

9 The objects of soap opera: Egyptian television and the cultural politics of modernity

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Circulating in Cairo in the 1980s was a joke typical for its urban contempt for the peasant from Upper Egypt:

A Sa'idi [Upper Egyptian] came to Cairo and wanted to buy a TV set. He went to the appliance store and, pointing, asked, 'How much is that TV in the window?' The owner yelled, 'Get out of here you stupid Sa'idi!' He went away and dressed in a long white robe and headdress to disguise himself as a Saudi Arabian. He came back to the store and again asked, 'How much is that TV in the window?' The owner yelled, 'Get out of here you stupid Sa'idi!' He went away and changed into trousers and a shirt and tie, coming back disguised as a European. Again he asked 'How much is that TV in the window?' The owner yelled, 'Get out of here you stupid Sa'idi!' Puzzled, the poor man asked, 'How could you tell it was me?' The shop owner answered, 'That's not a TV, it's a washing machine.'¹

In this joke, lack of familiarity with television was made symptomatic of rural backwardness. Television represents modernity, requiring for its production advanced technology and for reception an expensive instrument. Although introduced into Egypt in 1960, it took the slow spread of electrification and labour migrants' wages in the 1970s to bring television sets to the majority of households, especially outside the major cities.

In the 1950s, this new communication technology was celebrated in US discourses on the modernisation of the Third World. This was exemplified in Middle East studies by Daniel Lerner (1958) whose classic text, *The Passing of Traditional Society*, argued that mass media opened closed traditional minds by revealing the vast world of difference, facilitating the 'empathy' that was a prerequisite of the mobile, politically participating, opinion-holding personality essential to modernity.

Although Lerner's confident views of mass media have been countered by a more recent critical literature on cultural imperialism, followed by counter-critiques by anthropologists attuned to the creative and self-productive local appropriations of imported television (e.g. Miller 1992; Wilk 1993), in countries like Egypt, India and China with major television

production capabilities of their own, the more pressing question may be how the internal cultural politics of government-controlled media articulate with contested visions of modernity. An anthropologist interested in Egypt would want to ask what sorts of differences Egyptian television actually reveals to its audiences and what difference this makes to those exposed to it. What, in fact, is the relationship between television and modernity?

More than any other form of mass media, especially in a place where many remain non-literate, television brings a variety of vivid experiences of the non-local into the most local of situations, the home. So when someone like Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz laments the decline of the Cairo coffee house, explaining 'People used to go to the coffee shops and listen to story tellers who played a musical instrument and told of folk heroes. These events filled the role played by television serials today', he forgets that this older form of entertainment, with the imaginary non-local worlds it conjured up, was only available to men (quoted in Hedges 1992). Television gives women, the young, and the rural as much access as urban men to stories of other worlds.

In Egypt, I will argue, a concerned group of culture-industry professionals has constructed of these women, youths and rural people a subaltern object in need of enlightenment. Appropriating and inflecting Western discourses on development they construct themselves as guides to modernity and assume the responsibility of producing, through their television programmes, the virtuous modern citizen. Especially in the dramatic serials which are Egypt's most popular television fare, they seek to 'educate' their public. Their faith in the impact of television is spurred by the debates their serials provoke among critics and other parts of the urban intelligentsia.

Yet a look at the place of television in these subalterns' lives suggests that this public subverts and eludes them, not because they are traditional and ignorant of the modern, as the joke about the country bumpkin would have it, but because the ways they are positioned within modernity is at odds with the visions these urban middle-class professionals promote. The nationalist message is broadcast into a complex social space where the very local and the transnational both exert powerful pulls. On the one hand, people live in the local worlds of their daily experience, of which television is only a small part. On the other hand, as multinational companies bombard the Egyptian market with their products, as Islamic political groups with broader than national identifications vie for loyalty, and as elites look to the West, television's nationalists have much to compete with.

TELEVISION IN A DISCOURSE OF THE MODERN NATION

In the discourse of some key culture-industry professionals in Egypt, television figures in a nationalist and elitist vision of modernity. When film

star and director Nur al-Sharif described the beginnings of Egyptian television, he noted that in a general atmosphere of national advancement the government had a plan for using media and art to change people's views on political participation and life.² Films and serials of the 1960s were based on literary works in order 'to educate people, enlighten them, and draw them into the policy of the new revolution in transforming Egyptian society from a feudal, capitalist society into a socialist one'. In the same breath, he added that many serials were based on novels by Egypt's great writers 'to help the uneducated Egyptian youth in rural areas, the provinces, and in cities other than Cairo and Alexandria, who had no concern with culture, to become acquainted with those great writers'.

This professed interest in educating and 'culturing' the poor and those outside the urban capitals was echoed by Muhammad Fadil, one of Egypt's foremost television directors, who argued that television in a developing country plagued not just by illiteracy but by cultural illiteracy should not simply entertain; it has to work to eliminate this cultural illiteracy. Linking culture and social responsibility, he defined culture, in terms reminiscent of Lerner's portrait of 'modern man', as 'familiarity with the news, appreciation of art, a taste for art, music, theatre. . . . Culture is the concern of the individual with the problems of others, which comes from knowledge'.³ Fadil concluded that since drama was the most loved form, it had to be exploited to teach people without them sensing it.

Essential to this construction of television entertainment as serious art that is socially or politically uplifting is the contrast with commercial entertainment. Fadil distinguished between serials people enjoyed watching and those whose effects carried on long after they had been broadcast. He criticised colleagues for making pumpkin-seed serials – serials that were fun to watch, like munching on seeds, but gave no real nourishment.⁴ Nur al-Sharif defended government policy regarding television in the 1960s claiming that it enabled television 'to produce a common national dream, not only inside Egypt but in the whole Arab world. It made people enthusiastic and optimistic.' He contrasted this to what had happened since the mid-1970s when private companies began producing programmes, their only interest being to entertain people and their hands being tied by the necessity of selling their programmes in the conservative Gulf states where political and moral censorship are highly restrictive.⁵

This contest between the idealistic vision of television drama as the producer of a modern cultured citizen with a national consciousness and the competing tendency of Egyptian television to present 'cheap' entertainment was dramatically played out during 1993 in the controversy, not over an Egyptian serial, but over the American soap opera, *The Bold and the Beautiful*. Beginning in late 1992, Channel 2, the channel that broadcasts most of the foreign programmes in Egypt, began airing nightly episodes of this successful American daytime soap that has been running

in the USA since March 1987 and has been exported to twenty-two countries.⁶ In Egypt, cartoons in a weekly magazine caricatured its popularity; one showed a government minister on the telephone noting that the best time to raise prices on goods without anyone protesting was between 9.30 and 10.30 p.m., the time the soap was being aired.

The Bold and the Beautiful is set in the fashion world of Los Angeles and centres on two key families involved in fashion design and publishing. Nearly all the actresses are blonde and most of the actors are handsome, something that is not incidental to the success of the soap. Cartoons in a weekly magazine *Sabah al-Khayr* suggested that both men and women viewers had become smitten with the characters. One showed a woman viewer watching the female announcer introduce the show as follows: 'Dear Family Members, now is the time for our date with the adorable handsome boy who drives you crazy, damn him – Ridge.' Beside it was a cartoon showing a man strumming on a lute and singing as he watched television: 'O Night, linger over this pretty friend.'

Newspapers participated in and satirised viewers' immersion in the characters and their relationships, commenting on the way characters had become taken for real. A cartoon showed an older veiled woman talking to a friend on the telephone about the surgery of one of the female characters. 'Hey, people are all the same', she says. 'Come on, let's take two kilos of oranges and rush to visit our Aunt Logan, Brook's mother, in the hospital.' In a major magazine a serious article on USAID in Egypt introduced the argument that Egypt was actually subsidising the USA economy by saying, 'Would you believe that Egypt supports America? And gives it economic aid? . . . You don't believe that you subsidise that charming American woman, Brook Logan?'⁷

The contrast between *The Bold and the Beautiful* and the highlight of Egyptian television viewing over the past five years could not be more stark. Since 1988 during successive Ramadans, the Muslim month of fasting and the television season's high point, people had been emotionally riveted by a brilliant Egyptian television serial written by Usama Anwar 'Ukasha. This was the quintessential non-pumpkin-seed serial. Called *Hilmiyya Nights*, it followed the fortunes and relationships of a group of characters from the traditional Cairo neighbourhood of Hilmiyya, taking them from the late 1940s, when Egypt was under the rule of King Farouk and the British, up to the present, even incorporating into the final episodes the Egyptian reaction to the Gulf War.

Although many Egyptian television serials have captured large audiences and generated discussion and affection, and the local productions are generally more popular than foreign imports, the broadcast of this unusually long and high quality serial was a national cultural event.⁸ Its popularity was not confined to the millions who regularly followed the evening serials but extended to the intelligentsia who were provoked by its political messages. The merits of the serial were debated in

newspapers and magazines and a leading intellectual, Sayed Yassin, even used it as a metaphor for 'Egypt's real abilities'. In a brief essay in a major weekly magazine, *Al-Iqtisadi*, he contrasted the successful serial, with its excellent text, capable director, talented and devoted actors, and involved audience with the failures of current political activity in Egypt, suggesting that what Egypt needed was a better political text to guide its director (the President), more respect for its citizens, and the introduction of new political actors.⁹

With little daytime television and a state-controlled television industry until recently only minimally supported through advertising, there never developed in Egypt an equivalent of the US daytime soap opera.¹⁰ Instead, since the late 1960s, the form of the evening dramatic serial (*musalsal*) consisting of anywhere from fifteen to thirty episodes broadcast on consecutive days, has dominated Egyptian television entertainment. Although as television critics have noted, the strict definition of television genres is becoming increasingly problematic, serials are distinguishable from daytime or prime-time soap operas in being finite and self-contained, offering viewers some sort of dramatic resolution by the final episode (Geraghty 1991). Like soap operas, however, most Egyptian serials are set in the domestic space, using limited and familiar sets; more importantly, their plots revolve around unfolding personal relationships often presented melodramatically. Much like the USA and British prime-time soaps of the 1980s (e.g. *Dallas*, *Dynasty* and *EastEnders*) that have deliberately sought wider audiences, Egyptian serials are believed to have women as their primary audiences while reaching out successfully to whole families, men included.

Hilmiyya Nights, more than most Egyptian serials, seems to be a hybrid product. Although its talented writer denied in print that he had given audiences an Egyptian *Falcon Crest* (an American prime-time soap that had aired several years earlier), there are numerous aspects of *Hilmiyya Nights* in which the influence of such American programmes can be detected. If the prime-time soap opera can be defined by its peculiar mixing of the aesthetics of melodrama, realism and light entertainment, then *Hilmiyya Nights* fits the description (Geraghty 1991: 25). Strong on emotional drama, the serial focuses on the faces and feelings of its characters and intensifies its effects through dramatic music.¹¹ As in other Egyptian serials tears are plentiful, if balanced by laughter and anger. Like the British soap operas (and unlike the American) that take realism more seriously, the serial is set in particular neighbourhoods and attempts to depict class differences and regional identities authentically and nostalgically.

What makes *Hilmiyya Nights* seem most like American prime-time soaps is that it partakes of the element of spectacle. The costumes are lavish, the sets sumptuous, and at least some of the women characters extravagantly glamorous and fashionable (Geraghty 1991: 27–8). The aristocratic central characters move elegantly among their villas and

luxurious apartments, the key woman character elaborately made up and coiffured and dressed in a different outfit for each of well over a hundred episodes, trading sequined gowns for chiffon and furs, except when going in to the office when she wears stylish suits in striking colours.

In addition, the serial resembles the American prime-time soap operas in certain aspects of plot. As in *Dallas* the central action revolves around the rivalry between two wealthy men and their families, in this case an urban aristocrat and a rural mayor, both of whom become millionaire businessmen in the 1970s and 1980s. The financial wheelings and dealings of these two and the woman who at different times was married to each of them carry much of the narrative along. The adventures and love interests of their children become the focus as the serial moves into the present.

Though by definition serials differ from soap operas in having resolutions, this serial was unusual in deferring its resolution for so long. Drawn out over five years and far more episodes than any previous Egyptian serial, *Hilmiyya Nights* allowed for the development of the kind of attachment to characters that soap-opera audiences relish. Following the tribulations and successes of some of the characters from childhood to adulthood and others through marriages, divorces, losses, imprisonments and careers well into old age, audiences were treated to the pleasurable experience common to American soap-opera viewers: of finding meaning in scenes from their knowledge of the characters' histories (Geraghty 1991: 15). An intimacy was created by the deep familiarity viewers came to have over time with characters' personal histories and tangled relationships, especially since old episodes of the serial were re-run each year before the new instalment was aired and the whole serial, now complete, was being shown on successive Sunday evenings in 1993.¹²

Analysts have noted that among the distinguishing features of the soap-opera genre is the centrality of strong women characters. This too applied to *Hilmiyya Nights* with its important women figures in each generation. Not only do we have at the centre of the drama a *femme fatale* who is also a crafty and financially ruthless aristocrat turned businesswoman but also the long-suffering and moral wives and mothers of key male figures, the educated daughters of rich and poor pursuing professional careers while trying to manage love lives, and the odd belly-dancer. Although strong women characters are not uncommon in Egyptian dramatic serials, in *Hilmiyya Nights* the richness of the variety of women, their competence in the work sphere, and their dramatic centrality were striking.¹³

Despite these resemblances, however, 'Ukasha was right to deny that *Hilmiyya Nights* was the Egyptian *Falcon Crest*. This is not, as he charged, because *Falcon Crest* was made to dupe Third World people, full of beautiful women and sex, but because the series differed radically from any American soap opera in being historically contextualised. American soap operas have been characterised as a women's genre because they

privilege the personal, depicting even the non-domestic work scenes in terms of personal relationships. This Egyptian serial similarly portrayed the personal lives of individuals but instead of having its narrative pushed along simply by events in the personal relationships among the characters, *Hilmiyya Nights* had the moral themes of loyalty, betrayal, corruption, thwarted desires and tragic errors embedded in an historical narrative that tied individual lives to Egyptian national political events. It did what no American soap would ever do: it provided an explicit social and political commentary on contemporary Egyptian life.¹⁴

Above all, *Hilmiyya Nights* promoted the theme of national unity. With the exception of a very few truly evil characters, selfish and corrupt individuals out for themselves, the characters of different classes and political persuasions were shown to be basically good and patriotic. Our hearts went out to them as many were led astray, reacting to romantic and political blows. But in the end, they saw the errors of their ways, prevented by their love of Egypt from pursuing the materialistic, immoral or corrupt paths they had taken. Even the young religious extremist (the first to be depicted in an Egyptian television serial) was sympathetically portrayed as part of a generation that had been led astray by the lack of national spirit.¹⁵

PROTECTING THE PUBLIC

Hilmiyya Nights sought to teach and enlighten. In response, intellectuals, critics, politicians and censors sought to protect the public from its messages. Both the writer and his critics, the urban educated elite who felt it incumbent on them to protect others, assumed the power of television serials and the vulnerability of subaltern viewers.

Hilmiyya Nights attempted to inform millions of ordinary Egyptians about their country's modern history. Its characters participated in such activities as anti-colonial raids against the British, the nationalisation of factories during Nasser's era, the wars with Israel, political crack-downs in a police state, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and the scams of the new Islamic investment companies. Characters' lives were deeply affected by the economic liberalisation of Sadat's 'open door' policies, the increase in heroin addiction and drug trafficking, and the policies of state feminism.

The debates in the press focused on the political perspective presented. As the headline of an article in the centre-right newspaper *Al-Wafd* bluntly asked, 'Does the Author of *Hilmiyya Nights* Have the Right to Write History from the Nasserist Viewpoint?'¹⁶ The serial then provided the occasion for setting the public straight. In the same newspaper, Dr Abd el-Azim Ramadan, the leading establishment historian of the Sadat period, defended himself for not criticising the serial, noting that *Hilmiyya Nights* was excellent drama, important for raising cultural standards in the Arab

world, and that although the writer had glorified Nasser, he had presented the period as those living through it had perceived it. Ramadan explained why the people had worshipped Nasser; they thought he had achieved so many of their dreams: a republic, land reform, socialism, a strong army and Arab unity. They had not realised, he continued, that what Nasser had created was a military dictatorship. And because of media disinformation, they knew little about how many Egyptian thinkers of the left and right he had imprisoned. Ramadan concluded his articles with the two lessons to be learned from the Nasser period: that dictatorship and justice do not go together and that people should distrust the mass media.¹⁷

The serial was criticised from other political perspectives as well. In the leftist newspaper *Al-Ahaly* 'Ukasha was asked why he made the capitalist pasha such a sympathetic character and ignored the everyday problems of ordinary people. In *Al-Sha'b*, another opposition newspaper that now presents the viewpoint of the Muslim Brotherhood, the paper's editor Adel Hussein defended the serial and 'Ukasha's right to free expression. He praised the new instalment for depicting everyday religiosity, noting that he had earlier criticised the serial, like all television drama, for never showing Islamic religious practices as part of daily life.

Those sympathetic to 'Ukasha's politics wrote articles complimenting the serial for its brilliance, invoking a discourse of art over politics. 'Asim Hanafy criticised those who treated the serial as a political tract rather than a superb artistic achievement that had made people realise the fraudulence and poverty of the past 30 years of television drama. Yet, in enumerating their political criticisms, he made his own position clear. Most pointed was his mockery of one writer who had accused *Hilmiyya Nights* of being anti-Sadat 'because it dealt with the open-door policy and the new parasitical commercial class'. His comment was 'Isn't Egypt suffering because of the influence of this class today?'¹⁸ Alluding to the problems 'Ukasha had faced from the television censors, his article went on to condemn censorship in an age of increasing democracy.

State censorship is exercised in Egypt in the name of protecting the public from the morally, politically or religiously offensive. *Hilmiyya Nights* tested the limits of the more generous freedom of the press that has been President Mubarak's policy. The writer 'Ukasha clashed with the television censors who not only commented on the screenplay but also required cuts after the filming was complete. Many of the cuts requested by the censorship office were finally overridden on the personal authority of the Minister of Information and the head of the television sector responsible for the production of films and serials.

From the internal records of this clash about the third instalment, which covered the period of the 1970s, it is clear that most of the censors' objections were political. They only asked that one sexually suggestive scene be cut but they wanted to cut lines in which President Nasser was praised

or defended by sympathetic characters, lines in which lower-class good folk absolved Nasser by blaming those around him, those who 'isolated him from the people and built a wall around him higher than the Aswan Dam' so that 'the people couldn't reach him to tell him what was going on' and so that 'he did not trust the people in the street who loved him and could have protected him'. More tellingly, they objected to scenes suggesting criticism of President Sadat and his policies. For example, they requested more balance in the reaction of the characters to Sadat's visit to Israel in 1977. They asked 'Ukasha to add a scene showing people happy about the visit, a request he refused on budgetary grounds. They also asked him to change the timing of a scene in which the neighbourhood coffee shop of a beloved patriotic character is sold; by having it coincide with Sadat's visit they felt he implied that it was Egypt being sold. Finally they asked that all dialogue be removed from a scene in a mosque, saying 'We don't want any discussion of religion and role of fundamentalists.' Ironically, the censors also objected to a scene in which a newspaper editor cuts part of a journalist's story as too dangerous. They insisted that this was inaccurate; there had been no censorship at the time of Sadat.

'Ukasha bitterly accused them in the press of 'destroying the work on grounds that to criticise the Sadat period is to be against the current regime in the country'. Turning the language of protection on its head, he argued that the state was not in need of protection by these unqualified censors.¹⁹ Invoking his public mission he vowed that if he felt forced to produce Part 4 privately and it was banned from broadcast in Egypt, he would 'go around the streets with a video to show it to people in the coffee shops' so his words could reach the people.²⁰

Hilmiyya Nights, a serial that showed how political events at the national level affected the lives of individuals and communities, a serial in which personal histories, fortunes and tragedies, were directly related to policies and events, battled with the censors. In contrast, several months into *The Bold and the Beautiful*, the director of censorship responsible for foreign films could still claim that there was very little to censor in the American serial. The characters are free-floating, their only real context being that created by the soap-opera world itself. This was read by many as making it 'human'. The censor, for example, defended the soap saying, 'The serial carries general human values and debates problems that are not place specific; they are close to many of the problems of Eastern society.'²¹ Muna Hilmy, the daughter of the prominent Egyptian feminist Nawal El-Saadawi, defended the serial claiming that what the foreign serial offered that those 'serials irrigated by Nile water' didn't was a look inside people. Instead of external events – political, economic or social – one had people with feelings, desires, weaknesses, strengths, small wickednesses and goodness. She defended the slowness of the serial as necessary to show the vastness of the human psyche and the politics of the serial as feminist.²²

Critics of the American soap opera, on the other hand, deployed the discourse of protection – this time against bad art, immorality and American aid. 'Ukasha, the writer of *Hilmiyya Nights*, was provoked to analyse *The Bold and the Beautiful* when a major newspaper columnist praised the soap and invited Egyptian writers to watch it in order to learn the art of dramatic writing. Acknowledging its enormous success, 'Ukasha argued that like the earlier popular American imports this serial's popularity was not due to its artistic merit but rather to the fact that 'we in the nations of the Third World like to see the Western lifestyle which is forbidden to us because of the closed societies we live in. We like to watch pretty women in a range of abnormal sexual relationships that would be taboo in our Eastern societies.'²³ He took the moral high ground with his conclusion, 'God preserve us from what we watch on *The Bold and the Beautiful*: children encouraging their mother to get involved with a married man.'

Invoking the elitist discourse of 'art' 'Ukasha then contrasted the soap operas, 'targeted to housewives busy in their kitchens', to the high-quality imports such as *Roots* and *Upstairs Downstairs* so rarely shown on Egyptian television. Admiring the camera work and the casting, he nevertheless went on to criticise the techniques used in the soap opera; were any Egyptian writer to draw out stories over so many episodes or to have so many contradictions or shifts in character (classic criticisms of American soap operas), the critics would hang him. Instead of insulting Egyptian drama writers by asking them to learn from such programmes, he argued, columnists should request that censorship exercised on the work of Egyptian writers be lifted so that their full creativity could be enjoyed.

The final use of a discourse of protection hints that Egypt's inability to protect its citizens from American imperialism is at the root of the problem. 'Ukasha contrasted *Oshin*, the first Japanese serial to be broadcast in Egypt (a high-quality production that valorised honesty and simplicity and 'symbolized the triumph of the Japanese character over the tyranny of nature ... the character that built a civilization and achieved a high standard of technology and economy') to the American soap operas 'exported to poor Third World countries as part of American aid'.²⁴ Ahmad Bahgat, a traditionalist writer with Islamic leanings, complaining of the poor quality of *The Bold and the Beautiful* with its repetitions and the stupidity and immorality of its characters, sarcastically remarked in his column in the official government newspaper, 'Since the roulette wheel of the New World Order has stopped at the United States, we have to watch their silliest serials without the right to file a complaint.'²⁵

UNENLIGHTENED SUBJECTS?

Thus, to justify television as more than entertainment, a socially concerned and politically conscious group of culture-industry professionals who came

of age under Nasser have constructed as their object 'a public' in need of enlightenment. Their use of a discourse of protection is part of their patronisation of their public but it also serves to reinforce among the professional classes the faith that mass media have powerful effects.

But can we determine how the television serials produced for them affect these 'unenlightened subjects'? Although the answers to this are complex, on the basis of some ethnographic work in Egypt in the 1990s I will suggest how at least two groups who are the object of these professionals' efforts and discourse – poor working-class women in Cairo and villagers in Upper Egypt – seem to slip through their well-meaning nets.

'Ukasha might be relieved to discover that many of 'the uneducated' are protected from a pumpkin-seed serial like *The Bold and the Beautiful* by its timing and its language. A soap directed at America's subalterns – housewives (although watched by students and many others) – has in Egypt captured instead an elite, or at least middle-class, audience that includes as many men as women. To enjoy it one must know English or be able to read Arabic subtitles and one must not be too exhausted from a hard day's work to stay awake.

Likewise, he can be reassured that many of the Egyptian serials made by his less socially concerned colleagues are so far-fetched or of such poor quality that audiences ignore them.

He would be less happy to discover the ways some viewers resist the nourishing social messages of his *Hilmiyya Nights*, even as they acclaim it as the best serial ever made. An example will illustrate this. *Hilmiyya Nights* had numerous important women characters, most sympathetically portrayed and shown to be facing dilemmas shared by different generations of women. Morally good older women put up with mistreatment by husbands, including secret marriages and deceptions. Younger women struggled with the tensions between career and marriage. The serial glorified education, showing most of the daughters of working-class men going on to university, the daughter of a coffee shop owner and a singer becoming a university professor and the daughter of a factory worker and a dancer becoming a physician. In general the women were independent and able to take decisions on their own. The state feminism of Nasser's era was commended, one tough-minded wife of a factory worker counselling a friend to stand up for the rights 'Gamal' had given her.²⁶

However, when asked what they liked about the serial, several poor women who work as domestic servants in Cairo volunteered not the serious political or social messages but the character of Nazik Hanem, the aristocratic, conniving, magnificently dressed *femme fatale* who plays the leading female role. One young woman whose husband had left her with two children to raise suggested, 'Nazik is the reason everyone watches *Hilmiyya Nights*. She's tough; she married four men. She wouldn't let anyone tell her what to do.' An older woman with a disabled husband

explained why Nazik was so great: 'She's fickle, not satisfied with one type. She married many times. She represents what? What's it called? The aristocracy? She was strong-willed. And stubborn. Because of her desires she lost her fortune.' After a short silence she added, 'And Hamdiyya, the dancer, did you see her?' She laughed as she imitated a characteristic arrogant gesture of this belly-dancer turned cabaret-owner.

These were the two glamorous women characters with little nationalist sympathy who wrapped men around their fingers and wouldn't act like respectable ladies, despite the pleas of their children, their ex-husbands and their other relatives. These were also the two who took dramatic falls. The dancer became addicted to heroin after being strung along by a man she hoped to marry. By the time she was cured she had lost everything and had nowhere to go. Nazik Hanem's end was more complex but brilliantly played. She was someone who could not accept her age, even after being swindled out of her fortune by her fourth husband, a younger man who threw her aside. She became increasingly temperamental and then began dressing up like someone half her age, with a wig covering her grey hair, to flirt with a 20-year-old student. When scolded for this, she had a nervous breakdown.

None of the poor women who admired Nazik or the dancer ever mentioned the moral lesson of the fall; rather, they seemed to take vicarious pleasure in these women's defiance of the moral system that keeps good women quiet. These domestic workers were women whose respectability was threatened by their need to work outside the home and as servants. They struggled daily to claim and proclaim their respectability. They hid from their neighbours and sometimes even their relatives the actual sort of work they did and they had all adopted the *higab*, the head-covering of the new modest Islamic dress that, in Egypt, has come to be a sign of Islamic piety and middle-class respectability.

'Ukasha might have himself to blame for this resistance to his nationalist feminism and morality. For popular appeal and clarity in creating the righteous, modern, patriotic character, talented television drama producers often reach out to popular images, such as those purveyed in American soap operas, or introduce the debased 'other', usually parodied, for contrast. This can backfire as outrageous characters like Nazek Hanem, or the corrupt ignorant villainess of another successful serial by the same writer, *The White Flag*, steal the show from tiresomely earnest protagonists.²⁷

Only one older woman commented on the more explicit national politics of the serial that had so exercised critics. She noted that *Hilmiyya Nights* was 'against Sadat' and that was why it showed what happened with the *infatih*, or open-door economic policy: people started importing all sorts of putrid goods, like canned meat that was actually cat food. Yet she felt free to disagree with 'Ukasha's basic position adding, 'In those days everyone was busy getting rich. There was lots of money around. For all of us.' Various political opinions circulate in Egypt and there is no reason

to assume that the 'unenlightened' audiences of shows such as *Hilmiyya Night* are waiting passively to learn from the serials what to think.

Viewers were selective in their appreciation of the messages of these television dramas. They could disagree with the politics; they could marvel at and take pleasure in the defiant characters who lived as they could not. They accepted the moral stances presented only when they resonated with their worlds. This was clearest in poor women's positive responses to the moral conservatism about family and a mother's role promoted by Egyptian serials generally and *Hilmiyya Nights* in particular. As one admirer of Nazik Hanem noted, to explain why Nazik's daughter Zohra never found happiness, 'The poor thing. It was because her mother didn't take care of her. She abandoned her as a baby with her father. When the girl got sick and had a bad fever, his new wife brought her to Nazik saying, "Here take your daughter and hold her close." But she refused. So Zohra never knew the love of a mother. She had to depend on herself. So the man duped her [tricking her into a shameful secret marriage and a pregnancy]. Poor thing.'

The villagers of Upper Egypt with whom I have worked make no more pliable subjects for the enlightening messages of the serials than these working-class urban women. This is not because they are unfamiliar with television, however. Every household in the village near Luxor where I have been working had a television set. Many were simple black and white sets with poor reception balanced precariously on rickety shelves in corners of mudbrick rooms whose only other wall decorations might be a poster of a favourite soccer club or movie star. The wealthiest families in the village had large colour sets in their reception rooms – rooms that often also boasted padded couches and framed religious calligraphy. On every poor family's wish list, were they to sell a piece of land or somehow save enough for a down payment on the instalment plan, was a colour set.

Only on rare evenings would the television be silent; if there had been a death in the neighbourhood or among one's kin, if someone was ill at home and receiving visitors. The most common reason for televisions to be silent was loss of electricity, something that happened for a few minutes almost every day and occasionally for long frustrating hours. And precisely because electric power in the village was so weak, children often had to do their homework by the light of the television sets.

Rather, the impact of serials like *Hilmiyya Nights* is deflected by the ways villagers consume television. For one thing, like their urban counterparts, villagers I knew were capable of selective readings of dramas. This was often necessary since the distance between the 'realities' dramatised in the serials and the lives lived in the village was vast. The fashionable blonde stars of *The Bold and the Beautiful* in their plush offices and grand mansions are most obviously far from these hardworking people in mudbrick two-storey homes with blue-painted wooden doors wide

enough to allow the donkeys, sheep and water buffaloes to pass through into the pens inside; but the characters portrayed in Egyptian serials like *Hilmiyya Nights* are hardly much closer. Most Egyptian serials are set in urban locations and deal with urban, often upper-class problems.²⁸

An anecdote about watching television in a relatively poor household can illustrate the gulf between local and television lives and the selective ways women interpret what they watch. One evening, Yamna, the vivacious but exhausted mother of the family was preparing dinner with the help of her sister when the serial, *Love in a Diplomatic Pouch*, came on. Her sister had been there all day helping this overworked woman who had bread to bake and children to be watched when she went off to get fodder for the animals. The family was miserable that night – between the fever of the eldest son, the measles that had struck all four of the little girls, the three boys' end-of-year exams, the expenses and fatigue of a recent trip to a hospital in Assiut in search of a cure for the chain-smoking father's asthmatic cough, and the government's announcement the previous day that the price of flour was to be doubled, they wondered how they would cope. Yet the serial they watched centred on a wealthy diplomat's family and included characters like ballet teachers, woman doctors, journalists and radio personalities with career problems.

As Yamna cooked, her sister, wrapped in the black cloak women wear when they go visiting, shouted out a summary of the plot for her. She focused on the family dynamics that are the regular stuff of their own forms of telling life stories in the village. Divorces, arguments, absences, thwarted matches. She also picked up the moral message of the serial about women and family – the importance of the mother's role in raising her children and the ill consequences for their children of mothers who abandon them or put themselves or their marriages or careers first.

However, many of the 'women's issues' in this serial, written and directed by one of Egypt's few women directors, were constructed in psycho-social terms that were foreign to these women: 'psychological' problems like psychosomatic paralysis that love could heal, men unable to commit themselves to marry for fear of losing their freedom, mothers who cried because their children were not emotionally open with them, and psychiatrists treating drug addiction among the wealthy and educated. The women simply ignored in their discussions these aspects of the serial that were not part of their experience.

From my ethnographic work in the village, I would also suggest that the villagers make elusive targets for the cultural elite's modernising messages for a more complex reason: through the very ease with which they have incorporated television into their everyday lives. Although it is difficult to articulate how this happens, I would argue that television created its own world, one that was for the villagers only a part – albeit an exciting one – of their daily lives. What they experienced through television added to, but did not displace whatever else already existed. They

treated the television world not as a fantasy escape but as a sphere unto itself with its familiar time slots and specific attitudes. It was a realm of knowledge about which people shared information: adolescents often had an encyclopaedic knowledge of Egyptian films and serials and people knew a staggering amount about the private lives and previous roles of actors and actresses who starred in the serials. The young people read magazines but everyone had access to this knowledge through hours of viewing and the glorification of stars promoted by Egyptian television itself through interview programmes and celebrity game shows.

In the villagers' attitudes toward the stars is a clue to the larger question of how television serials affect them. The villagers spoke about these stars as 'ours', somehow belonging to them as viewers, but not as 'us'. The same mix of entitlement and distance applied to the serials. They are for 'our' pleasure but they depict the lives of others who have different problems, follow different rules, and do not belong to the local moral community. What these others do, then, has little bearing on what we do or how we conduct our lives. The daily worries of trying to make ends meet, balancing a father's monthly salary of 130 LE (less than USA \$40) with work in the fields to grow clover for water buffaloes and sheep, of struggling to get families grown, through school, and married, of asserting rights to inheritances or extracting support from kin, of preserving one's moral reputation and standing in the face of in-laws and jealous neighbours with whom one has had disputes – these consume villagers. So do the pleasures of visits with friends and relatives, of meeting social obligations with generosity, of passing examinations, selling an animal, having a good harvest or wearing new clothes on the religious feasts.

Even when serials try to reflect village lives, as did a 1993 serial called *Harvest of Love* about Upper Egypt written by a politically concerned progressive woman writer, people reject the problems as not theirs. In this case people enjoyed the serial and recognised the dialect and occasional bits of clothing but alleged that its central issue – the problem of revenge killings – was something that happened elsewhere in Upper Egypt. Perhaps this happens in Sohag (a city to the north), some villagers offered, even though I had heard the vivid narratives about just such a revenge killing in their village only a decade earlier.

I was most struck by the suspension of judgment people applied to the compartmentalised television others because it was so different from their critical evaluations of neighbours and kin. This response resembled the villagers' curious but neutral discussions of the foreign tourists, archaeologists and researchers who were daily in their midst and had been since the early part of the century.

I am not arguing here that the villagers anxiously compartmentalise the 'modernity' television serials (or foreigners) present in order to preserve a static traditional community somehow untouched by the global or 'modernity'. On the contrary, while the village appears picturesque with

its 'traditional' sights like mudbrick homes and swaying palm trees, donkeys and the occasional camel carrying loads of clover or sugar-cane leaves, men hoeing fields or walking barefoot along muddy irrigation canals, and women in long black robes balancing bundles on their heads, there is not an aspect of people's everyday lives that has not been shaped by 'the modern'.

The modern Egyptian state determined that sugar cane be grown in the region, decides on prices, requires permits and licences, conscripts all young men into its army, and runs the Antiquities Organisation that employs so many local men, prevents people from building in certain areas, and requires that they build in quaint mudbrick. It runs the schools that most children now attend, coming home weary from carrying the schoolbooks that teach about cleanliness, patriotism and religion.

People suffer from various health problems, the result of chemicals and pesticides, too much sugar in the diet, and waste – including plastic bottles, batteries, and Raid cans – thrown into the irrigation canals. The straight-backed men in their turbans and long pale robes are savvy about the difference between local physicians and specialists who are university professors and practice in Cairo, Mansura and Assiut. The women in black want 'television examinations' of their pregnancies and want to know if you had an ordinary delivery or a caesarian.

How well people eat and whether they decide to uproot cash crops to grow wheat is determined by such faraway organisations as the World Bank and the IMF. Whether the men are away looking for work depends on the state of the Saudi Arabian economy, the decisions of bourgeois investors in the Red Sea tourist developments, French archaeologists, and wealthy Lebanese refugees setting up chicken factories on the desert road to Alexandria, 600 kilometers away. Whether children who have learned to say 'Hello, baksheesh' come running home to give their mothers a few pounds, men who have developed pride in the art of carving pharaonic cats and Horus statuettes find buyers, and those who cook meals for the low-budget tourist groups visiting the tomb of King Tut on donkeys make enough to get new covers for their cushions all depends on whether the *New York Times* has reported 'terrorist' attacks in Cairo.

And contrary to the joke told in Cairo, everyone knows how to operate not just television sets but washing machines, refrigerators, fans and water pumps.

Television is, in this village, one part of a complex jumble of life and the dramatic experiences and visions it offers are surprisingly easily incorporated as discrete – not overwhelming – elements in this jumble.

This is not to say that television in general has not transformed social life or imaginaries. There are at least three areas in which careful ethnographic work might reveal significant transformations. First, in social life: there is less visiting among households in the evenings since families stay home to watch television. More important, television may have increased

the number of 'experiences' shared across generation and gender. Television brings families together in the evening and makes it more likely that men and women will socialise together as they sit around the single television set in the house. The focus of attention is the evening serial but families converse with each other while waiting for it, as when the start of the serial is delayed by government ministers droning on during the televised sessions of Parliament. Conflicts also arise, though, between generations and genders about which programmes to watch, just as exposure to television differs by generation.

Second, television may have changed the nature of experience itself. Some Egyptian professionals rationalised to me viewers' pleasures using a discourse of continuity, suggesting, for example, that the serials are like 'the stories a grandmother tells her grandchildren to send them to sleep', or 'like *The Thousand and One Nights*, where the story-teller would stop at the most exciting moment to attract the audience to listen to him the next day', or the North African tradition 'where the wandering poet who sings his poetry to the tune of the rababa stops every day at an exciting point in the story of 'Antar or Abu-Zeid al-Hilaly'.²⁹ But this ignores a distinctive feature of television drama, what Raymond Williams (1989) has called, referring to the frequency with which TV viewers are exposed to it, its possible role in dramatising consciousness itself.

The third area where television in general may be transforming experience is in its facilitation of new identifications and affiliations. Do the villagers feel part of an imagined community of citizens or consumers because they know they are watching the same programmes at the same time and being offered the same goods as people across the country?

To acknowledge or explore the general effects of television on experience is not, however, the same project as the one I've been pursuing in this paper, which is to track the effects of particular kinds of public-spirited programmes on their objects. Two factors conspire to undermine the impact of serials like *Hilmiyya Nights*. First, of course, the serials appear only as part of the flow (Williams 1975) of programming, sandwiched between films, pumpkin-seed serials, advertising, religious programmes, children's programmes, sports, news, nature programmes and countless talking-head shows. More important, their messages are evaluated from within, and hence often balanced or even contradicted by, the powerful everyday realities within which villagers, like poor working women in Cairo, move. These realities are both resolutely local and transnational.

Whereas *Hilmiyya Nights* and related serials condemn the consumerism and materialism encouraged in the 1970s with the renunciation of socialism and the turn to economic liberalisation, the proliferating television advertisements that precede the broadcast of evening serials and the middle-to upper-class lifestyles portrayed in most dramatic serials offer different messages. These are reinforced by local circumstances. At least among the schoolchildren, the availability of the goods in the nearby town of Luxor

combines with these television messages to instil an insistent desire for specific brands of candy or running shoes (Amigo shoes with Ninja Turtles on them). For urban poor women, the availability of such goods is that much more persuasive.

Ukasha and the other enlightened professionals also exclude from their storylines any positive depiction of the various guises of the Islamic alternative being offered to Egypt's populace. Yet the Islamic identity and knowledge promoted by religious programmes on television interact positively with adults' experiences in the new or refurbished mosques that are being enthusiastically supported and children's experiences in schools, secular state institutions that are, somewhat ironically, the locus of religious pressure especially in rural areas. In the village where I worked, these children, the girls forced to wear the new Islamic headcovering and all subjected to the lectures of their aggressively religious schoolteachers, even discussed in class the significance of a television serial loosely based on the Koranic story of Joseph.

Furthermore, as for poor women in Cairo, there is little to reinforce the enlightening messages about culture, social responsibility and national unity the politically inspired culture-industry professionals are seeking to disseminate. *Hilmiyya Nights*, with its secular vision of a modern Egypt full of virtuous patriotic citizens, united across class by their love of country, sought to bring these subalterns into its modern fold.

But these subalterns are already folded into Egyptian modernity in a different way. The children who sing every morning the national anthem and memorise countless other nationalist songs from government school-books may be somewhat receptive to the nationalist messages of television serials. Some, like a young village girl completing agricultural school, dream of impossible futures like being given a government plot of land in Sinai to develop. But their elders in Upper Egypt believe that their region has long been discriminated against and exploited by the north; they regularly experience the nation not through songs but through a formidable bureaucracy, a corrupt police force and army service (in which they are badly treated). The unity of rich and poor in national endeavours that *Hilmiyya Nights* idealises is undermined by their knowledge of how the wealthy buy their way out of the army and around all regulations. For urban women who are the exploited supports of a modern class system, solving the twin demands of work and respectability through 'Islamic' veiling, this vision of the nation must also find little corroboration.

The problem, finally, is that the kind of modernity these television serials depict as a vision for Egypt depends on class position and the availability of certain kinds of educational and career opportunity. The 'uneducated public' at whom these serials are directed participates in the more common form of modernity in the post-colonial world: the modernity of poverty, consumer desires, underemployment, ill health and religious nationalism.

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NOTES

1. Given the non-specialised readership for this paper, I have used an extremely simplified system of transliteration from the Arabic. To mark the letter *ayn* I use an apostrophe; otherwise all diacritics are absent as are distinctions between long and short vowels.
2. Interview with the author, 22 July 1990.
3. Interview with the author 15 April 1990.
4. Interview with the author, 15 April 1990.
5. Interview with the author, 22 July 1990.
6. So popular has it been internationally that its stars have been invited to act in Italian, Spanish and French films. They were treated as VIPs when invited to Egypt's Film Festival in December 1993, and thrilled audiences in India when they came on the air to wish Hindus well on a religious holiday. Many of these details were provided in a major magazine spread by Galal Al-Rashidy, 'The Stars of the Bold and the Beautiful Behind the Camera' (in Arabic), *Sabah al-Khayr*, 25 March 1993, pp. 46–50.
7. Ibrahim 'Issa, 'An American Researcher in an Important Book: Egypt Subsidises America!' [in Arabic], *Roz al-Yusuf* 3382, 5 April 1993.
8. It seems frequently the case that national productions are more widely popular than imports. For evidence from Europe, see Silj 1988.
9. Sayed Yassin, 'Cultural Papers: "Hilmiyya Nights" and Political Activity', *Al-Iqtisadi*, 9 July 1990, pp. 96–7.
10. With the increase in products available on the market, competition has become fierce and television advertising considered effective in a country where illiteracy runs high. According to Aida Nasr (*Cairo Today*, November 1992, p. 98), the television advertising industry grossed LE 50 million, gleaned from a 15–20 per cent commission.
11. For a stimulating discussion of the politics of television melodrama, see Joyrich (1992).
12. According to 'Abd al-Nur Khalil, 'The Ramadan of Television Captured People in a Bottle' (in Arabic), *Al-Musawwar* 3518, 13 March 1992, pp. 48–9, so wedded did the actors become to their roles that, after the conclusion of the serial, many of them complained that they felt trapped by their roles in *Hilmiyya Nights*. As in American soap operas, stars also quit the show before its conclusion and had to be replaced so audiences had to cope with the separation of character from actor.
13. According to Soha Abdel Kader (1985), based on a content analysis of television dramas and women's programmes in 1980, women are numerically under-represented in Egyptian television drama but often play significant roles (pp. 15–19). She argues, however, that women are 'always portrayed as more

morally "good" than men' (p. 61), something that was not true of *Hilmiyya Nights*.

14. The only exception in recent American television was the *Murphy Brown* situation comedy that attacked the Bush family-values campaign in retaliation for Vice President Dan Quayle's attack on the protagonist's decision to have a baby out of wedlock. The fact that it was a *cause célèbre*, reported in newspapers and thought worthy of a BBC documentary, indicates how unusual the explicit inclusion of politics was in American television entertainment.
15. For a discussion of the exclusion of the perspective of the Islamic movement from television serials, see Abu-Lughod (1993).
16. 10 June 1990, p. 10.
17. Articles entitled 'The Political Impact of Hilmiyya Nights' (in Arabic) (*Al-Wafd*, 14 May 1990, p. 5) and 'Historical Facts and Hilmiyya Nights' (in Arabic) (*Al-Wafd*, 21 May 1990, p. 5).
18. 'Hilmiyya Nights Between Nasser and Sadat', *Roz al-Yusuf* 3233, 28 May 1990, pp. 68–9.
19. Interview by Aynas Ibrahim (in Arabic), *Roz al-Yusuf*, 24 May 1990, p. 56.
20. Interview by Abba Al-Ruwayny (in Arabic), *Al-Ahaly*, 30 May 1990.
21. Dalal 'Abd Al-Fatah (in Arabic), *Roz al-Yusuf*, 3371, 18 January 1993, p. 10.
22. The men, she argued, are not macho and they don't dominate women. The women work and make money. They want to succeed and to make their own futures. They don't give in to fate or circumstances or gossip. They use their minds and all they've got. The pleasure viewers get from *The Bold and the Beautiful*, she continues, is in seeing confrontation and hope ('*The Bold and the Beautiful: A Serial without Male Complexes*' (in Arabic), *Sabah al-Khayr*, 11 February 1993, p. 59).
23. *Roz al-Yusuf*, 3371, 18 January 1993, p. 8.
24. The theme of protection even came up in this article 'Ukasha wrote about *Oshin*. Accusing Egyptian television authorities of conspiring to discourage viewing by placing it in an unusual time slot, he compared *Oshin* favorably to *Roots* and other high-quality serials of the sort they hated to import for fear that people might come to demand programmes that met intellectual standards. No doubt alluding to his battles with the censors, he accused them of perceiving these high-quality serials the way they perceived democracy – as something that Egyptians needed to be protected from and only given in small doses.
Using a different food metaphor than Fadil's pumpkin-seed munching, 'Ukasha contrasted *Oshin*, a natural drama with no food preservatives or artificial flavours, to the 'hawawshy bread' of *The Bold and the Beautiful*. ('Hawawshy bread' is a kind of meat pie whose strong spices are known to cover poor-quality minced meat.) Instead of striking women showing off their bodies and male mannequins smiling promiscuously, *Oshin* told the profound story of an ordinary Japanese woman who overcomes great obstacles (Usama Anwar 'Ukasha, 'Pay Attention Gentlemen: "Oshin" Confronts the "Bold and the Beautiful"' (in Arabic), *Roz al-Yusuf*, 3385, 26 June 1993, pp. 52–3).
Ironically, under public pressure, *The Bold and the Beautiful* was eventually reduced from nightly broadcasts and *Oshin* brought back on the air in late 1993. Only a few months later, however, *Oshin* had become the subject of tremendous criticism in the press because of its relentlessly depressing character.
25. *Al-Ahram*, 6 February 1993, p. 2.
26. On state feminism and its demise in Egypt, see Hatem (1992).

- 27 For more on *The White Flag*, see Abu-Lughod (1993).
- 28 Abdel Kader's (1985) study showed that there was a bias toward portraying the urban upper classes. Of fourteen serials and twelve short plays sampled during a 6-month period in 1980, none were set in rural areas (p. 36).
- 29 Nur Al-Sharif, interview with the author, 22 July 1990.

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