds, Badr starts to feel uncomfortable and leaves the table for a walk in the garden. On other
occasions, Rasha arranges for live performances of female singers who wear tight little dresses and who sing English-based songs such as the “Lady in Red” lyrics of Chris de Burgh and the Spanish-based Suavemente lyrics of Elvis Crespo that stir up the crowd who have gathered in Rasha’s garden in order to celebrate her divorce from her husband. This time Badr is not afraid and dances with Rasha while some others guests dance in a circle around them.

As a matter of fact, Rasha not only likes Western music better (she does not even know Egyptian music), she also likes English better than Egyptian Arabic. This transpires on numerous occasions. When she meets Badr’s father for the first time who, I recall, is ʿumda (chief) of an Upper Egypt village, she greets him by using the word oncle (uncle). Oncle is often used by upper class Egyptians who have received bilingual education at one of the expensive private schools and who use a mix of Egyptian-Arabic and English among each other. In contrast, Badr often addresses Rasha in rather formal Arabic as if he wants to compensate for the fact that he does not speak English. Rasha’s bad classical Arabic comes to light when she has to state in court that she is afraid to cross the limits of God were she to stay married to her husband.91 As for Badr, it is only on one occasion that we hear him making a language switch. When Badr enters his office in his modish white suit and without his moustache, he greets his colleagues by saying bonsoir (good evening) instead of bonjour (good morning) which, in my eyes, is a vain attempt to become something which he is not. Apart from this one attempt by Badr, Rasha and Badr do not try to level out their language differences.

Surprisingly, it is Badr’s mother, a pesant woman who uses the few English words she knows, clearly realizing that in order to link up to Rasha’s world she must at least attempt to welcome her in English. Hence, where in the last section a dichotomy was presented between the “good” city and the “bad” countryside, this time around music and the language it is articulated in seemingly served to create a dichotomy in which the cultured and the educated were presented as foolish and urban while the less-cultured and the less-educated were presented as smart and rural.

When I was in Egypt, I often heard people say that the private institution of higher education did not necessarily offer a better quality of education notwithstanding the fact that admission fees are extremely high compared to those of their public counterparts. In fact, people would often mention that private schools were merely ways for upper class children - who did not have the intellectual ability to enter public higher education - to buy their way into higher education. This assumption also transpires in the film muHāmi khul’ where Rasha, notwithstanding the fact that she is a successful bilingual businesswoman, is also portrayed as ignorant. For example, when Badr tells her that his parent’s village is

91 This also applies to the female protagonist, Maha, in the film urīdu khul’an.
along the Nile, Rasha thinks that the Nile is a sea and that Badr’s parents are living near the beach. Her assistant manager befalls the same fate. Showing Badr slides about the history of Rasha’s factory, he explains that the factory was completely destroyed during the Second World War to which Badr replies that Cairo was not bombed in the Second World War.

Thus, in the film *muHāmī khul’* the city is presented as morally and intellectually backward with its citizens having no geographical, cultural, linguistic and historical awareness of the country they live in. The same notion transpires in the film *urīdu khul’an* where the wife Maha is not able to repeat by heart a few lines in classical Arabic, although she has won a prize for being the best teacher of her school and where Tarik the husband fails to recite a few lines of poetry in classical Arabic. This starkly contrasts the fact that the illiterate wife of Tarik’s uncle from Upper Egypt is able to address in classical Arabic the peasants whom she has managed to mobilize for her cause of empowering women.

Again, the articulated message seems that in comparison to their rural counterparts modern urban Egyptians, even teachers (the bearers of national development par excellence) are intellectually backward. The films, then, do not only criticize the fact that the maintenance-obedience relation is disturbed and leads to changes within the space of the marital home (in which the husband in *urīdu khul’an* is expelled from the house). By making a clear distinction between Egyptian and Western music and language, their criticism went further than that. The state’s development philosophy of the educated and cultured individual representing the good and being a prerequisite for national development was ridiculed, especially the value of education and work for women. By clearly placing the upper class outside Egyptian tradition and by linking the city to the West, the films took the matter of space across the national borders of Egypt including the West as well, something which would not lead to national development at all. Just like in the newspapers *al-sha’b* and *al-wafd*, the films also criticized the Western influence and the state’s ideas about national development.

But, where *al-wafd* and *al-sha’b* had linked their criticism of the West and the Egyptian government to Islamic religion being under threat, the films also criticized the West and the government but instead of showing how it threatened religion, it seemed that they criticized the official modernity project of the state by presenting a picture of urban citizens as both morally and intellectually backward. In my opinion, by ridiculing the modernity project of the government, the filmmakers used the medium of film to “talk back” to the government. This is in contrast to what the authors of *Media Worlds* call the classic formation of mass media in which governments and commercial institutes attempt to create modern citizens and consumers (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin 2002, 7) and which
applies to the Egyptian case where the basis of this collaboration is the national interest (Abu-Lughod 2005, 189).

Does this mean that we have finally found in the male peasant the hero which was missing in the Egyptian cartoons on khul'? In order to provide an answer to this question, I now turn again to Armbrust’s study on mass culture and modernism in Egypt. As indicated in the introduction, I was curious to read how Armbrust elaborates on the way in which the modernizing project of the state is ridiculed through what he calls a “vulgar” film genre. He shows that it became clear in the last quarter of the twentieth century that national development was not accessible to all and that education often was not a guarantee for a better future. Consequently, a “vulgar” film genre developed which criticized the official modernity project of the state by conversely portraying the countryside as a site of both morality and progress while the city was portrayed as corrupt (1996, 207). What is interesting for the analysis at this point is that in some of these films degradation is communicated by putting the protagonist into an emasculated world (ibid). This, I think, is also the case in muHāmī khul' and urīdu khul'an.

**muHāmī khul' and urīdu khul'an: an emasculated world**

In *muHāmī khul',* the male peasant from Upper Egypt exemplifies manhood and patriarchal culture. This is well exemplified by a scene where the father of the lawyer Badr gets very upset by an anonymous phone call about his son. He travels all the way from the deep south of Upper Egypt to pay his son in Cairo an unexpected visit. Badr, who has fallen in love with Rasha, and who, on the instigation of Rasha had his moustache shaven off opens the door and much to his surprise finds his father, with moustache and wearing a *gallabiya* and turban - standing in front of the door. While Badr stumbles *hamdilah 'ala al-salama* (welcome back), his father sarcastically asks him: “*fayn shanabak, ya binti?*” (where is your moustache, my daughter?). Now that Badr is bereaved of his manhood, it is his father who is the personification of the authentic Egyptian.

However, as we have seen, even the authority of Badr’s father is ridiculed. This is well illustrated by a scene which follows right after the “bikini scene” where we see how a poor villager addresses Badr’s father as ‘ūmda of the village. In the presence of the whole village, the man shouts at the ‘ūmda: “you have punished me earlier [in front of the whole village] for letting my wife leave the house without underwear to wash our clothes in the water stream, so what are you going to do now [after your son’s fiancée has swum in the Nile without clothes]?” The ‘ūmda is speechless and needs Maha, the female colleague of Badr who has her eye on Badr, to rescue him. In contrast to Rasha, Maha has changed her modern city clothes for a more modest dress and has covered her hair with a loose veil. Where the ‘ūmda, Badr’s father, is still too perplexed to adequately address the angry
villager and to save his position of authority in front of the whole village. Maha shouts at all the people who have gathered that they should not be so hypocritical: “Haven’t you seen women in bikini’s while you were in Sharm as-Sheikh (well-known seaside resort in the Sinai)?”

In urīdu khul’an the picture gets even worse. Here we see how the illiterate wife of the ‘umda tells him that a female neighbour has read to her a newspaper mentioning that women no longer need men since the female sheep Dolly got a baby without male intervention. Although the ‘umda locks up his wife in the marital home, during his absence she still manages to start a revolution in the village by winning over support from both male and female peasants for women’s empowerment. Again, peasants seem to be unable to put a stop to the disruptive influence of khul’. Just like in the cartoons, it becomes clear in the films that the best place to find masculinity is not with men at all. Historically seen, this is not new. In a study on popular Egyptian cinema Shafik notes that, first, the Egyptian nation is often represented as male in the face of a female West (2007, 90-3), and, second, that maintaining a male self in such a context can be hard resulting in a popular allegory of impotence (ibid, 93).

3.7 The issue of censorship
Although Armbrust’s book shows that popular media in Egypt is a popular place for expressing different ideas of modernization as well as for criticizing the value of education for peasants and women which is so characteristic of the official modernity project of the state, Herrera is right in criticizing him for not having paid attention to the question as to how such films can pass censorship in a country in which all film scripts must pass censorship (review of Armbrust 1996). With the two films seemingly propagating a political message, albeit one that is less explicit than the one expressed by al-sha’b and al-waṣīf newspapers, we can wonder why in the case of muḤāmi khul’ and urīdu khul’an the government allowed them to pass censorship and, more importantly, consented to their release during the biggest filmgoing week of the year, the week of the ‘id al-fitr (the feast of breaking the Ramadan fast).

I think that part of the answer lies in the fact that the films are comedies. Given the fact that joking is widespread in Egyptian society (Herrera even speaks of the legendary role that language and humour play in Egyptian society (review of Armbrust 1996), it is not unlikely that Egyptian filmmakers turn to comedies in order to provide a channel for ventilating frustration (in the same way as cartoons are used to ventilate frustration). In the words of Sadek: “Perhaps because of political instability in the Middle East […], Arab audiences seek comedy films, and in the last few years Egyptian comedies have been the top-grossing hits in the Arab world” (2006, 170).
Of course, the scriptwriters and filmmakers of muHāmī khul‘ and urīdu khul’an could also have resorted to social realist drama (as was the case in urīdu Hallan) but this would have increased the likelihood of their films being banned. Especially if we take into account the fact that the state controls audiovisual media more directly than the press (Armburst 2002, 922). In addition, Armburst claims that heavy social realism is out of step with current fashions which favour among others comedies (Armburst 2002, 927). Although this might be true to a large extent, it must be mentioned that serious films such as sāhar al-layāli (2003) and baHibb al-sīma (2004) were box office hits.

Yet, in the case of urīdu khul’an it is not totally clear whether the film is a particular form of social realist drama or light and humorous comedy drama. The male protagonist of urīdu khul’an, the well-known actor Ashraf ʿAbdalbaqi, claims that the film is social realist drama containing elements of comedy. The opening sequences to the film also suggest that we are dealing with a film depicting reality as they place urīdu khul’an in a tradition of women empowerment (it mentions the first woman in active politics; the first female minister; the release of the film urīdu Hallan and the first woman of the country filing for khul‘). Critics accused the film of being an affront against men and while Ashraf ʿAbdalbaqi explicitly denies this (Sawt al-umma 21 November 2005), another film critic conversely claims that urīdu khul’an is against women instead of being against men. According to her, the female protagonist Maha is a superficial character who only files khul‘ because her neighbour Samiha and her brother ‘Amr want her to do so (ākhir sā’a 16 November 2005).

Hence, my impression is that by leaving undecided whether the film is a work of social realism or comedy, the filmmakers hit two birds with one stone. Through the use of comedy they appealed to an audience which tends to favour comedy over works of social realism and whom the filmmakers’ income depends on. The hybrid nature of the film made it more difficult for the censors to forbid the film on political or moral grounds. However, what looks on the surface like pure comedy is at the same time criticism of the institution of khul‘ and the Egyptian government.

Perhaps the censors were of the opinion that films such as muHāmī khul‘ and urīdu khul’an would vent frustration by providing Egyptians with a means to turn to satire instead of revolt. This is reinforced by the timing of the two films.

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92 The advent of satellite broadcasting has changed this, although “In audiovisual expressive culture the situation is more complex” (Armburst 2002, 922).

93 Even in the case of muHāmī khul‘, writer and cinema critic Ahmad Salih claims that the film was a move away from eight years of what he calls “youth cinema,” that only produced comedies which Ahmad Salih considered to be farces while muHāmī khul‘ was able to address “youth cinema” while simultaneously discussing an important subject (akhbār al-yawm 7 January 2006).
Both films made their entrance in the week of the ‘id al-fitr. While during the rest of the year people do not often visit cinema, this is different during the week of the ‘id al-fitr which prompts people to scramble for tickets for whatever film. For filmmakers the importance of the week of the ‘id al-fitr is of such significance that it even led Hani Ramzi (who plays the lawyer Badr in) muHāmī khul’ to delay the release of his film from the summer season to the ‘id al-fitr (al-sharq al-awsaT 14 July 2002). Besides, with the Egyptian film industry only producing 10 to 15 films annually, it is not a sinecure that within a period of a few years two films on khul’ were released, during the biggest week of the filmgoing year. It suggests that state officials at least did not object to the films and the issue of khul’ being disseminated in this particular way among a large audience.

3.8 Conclusion
In the last two chapters, I have analysed the public debate on khul’ through the use of two pens: one pen describing debates in written media such as newspapers and the other pen presenting the debate through the use of audiovisual techniques in popular culture media such as films and cartoons. When comparing these two different ways of engaging in the debate, it became clear that in both cases khul’ was linked to Westernization and modernization and that women who use khul’ were depicted as Westernized upper class women who filed for khul’ for frivolous reasons as a result of which they put their family in danger. The traditional husband-wife relationship, which was based on the maintenance-obedience relation was destabilized and men were no longer in a position to control their wives. In the written debate, opponents to the law vehemently argued that this was in contrast to Islam and they accused the government and the Sheikh of al-Azhar of collaborating with the West. Proponents to the law also used the language of Islam to defend their point of view. In the end, opponents’ harsh criticism seemed to have led to their expulsion from the public debate by the government. In the years after the implementation of khul’ many controversial reforms in the field of PSL were introduced but this time the criticism was void of the harsh anti-Western and anti-government critique which had dominated the debate on khul’ in the press. What remained was a discussion in newspapers of how these new reforms would change the proper place of men and women in society.

Cartoons and films, communicated the same message through a visual, non-rational mode. Since it is hard to not emphasize the body and styles of dress in films and cartoons, the message they articulated was one of sex- and gender reversal: men would become women and women would become men. More than in the press, films and cartoons made it very clear that men’s sense of manhood was put under threat by khul’. In the films Islam was not explicitly presented as a
means to put a stop to this process as the language of Islam was absent, neither did we find bodily references to Islam such as women wearing the veil. Although the absence of religion can be seen as a statement in itself, in order to demonstrate the dominance of men over women, the films rather presented the figure of the peasant from Upper Egypt as the saviour of the nation. In contrast to their urban counterparts, men from Upper Egypt were assigned masculine attributes and in this sense the films seemingly criticized the official modernity project of the state in which the countryside is often presented as backward and the city as good. Ultimately, however, the peasants from Upper Egypt were also not in a position to resist the cultural violence brought about by *khul’*. This allegory of male impotence was not new in the history of Egyptian film and cartoon industry. The same applies to presenting women as putting the Egyptian nation under threat. This suggests that using sexual relations as metaphors for politics has a history in Egyptian films and cartoons.

At this point, I would like to point out that although both films suggest that women who use *khul’* put the nation at risk, Mernissi mentions in the case of Morocco that “the serious blows to male supremacy did not come from women [...] but from the state” which takes over more and more functions that used to be the traditional functions of the male head of the family such as education and providing economic security (1987, 172). Bourdieu even claims that changes in perceptions of what it constitutes to be a man or a woman do not change because some women’s movements want it so and they will only change when the state sets out to institutionalize through its institutions the changes (2001). The introduction of a unilateral form of *khul’* divorce provides an example of a state depriving men of their exclusive right to unilateral divorce. It also explains why in both the cartoons and the films women were depicted as the aggressor and men as representing the Egyptian nation under threat.

At the same time, however, the question arises as to whether the state’s implementation of *khul’* was really meant to initiate a change in perceptions of man and womanhood as well as in the traditional maintenance-obedience relation, or was it more concerned with its image abroad? The question is important as we have seen that the state allowed: state-dominated and opposition newspapers to present the public with a picture in which women’s irrationality was presented as a threat to the nation; cartoons depicting pictures of brutish wives turning the proper gender roles upside down; and two films to criticize the official modernity

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94 The way the state promotes Family Planning makes clear that the state still considers the husband to be the head of the family. In a lesson about family planning it is claimed that: “Kamil loves his family. Habiba is Kamil’s wife. Kamil loves his wife and Habiba loves her husband. Tariq is Kamil’s son and Samah is Kamil’s daughter. Tariq and Samah are Kamil’s children. Kamil’s family is small. Kamil’s family is small and happy” (Ali, cited in Abu-Lughod 2005, 63).
project of the state by ridiculing *khul’,* in the biggest filmgoing week of the year. In other words, the state allowed the image of *khul’* to be slandered in the public sphere which is strange considering the fact that it has a (inter)national “reputation” for being the guardian of the public sphere. Does it mean that the state was not able to control what was being said and done by participants in the public sphere or was it merely interested in presenting to the international community a picture of a modern nation state in which women were not suppressed but given many rights instead? It is true that the Egyptian state values a good record abroad but because of international pressure it cannot suppress all forms of opposition in the public sphere and therefore it needs to provide its opponents with an outlet for venting frustrations.

This undermined the role of the state as the “guardian” of the public sphere and ultimately it was not the state nor the religious authority of al-Azhar but the secularly trained judges of the High Constitutional Court who decided on the Islamic validity of *khul’* (see also 2.6). What underlines the observation that the supremacy of the Egyptian state in the public sphere is contested is the fact that opposition to the film *muHāmī khul’* did not come from the state. This time a lawyer filed a lawsuit in which he called for a ban on the film *muHāmī khul’.* Interestingly enough, the lawsuit was not only directed against the director and the producers but against the Minister of Culture, the Chamber of Film Industries and the Censor as well. According to the lawyer the film misrepresented Egyptian social values, attacked the sanctity of the judiciary, misrepresented lawyers and the judiciary and scorned marital relationships (al-Ahram Weekly, 23-29 January 2003). Hence, this time around the state was criticized for not having guarded the morality of the public sphere and for having allowed a film to misrepresent reality.97

As for representing daily reality, the question arises as to whether the public debate on *khul’* in general and the two films in particular were in line with reality or was the way in which women were depicted a defence mechanism against profound changes in sex roles and sexual identity (Mernissi 1987, xxvii). In other words, did the public debate on *khul’* refer to daily practice or was it rather a psychological need to maintain a minimal sense of identity in a confusing and

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95 This was not the first time that legal actions were taken against a film of Wahid Hamid. *awān al-ward* (Time of Roses), a 2000-1 Ramadan serial about Coptic-Muslim relations befell the same fate (Abu-Lughod 2005, 176-7).

96 The identity of this lawyer has remained unknown to me.

97 In the case of the controversial film *baHīb al-sīma,* Mehrez also argues that “…the role of the State as the guardian of public morality was contested when 40 Coptic priests and Christian and Muslim lawyers’ demanded ‘that legal action be taken against not only the director, the scriptwriter, the actors, the producer, but also the Minister of Culture, the Censor, and the Minister of Interior for “contempt of religion”’ (2005, 35).
shifting reality (ibid)? What serves to underline the postulate that the debate on
khul‘ is merely a reflection of deep-rooted fears about self-representation;
manhood; and identity building is the fact that long before arīdu khul‘an (2005)
presented Maha al-Shanawi, a rich and well-educated urban upper class woman,
as the first Egyptian woman filing for khul’, newspapers in 2000 had already
presented the case of Wafa’ as the first khul‘ case of the country and this woman
was a fallaha (peasant) from Lower Egypt.