

Capitalism at Home:

Labour and Revolution in two Egyptian Novels

Contributors:

Mai Taha is Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology, London School of Economics.

Sara Salem is Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology, London School of Economics.

Acknowledgements:

We would like to thank Sophie Chamas for her generous feedback. We presented an earlier version of this article at the Historical Materialism Conference in London, and the feedback we received was very helpful in revising the arguments.

Introduction

*All the days are like all the days, nothing grows and develops through the struggle, and nothing happens other than the mad race to own and possess, nothing changes.*¹

Boredom, repetition, and dreariness mark the life of Dhat, the protagonist and anti-hero of Sonallah Ibrahim's novel *Dhat*.² Ibrahim is writing about the period known in Egypt as *infitah*, the years when Anwar el-Sadat took power (1970-1981) following the death of Third Worldist leader Gamal Abdel Nasser. These were the years during which many postcolonial states moved towards free market economy and the unending competition over material goods. Dhat's life is consumed by work; for

her, *all the days are like all the days*. Stuck in a spiralling repetition, her time is marked by housework. In the evenings, she prepares large quantities of peeled and chopped garlic and onions, one and a half kilos of boiled meat, and homemade salsa. Before she goes to bed, she cleans the vegetables while watching television. The next morning, she takes out the food from the freezer so that it is ready for cooking when she returns from work in the afternoon. She prepares meals for the next three days and soon after she washes the dishes leftover from breakfast. Then comes the scattered clothes. She collects her daughter's pyjamas and her husband's dirty socks, soaks them in water before she puts them in the washing machine in the late afternoon. After all, a semi-clean laundry batch would only mean she would have to repeat the cycle again.³ In the evening, she picks out the stones from the rice in front of the television, washes it in the morning and cooks it after she returns from work, saving some time to prepare a dessert like flan or jelly, "or, or, or, etc...all the housework that never ends."⁴ The repetitive gestures continue everyday forming a muscle memory that controls all her bodily moves. There is something unhomely about how Dhat inhabits the home space, as if she is watching her own life, estranged from her very existence. The reader relates to her yet is also alienated from her at the same time.

This article centres the home as a space of labour and alienation, while simultaneously paying attention to the affective and visceral dimensions of reproductive labour. We do this through a close reading of two Egyptian novels: Latifa al-Zayyat's *The Open Door* and Sonallah Ibrahim's *Dhat*, published approximately thirty years apart in 1960 and 1993 respectively. Each novel represents a particular historical moment, but both invite their readers inside the home and the family, narrating their history through the histories of colonialism, postcolonialism, and capitalism in Egypt. Al-Zayyat herself wrote about Ibrahim's *Dhat* many years after publishing her first novel *The Open Door*. We

translated this literary encounter between both writers, an encounter that we think is not coincidental. The two novels speak to one another even if differently.⁵ One protagonist seeks the *open door* of the home, the second is trapped inside it, and inside her being or *dhat*. Writing about *Dhat*, al-Zayyat shows that the novel takes an epic form based on alienation in the Brechtian sense of the term.⁶ The novel is not told from the perspective of the protagonist, Dhat, but from the perspective of a narrator, the writer himself. This, as al-Zayyat shows, alienates us as readers from Dhat's life, locating us outside the event, emotionally separated from it and observing it from above. Alienation seeps into the novel's form of narration and in the everyday materiality of Dhat's life. Her home is unhomely. Her labour is not hers. Her life is a make-believe parallel life narrated by the writer whose own agonies about Egypt during this historical conjuncture consumes Dhat's existence.

Through this alienated narration, the novel invites us into the home, a site that is absent in many readings of the history of capitalism in Egypt. The absence of the home—with its labour and affective experiences—from what we understand capitalism to be produces an analysis that is incomplete, as scholars of social reproduction have long argued. We argue that this absence creates a sensation of haunting. In al-Zayyat's novel, the home is a tangible haunting absence, in that it is conceptualised as an apolitical space; the revolution is happening elsewhere, outside of the home, and the characters must leave the home and cross its threshold to become revolutionary subjects. What is absent here is a conceptualisation of capitalism as seeping into every part of life, including the home; by extension, revolution must also take place everywhere, if it is to be truly anti-capitalist. The absence of the home as a site of capitalism means that it is also absent as a site of revolution.⁷ To be a revolutionary is to leave the home, not to rethink the division of labour and class formation *from within* the home.

In Ibrahim's *Dhat*, this conceptualisation structures the novel; because of how ordinary Dhat and her life and home are, the reader sees how deeply implicated our home lives are in questions of capital and labour; it is everywhere and affects everyone, even the most ordinary and apolitical of people. Ibrahim, as opposed to al-Zayyat, centres the home as a site of capitalism and thus of revolution, and invites us to see someone as ordinary as Dhat as a potential revolutionary subject. This stretching has implications for how we think about the home in relation to both capitalism and revolution; the home as a site of revolution, and Dhat as a potential revolutionary subject.⁸ Yet there is still a haunting absence in this novel: that of the past. Throughout we are haunted by the Nasserist years, during which revolution was everywhere, and capitalism was exposed. In this sense, the changes taking place during the transition to a free market are marked as a political choice rather than inevitable, precisely because they are constantly read against the project of Arab socialism that came before. Both novels speak to the absence of the home in conceptualisations of capitalism in Egypt; one through its uncritical reading of the home that locates revolutionary subjectivity elsewhere, and the other through its centring of the home as a key site of revolutionary subjectivity.

That both of these moments—one characterised by anticolonialism and the other by the free market—include a kind of haunting absence has implications for the way we assess anticolonialism, resistance, and capitalism in the context of Egypt. It is only by centring the home as a site of the production and reproduction of capitalism and of class formation that we can begin to address this absence, transforming the way we imagine revolutionary politics and possibilities. If, following Avery Gordon, haunting signifies something unresolved, something that will continue to appear in the present until it is addressed, we can read the spectre of the home in studies of capitalism as an

invitation to reimagine what revolutionary horizons might look like if we took all kinds of labour seriously.⁹

Centring the home also allows us to access revolutionary and counter-revolutionary moments through a different register.¹⁰ In this sense, the article speaks to the special issue's core thematic of how we might differently visit revolutionary and counter-revolutionary moments through the register of social reproduction, class formation and affect in the space of the home, showing that the home is a central site of politics. Dhat's experience of the endless cycle of housework is described in highly affective and visceral ways, bringing to life how capitalism and labour are felt. Taking seriously the question of what revolution and counter-revolution *feel like*, the article explores how time, the body and the market are experienced through various senses, and what this tells us about the machinations of capitalism and labour. In this sense, the haunting absence of the home as a critical site of analysis can be read as an invitation to explore different registers of politics, those often left out of discussions of capitalism in Egypt.

In what follows, we first situate this article within the literature on social reproduction theory, as well as critical scholarship on the history of capitalism in Egypt, noting how centring the home requires a theoretical and methodological shift. To access everyday life in the home and its affective registers, we rely on fiction as an archive of social reproduction and alienation. Second, we look at different historical moments in Egypt during which debates on care work and motherhood cropped up and ask what these debates tell us about broader questions of capitalist reproduction. We focus on two historical moments, each engaged with through the lens of the novel, as material sources of social and labour relations inside in the home. We begin with the postcolonial moment and its articulation of anticolonial nationalism, Arab Socialism, and state feminism. Through al-Zayyat's *The Open Door*,

we look at the imagined role of women in newly independent Egypt. As part of a new vision of postcolonial modernity, this period witnessed a radical reimagination of the role of women in the public sphere, yet it maintained the sanctity of the figure of the mother that serves the nation through her reproductive labour of child-rearing and household management.

We then move to Egypt's transition to an open market economy, or *infitah*, looking in particular at the conditionalities and the structural adjustment programs of the World Bank and the IMF throughout the 1970s. Through a close reading of Ibrahim's novel, *Dhat*, we focus on the new challenges facing women in the post-*infitah* period as the state was withdrawing social protections secured by the Nasser regime. The changing rhythms and tempos of everyday life depicted in the novel reveal the added burden of reproductive labour on women that was consolidated through an increasingly insular nuclear family. Rather than a close analysis of those two historical moments in the history of Egyptian capitalism, we think that these two moments, read together, serve as starting points to help us rethink the history of Egyptian capitalism, through the haunting absence of the home and its labour.

Beyond the factory: the home and literature as its archive

Critical scholarship on the history of capitalism in Egypt has primarily come from the fields of workers' history, critical political economy, and development studies, including work focused on gender inequality.¹¹ At the same time, there has been extensive and prolific work on gender history, feminist movements and the family. In this article we want to think about these histories alongside one another. Histories of capitalism in Egypt often examine the historical tension between class and nation, but tend to focus on labour done outside of the home. On the other hand, Hanan Hammad brilliantly recasts women's history by re-examining the relationship between life and labour through

the experience of urbanity and the factory.¹² Through a newly-fabricated hybrid gender role, working women renegotiated their space in the factory while remaining “dutiful mothers, wives, and daughters in the family.”¹³ Because of the economic independence that came with factory work, they were able to liberate themselves from some of the patriarchal social norms that governed their relationship to their families. As such, working-class women were “neither powerful nor powerless.”¹⁴ They renegotiated their space in society and in the household in new and imaginative ways.

Following Hammad, we are interested in scoping out this constantly negotiated relationship between life and labour by looking at social reproduction. The rich literature on social reproduction has helped us to think critically about what counts as labour, and how value is assigned under capitalism.¹⁵ Importantly, it shows how value is highly gendered and racialized. In other words, this literature reminds us to always ask who reproduces the social world we all live in. Initially conceptualised as a Marxist feminist framework for understanding the unpaid work that goes into reproducing both the household and labour, social reproduction theory pushes us to continually revisit the famous question: “If labour produces the commodity, who produces labour?” Challenging the tendency of orthodox Marxist scholarship to ignore the importance of unpaid labour—often done by women—to the evolution of capitalism, social reproduction as a theory made a crucial intervention in Marxist theorising.¹⁶ Following this literature, we argue that centring the home could help us narrate another more complex history of capitalism in Egypt, and perhaps also tell us something about the present.

Stuart Hall’s wide-ranging writings on cultural studies inform much of the analysis in this article, particularly our understanding of how culture relates to how we theorise political economy. As Hall writes, “[a]rt and literature...[are] part of the general process which creates conventions and

institutions, through which the meanings that are valued by the community are shared and made active.”¹⁷ Changes in culture relate closely to changes in the economy, in that cultural productions such as novels or films are often attempts at meaning-making in relation to what a society is experiencing; these become particularly important, then, when it relates to shifts or breaks between various historical moments. Culture “threads” through all social practices and is “the sum of their inter-relationship.”¹⁸ As such, we treat literary and visual culture as material sources of representation of social relations and sites of political contestation.

While we are influenced by and rely on existing critical literature on the history of capitalism in Egypt, we posit that starting from the home forces a methodological shift. Traditional archiving practices often exclude everyday life in the home space. One could find personal status legislation, labour laws, court records, employment statistics divided by gender, rates of unemployment, and unionization. In other words, the available material is often around the home, not inside of it. To get inside the home, to face its haunting absence, we turn to the arts, exploring how literature could act as alternative archive depicting labour, time, and gender in the home space. By accessing the home through literature, we are able to access a different register of politics, one that is sensitive to affect.

For the ‘affective turn’ that centres feelings, sentiments and a whole range of affective states in scholarly research, interior selves become “objects of imagination”—emotional life is seen as social life. This has been crucial in troubling the line between the material and the immaterial, helping to complicate, deepen and expand the ways in which we understand political, economic and social inequality, as well as to provide texture to structures that can often seem very abstract. The continued emphasis on the “emotionally contained subject”—a spectre of Eurocentrism haunting affect studies—relies on a closed off subject, a stance that has been critiqued by various scholars.¹⁹ Pushing against

the individualisation of loss or affect more broadly, Orkideh Behrouzan calls for careful attention to both historical and generational sensibilities that can be traced through affect, and Neetu Khanna has called for more attention to be paid to what she terms the visceral nature of anticolonialism and decolonisation. Sara Ahmed's work on affect similarly speaks to the forms of knowledge we become attuned to when we pay attention to senses and feelings.²⁰ Specifically, her writing on what home means in relation to migration explores the many meanings attached to 'being at home,' writing against the notion that home can ever be a 'pure' space outside of politics.²¹ In both novels, affective states such as despair, hopelessness, anger, and defeat characterise not only the lives of Dhat and Layla, but also speak to broader collective sentiments connected to anticolonialism, postcolonialism and neoliberalism. As such, they become lenses into historical changes as narrated through the intimate space of the home.

Crucial texts such as Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives* and Antoinette Burton's edited volume *Archive Stories* speak to the complex and powerful ways in which the fictional and speculative work to address gaps, silences and erasures in the 'official' archive.²² As with memory, fiction includes the possible risk of leaning away from events as they 'really were,' while also attuning us to the possibility that events always unfold in multiple ways thus precluding us from searching for an untouched truth. Yet the fictionalised and speculative enable us to revisit events and figures otherwise left out of the official archives, rendered to the silences of history. They also enable us to encounter these events and figures through centring the visceral, haunting nature of violence and resistance, hope and defeat.

Perhaps most importantly, fiction gives writers the ability to capture distinct temporalities that mark the contradictions of projects such as *infitalh*, where optimism for the future comes to clash with the exhausted and endless present. As noted by Monica Popescu in her book *At Penpoint*, various

“affective temporal structures” operated in the novels of African writers during the era of anticolonial revolution.²³ Popescu excavates different temporal registers, from defeat to optimism, arguing that they emerge through fiction because of the ability of writers to capture minute changes in experiences of time that otherwise escape the historical archives. In Sonallah Ibrahim’s *Dhat*, for instance, temporality becomes a lens into experiences of the free market; through capturing how sensations of time shift in different spaces, Ibrahim tells a broader story about past, present and future. It is in this sense that fiction becomes an archive that allows us to see into the home and to articulate it as a space of politics.

The Home, the Nation, and *The Open Door*

The celebrated feminist novel, *The Open Door*, written by Latifa al-Zayyat in 1960 and its later rendition into a film directed by Henri Barakat in 1963, is a story about challenging gender norms in the midst of anticolonial struggle. The novel was written a few years after the nationalization of the Suez Canal, a major conjuncture in Third Worldist decolonisation, and represents an attempt to centre women’s resistance against the British occupation. Importantly, it connects women’s liberation to that of national liberation. The popularly supported 1952 coup that ousted the British from the country marked the founding of Egypt’s postcolonial state, defined by a project of modernisation, Arab socialism, and anticolonial nationalism led by one of the central figures of Third Worldism, Gamal Abdel Nasser. Some of the key transformations during this moment include wide-spread nationalizations, a turn away from foreign capital as the basis of the economy, as well as the introduction of free education, health care and guaranteed employment due to the expansion of the public sector. This also included a project of expanding the role of women in the public sphere,

including in factory work, government jobs and in politics, especially in urban environments. Because of these dramatic shifts, this historical moment marks an important transition in the story of Egyptian capitalism and its entanglements with the home.

The novel follows Layla, an intelligent young woman from a middle-class Cairene family. It is no coincidence that *The Open Door* begins with the 1946 strikes and demonstrations across the country called by the Egyptian Labour Union and the National Committee of Students and Workers against the British occupation. After all, al-Zayyat herself was a member of the National Committee of Students and Workers as a college student in the 1940s, a member of the communist party *Iskra*, and a devout anti-colonial activist.²⁴ Layla represents the new Egyptian woman, who rebels against traditional gender norms by joining the national struggle for independence. Egypt during the Nasser period, like other post-independence states in Africa and Asia, embarked upon a comprehensive legal, economic and cultural program that consolidated the power and political legitimacy of the postcolonial regime.²⁵ Women were granted the right to vote in 1956, and new labour laws iterated the principle of non-discrimination on the basis of gender. Women were entitled to fifty days of paid maternity leave, and employers had to provide day care if they employed more than one hundred women.²⁶ Accordingly, as Mervat Hatem argues, the state “made reproduction a public concern.”²⁷ This was not simply a formal commitment to women’s rights, but a comprehensive state agenda that instituted changes in the nature of women’s productive and reproductive labour.

Within this context, one can see Layla as the embodiment of the project of state feminism. With the liberation of the nation, Layla would become this new Egyptian woman. Egypt’s independence would open up the space for her and other women to become part of the public sphere: to work in factories and in politics, and to have a more prominent role in society, moving out of the

imprisoning confines of the home with its archaic sensibilities. Layla sees this clearly: “she grew to the realization that to reach womanhood was to enter a prison where the confines of one’s life were clearly and decisively fixed. At its door stood her father, her brother, and her mother. Prison life, she discovered, is painful for both the warden and the woman he imprisons. The warden cannot sleep at night, fearful that the prisoner will fly, anxious lest the prisoner escape the confines.”²⁸ Here, the prison is the home and she is the prisoner. Later in the novel, she compares herself to a slave: “a slave, nothing but a *jariya*! A *jariya* in the slave market! Dressing and adorning herself to raise her price” to move to another home, another prison after marriage.²⁹ The collectively imagined new Egypt would get women out of that prison and its servitude. The absent presence of the home haunts the story. On some level, the novel is about the *open door* of the home; to get out and be free. But on another level, the critique of the home never gets to its core, as a site of political economy and gendered division of labour.

Layla could already see glimpses of this new womanhood, not in visions of socialized care, but only in moments of national resistance to the British colonial presence in Egypt. Egyptian arts and culture depicted a consistent vision of anticolonialism during the Nasser period. Importantly, this period saw the socialization of culture that aimed to reach the working class and cement the project of anticolonial modernity. The absence of the home as a critical site of understanding the parameters of socialist feminist liberation continued to haunt the characters of the novel, as they uncritically embrace a version of freedom that only goes through the *open door*, never *stay with its trouble*. As an anticolonial demonstration leaves Layla’s school, the headmistress approaches the microphone and students hear her say: “[w]oman’s job was motherhood... Woman’s place was in the home... Weapons and fighting were for men.”³⁰ But Layla is inspired by her friend, Samia Zaki, who responds to the headmistress: “Our esteemed headmistress says that woman belongs in the home and man belongs in the struggle. I

want to say that when the English were killing Egyptians in 1919, they didn't distinguish between women and men. And when the English stole the Egyptians' freedom they didn't distinguish between men and women. And when they plundered the livelihood of so many Egyptians, they didn't stop to think where that belonged to men or to women."³¹ Here, al-Zayyat is making the important and historical connection between women's liberation and liberation from colonialism. Indeed, this is a significant, and on some level, a historically materialist, intervention. Samia Zaki's words connect historical structures of oppression and exploitation to each other. The year 1919, for example, saw wild cat strikes in a social revolution against colonialism across the country. al-Zayyat is rejecting local manifestations of the patriarchy through rejecting its colonial and capitalist iterations. While this is a very powerful intervention, the novel ends up taking overtly nationalistic and melodramatic tones. And in the process, the reader gets pulled into the drama of endless letters between Layla and Husayn, her love interest, that are weighed down by direct messages and crude metaphors of the nation, reading more like manifestos than love letters.

Husayn writes to Layla: "*my overpowering longing for the homeland left me no choice. For you have become the symbol for all I love in my nation. When I think of Egypt, I think of you; when I long for Egypt, I long for you. And to be honest, I never stop longing for Egypt.*"³² Husayn's love for Layla is inseparable from his love for the country connecting both libidinal and national aspirations.³³ Beth Baron and other feminist writers have shown how Egypt was centred in the national imagination as a woman and a mother.³⁴ This important reflection on the imagery of womanhood and motherhood in postcolonial Egypt is also an allegory for land fertility, reproduction, care and notions of unbounded love. Husayn continues in his love letter, calling on Layla to leave the space of the "T" that she had been living in and let go. He asks her to sacrifice her "*selfish desires for the larger whole, in love, in an ever-renewing, fertile life.... Then you will find*

love, a love bigger than you and me, a beautiful love that no one can ever steal from you. A love whose echo you will always find resounding in your ear, reflected in the heart. It is a love that makes one grow: love of the nation, love for its people.”³⁵ This larger love for the nation and its people would become truly a woman’s primary role.

Loving the nation entails caring for its workers and its future generations. While the imagery of womanhood and motherhood served the national consciousness, it effaced women’s labour at home, subsuming it under the allusive category of ‘love’. A woman’s struggle in motherhood, be it in the form of labour or social and psychological burdens, falls outside the mainstream conception of motherhood, which views it as a relation of exceptionality and unconditionality – a relation of boundless love.

The first love story that Layla experiences in the novel is with her cousin, Isam who gradually disappoints her with his violent possessiveness and his cowardice when he doesn’t volunteer in the peoples’ resistance against the British. But the true turning point in this short-lived love story was when the character of Sayyida, the domestic worker in Isam’s household appears. When Layla enters Isam’s room, al-Zayyat writes, “[she] was kneeling on the floor, wiping traces of coffee off the carpet with a damp rug... [as] Isam got up, an embarrassed smile on his face.”³⁶ Sayyida continues to wipe the floor despite the fact that there was no longer a sign of spilt coffee. When asked to leave, Sayyida “raised her eyes, giving [Isam] a bold look.... Then, slackly, she got to her feet.”³⁷ There is clearly a tension in this encounter: Sayyida is already framed as suspicious, even if bold and flirtatious. But this tension is crystallized in Layla’s thoughts through the narrator’s words:

Layla took a relieved breath when Sayyida was nearly out the door, but then she came back in, her large body moving indolently, taking the cup slowly from the desk, and then leaving the room again, letting her full hips sway slowly, heavily, a half-smile on her lips that was not directed at anyone, as if she were smiling at something that had just come into her mind—a secret, something very private and significant, something that gave her sense of importance.³⁸

Sayyida is immediately framed as the promiscuous maid, seducing the man of the house with her “large body” and her “full hips” swaying, as she unashamedly reveals part of the secret shared between her and Isam. When Layla asks Isam’s sister, Gamila, about her she says: “That’s because she has a crush on Isam. She’s his girlfriend, ya sitti!”, a statement that would later haunt Layla. Gamila continues to say that she had once seen them together on the kitchen floor late at night. At this point, the reader has no sympathy with Sayyida, the maid who is plotting beyond her reach, stealing Isam from Layla, the main protagonist of the story. The common representation of domestic workers stealing money, objects and men from the household is perpetuated in this self-consciously feminist and leftist novel. Promiscuous Sayyida is pitted against Layla whose freedom from the confines of the family becomes tied to the freedom of the nation. As Layla is breaking from old norms of the middle-class through her anti-colonial political activism, domestic work remains devalued and tied to notions of immorality and female promiscuity.

Despite the nationalist and melodramatic tones, the novel still takes the reader inside the home, consciously revealing the gendered familial tensions, and unconsciously depicting the devaluation of domestic work and its relationship with impropriety and promiscuity. At the same time, the home in the novel is defined as an archaic space for the private, individualistic, if not egotistical subject. No real politics could take place within the home space. The home represents middle-class obsessions with trivial matters, such as the bride’s trousseau, “the lacquered wood fauteil with its Aubusson upholstery.”³⁹ The novel refuses to see politics in the home and if there is no politics in the home, there is no labour, no gender and no class at home. It is as if these social relations are evacuated from the home and displaced, not to the outside world, but to an inaccessible place hidden, unmarked, and forgotten. The political subject is evicted from the home into the nation. The only moral political path

is that of the liberation of the nation, which could only happen outside of the confines of the home, *the open door*. This political path would be consummated through a marriage to a man (Husayn), who works as an engineer in the High Dam, no less, Egypt's large national project that symbolized the country's postcolonial modernity, industrialization, and anti-colonialism. Its workers "felt they were building a nation they could better fit into."⁴⁰

The novel, considered a feminist literary manifesto, linked women's individual freedom to the collective national liberation, capturing the spirit of a new vision of postcolonial modernity where women became active participants in the political life of the nation. While it broke older taboos on women's role in the public sphere, it maintained conservative notions surrounding women's propriety and respectability at home, where domestic labour continued to be denigrated and devalued. Still, this influential literary work continues to mark the country's collective memory of the relationship between a particular form of feminism and decolonization. Women's liberation was seen as necessary for building a new, modern, republican, and anti-colonial nation-state.⁴¹ While the state's comprehensive program included women in the public sphere, it relied on their reproductive labour at home. Importantly, as *The Open Door* shows, domestic workers remained constantly suspected as morally dubious, thieves and lacking propriety and respectability. This association deflects attention from seeing the home as a space of devalued labour and women as unpaid workers. It also raises the question of what it might have meant if the homeplace was seen as a worthwhile site of struggle.

The novel has been celebrated by most literary scholars and considered one of the most important works of feminist Arabic fiction, especially when understood within its historical context.⁴² While we appreciate the historical significance of the novel, we are more interested in showing the

tensions within the literary form itself. The novel, in the words of al-Zayyat, falls within the tradition of impressionism in literature, focusing more on the character's thoughts, feelings and emotions.⁴³ Through this style, readers are able to take women's subjectivity seriously at a time when it was difficult to do so. Despite its absence, readers are also able to get inside the home and see the gender and class contradictions that operate within the household. At the same time, the novel is overtly literal and didactic, a quality that shades some of its transgressive content. But again al-Zayyat's conscious use of colloquial Arabic was an attempt to disrupt the form of the traditional male-dominated Arabic novel, which was largely written in classical Arabic language (although Naguib Mahfouz and others had already started incorporating colloquial Arabic).⁴⁴ One could argue that this choice was a reflection of al-Zayyat's own communist commitments towards speaking to the everyday person rather than the intellectual elite. On some level, *The Open Door* privileged a social and literary marginality, by centring a woman's perspective in family and society, and by using colloquial rather than literary diction.⁴⁵ This literary marginality is what drew us to this novel. The home, as an absent-present, becomes an important site from which to understand the limits of approaching the history of capitalism in Egypt only from the perspective of the factory. The devaluation of domestic labour and in fact its irrelevance to class politics in the novel is reflective of broader blind spots in traditional Marxist histories. Sayyida's character shows that her employers were middle class Egyptians who could afford a maid, inconspicuously demonstrating that domestic labour is devalued even within Layla's own imagination of a future independent Egypt that would liberate women from their imprisoning home life. It is almost as if domestic work existed outside of the class relation and the Marxist politics that the novel is known for. Domestic work is not about the material realities of social reproductive labour; it is not about Sayyida wiping the coffee from the floor. It is about her immorality and promiscuity. At the same time,

the novel accurately represents how womanhood during the Nasser period was intimately tied to the nation. This libidinal-national nexus came to be later reflected in a woman's national duty toward a new generation of independent Egyptians who would build a new nation-state after years of colonial plunder. What the novel doesn't directly address is how this national duty would materialize through women's responsibility over social reproduction. Reading this novel closely is therefore not about revealing something new on this period, rather it is about centring the haunting absent presence of the home. Despite the fact that the novel is set inside of the home most of the time, it doesn't take it seriously as a critical site of analysis but sees it as an archaic space to cross and surpass.

While women were celebrated as the drivers of modernity and progress in the public sphere, they were denied their autonomy should they decide to abandon the household or the 'social factory'.⁴⁶ A woman's labour outside of the home, as well as her active participation in political life, was considered complementary to her duties in the household. Showcasing the successes of import substitution and industrialization policy, the state introduced household management devices to help the working mother.⁴⁷ Through the washing machine, the gas stove, and the vacuum cleaner, women would be able to balance between their work outside and inside of the home. The nuclear family came to be governed by the new family planning program that propagated contraception as the way forward for the modern Egyptian family. Through contraception and industrialization, the postcolonial state configured its identity, and in the process maintained the double burden placed on women in society.⁴⁸ Through our analysis, the home thus opens up a different way of apprehending the political and economic realities of Nasser's revolutionary project, in which women both won and lost at the same time.

In what follows, we discuss the complete disintegration of this project, which, albeit imperfect, provided basic social services for women that would soon crumble with the start of *infitah*. As we turn to Sonallah Ibrahim's novel, *Dhat*, we see how this disintegration unfolded in the aesthetics of everyday life in Egypt, and in the material and social relations of production and reproduction. In *Dhat*, the narrator paints a picture of the transition from Arab Socialism to an open market economy. As readers of the novel, we are immersed in the aesthetics of 1970s government offices and institutions. Almost acting as museums of allegiance, the walls of public institutions became boards for declarations of loyalty to God and nation, entrance gates welcomed visitors with national flags, and most importantly, the ruler's own reproduced images hang over workers as they go about their daily duties. Indeed, as the novel narrates with its satirical tone, when Nasser died and Sadat became the president, government bureaucrats wanted to replace Nasser's images with Sadat's across all public institutions. But Sadat, citing principles of loyalty, refused arguing that it was perhaps better to leave Nasser's picture until it fell crumbling on its own.⁴⁹ This aesthetic prophecy was indeed realized, first, in companies formed under the new investment law before it moved to other institutions.⁵⁰ In what follows, we show how the disintegration of this regime was reflected in the home through *Dhat* as the country transitioned to a market economy that, ironically, promised a shining future that was quite the opposite of the faded aesthetics the novel portrays.

On repetition: Egypt's free market project and a deepening domestic burden

Anwar el-Sadat became president of Egypt in 1971, after which we see the 'opening up' of Egypt's economy to foreign investment and imports, known as *infitah*. This was part of a global shift towards the free market, a project that can be understood as a counter-revolution against the radical anti-

colonial moment led by the postcolonial world in the 1950s and 1960s during which a socialist and internationalist imaginary was dominant. The 1970s, therefore, marked the defeat of anticolonialism and Arab socialism, and in the context of Egypt, Nasserism. This coincided with the IMF and World Bank intervention into much of the Global South through structural adjustment programs which had massive effects on public social services that had been established under Nasser. In particular, structural adjustment targeted health and education as sectors within which states were ‘over-spending.’ The withdrawal of the state from the provision of social services would have major ramifications for social reproduction, given that reduced state support for health and education meant an increased burden on individual families to fill in the gaps.⁵¹

Representations of the new emerging elite made up primarily of entrepreneurs and businessmen began to appear in films and novels, focusing especially on their extravagant lifestyles, their sudden wealth, and their Westernised outlook and values. These representations also touched on what *infitah* meant for the rest of society, particularly the deepening inequality, the withdrawal of public services, and the dramatic changes to the urban and rural landscape. We explore these changes through a reading of Sonallah Ibrahim’s novel, *Dhat*, which offers an incisive commentary on how political and economic changes seep into the ordinary-ness of the everyday. We pay particular attention to the way Dhat navigates life post-*infitah*, and the new challenges she confronts in the face of an ever-changing political economy, one representative of counter-revolutionary politics. Perhaps most notably, Dhat’s increasing workload and her accumulating exhaustion structure the novel once we enter the free market era; from cooking and cleaning to taking on side jobs such as sewing to earn more money, Dhat is constantly busy. Her life and time are consumed and regimented by work, creating an endless repetition that renders each day the same as the one before, even as her body

becomes increasingly exhausted. The novel counters the usual absence of the home in relation to Egyptian politics, choosing instead to centre it as a site of capitalist exploitation and gender oppression, and perhaps also as a site of potential revolution. In order to think of the home as a site of critical analysis, Ibrahim mobilises the past as a haunting force in the present, where the Nasserist project is used to demonstrate the increasing exploitation inherent in *infithah*.

Early in the 1970s, international financial institutions began to exert increasing pressure on Egypt's economy and political sphere. In 1988 Egypt was pressured into signing a structural adjustment deal; embedded within this deal was Sadat's promise to cut subsidies and reduce government spending for public services. Alongside this, there was a concerted effort to construct the private sector as the engine of economic growth, which included opening up to foreign capital and turning towards the goal of profitability rather than national development. This was to have particular gendered implications. On the one hand, Nasserism's state-centric approach to gender equality, which was very much built on the public sector and women's labour within it, was abandoned. On the other hand, while the shift to the private sector opened up opportunities for some women, this affected a small minority. As Mervat Hatem writes, "With the retreat of the state as a social and economic agent of change, many official commitments to gender inequality were either ignored or abandoned within and without the state sector. It is the young lower-middle-class and working-class women who bore the brunt of these painful economic and social adjustments."⁵²

Although the private sector often provided a higher salary, it is in relation to benefits that we see a gap between the public and private sector, particularly with regards to job security, long maternity leaves, subsidized transport costs, childcare, and fixed working hours. The *infithah* also had the effect of feminizing a certain part of the labour force.⁵³ Thus, while we see a shift in which women were able

to access jobs during this period, and while social reproductive work intensified because of cuts to social services, the continuity of undervaluing social reproductive work remains. During *infitaḥ*, for instance, we see that middle class and elite women can enact their class belonging by displacing their social reproductive work onto domestic workers, either poor Egyptian women or migrant women. In this sense, class belonging and the contours of class mobility are directly connected to the exploitation of domestic workers who are both classed and racialised. While this is a reality under capitalism in general, we see it become more visible in the 1990s and 2000s as class inequality deepens and as migration becomes more central to regimes of domestic labour.⁵⁴

What we are interested in here is not only what *infitaḥ* did, but also what it took away; in other words, the gaps that opened up because of state withdrawal from social services and reduced government spending. These gaps were often felt at the everyday level, making them difficult to trace politically or economically. Here cultural texts such as novels and films become important archives that document the everyday and pay attention to the experience of economic shifts. Through them we can see the opening of gaps, the attempts to fill them up, and the viscosity of these changes.

We trace some of these gaps through Ibrahim's *Dhat*, which explores Egyptian politics through the life of the central character, Dhat. Sonallah Ibrahim is one of Egypt's most prominent novelists and a self-defined communist intellectual. His leftist views have meant that his work often includes clear and concise critical views on economic, social and political change in Egypt. Having witnessed multiple phases of modern Egyptian nationhood, his sweeping view of history translates into his work, providing a series of fascinating snapshots into different eras. *Dhat* was first published by Dar al-Mustaqbal al-Arabi, a leftist Nasserist publishing house, and was received with great celebration by

Cairo's intellectual scene. The novel was later translated into English and became extremely popular in its translated version as well.

Born on the day of the 1952 revolution, *Dhat* herself is very much symbolic of Egypt as a nation; as Samia Mehrez writes, "This is not a novel that critiques a regime of the past. Rather, it is one that hits hard at the present, in all its manifestations—social, economic, cultural, ideological, religious, political."⁵⁵ The novel is structured around a series of newspaper clippings that detail numerous problems and issues the country was facing, alongside claims by successive governments that everything is fine and that progress is being made. As Mehrez has pointed out, using these newspaper clippings works as a form of testimony, as a way of ensuring that a collective memory of the state of the country was put in place and serialised through literature.⁵⁶ The word *Dhat* itself is also symbolic: Mehrez points out that when used alone, the word *Dhat* means 'self' or 'being' in Arabic, a tactic Ibrahim used to displace the focus from an individual onto the collective. This is not a story about an individual Egyptian woman named *Dhat*, but a story—or a series of stories—about Egypt and Egyptians:

Through the transformations *Dhat* undergoes, a whole society is exposed—its institutions, mores, contradictions, failures, and mediocrity. Yet throughout the narrative and despite the obstacles she encounters, *Dhat* does try to resist, but her resistance collapses in the face of the general tide of her social reality. As we read *Dhat*'s individual history, which gradually loses any individual features because of its familiarity, we discover that it is conditioned and shaped by a collective history that unfolds through [the] newspaper clippings.⁵⁷

The amount of historical detail brought to life through the novel is striking, and is one way in which the past haunts the present. Though the novel, as Mehrez notes, hits hard at the present, the past is a ghost that stays with you as you read, an incessant reminder of the increasing penetration of capitalist logics into the everyday.

The novel raises multiple issues and themes that emerge throughout. Here we focus specifically on the theme of work and exhaustion that permeates much of the novel during the era of *infitah*, and how this is represented through the everyday travails of Dhat. Indeed, as we move from the 1960s into the 1970s, it increasingly seems to be the case that Dhat is always working. Whether at home or at her job at a national news agency, she barely has time to recover, let alone relax. She is in a constant state of movement, which in turn means she is in a constant state of tiredness. In contrast, her husband Abdel-Meguid is portrayed very differently: although he goes to work, once he comes home he spends his time relaxing.

For Dhat, work outside and inside merge into one endless day. Many of the scenes in this section become a repetitive representation of this endless cycle, where Dhat wakes up, goes to work, comes home, only to begin what appears to be a second shift. This echoes feminist understandings of the ‘second’ or ‘third’ shift, where coming home after work—supposedly in order to relax—often means nothing more than starting a new shift, or what can even seem like an entirely new workday. We see Dhat do the laundry, cook, clean, and take care of the children, all while seemingly exhausted. Indeed the images that stay with you from many of these scenes focus on the increasing tiredness Dhat embodies, and the ways in which her pace slows down over time. This social reproductive work and the effects it has on how the body and mind feel is emphasized; it is precisely in the body that women often feel the effects of simply doing too much.

In addition to this—and in addition to her full-time job in the public sector—we also begin to see Dhat getting involved in numerous small business schemes, from selling electric cooking pots to sewing lingerie. This very much captures the spirit of *infitah*, where entrepreneurship was encouraged and the economic burden was individualised. Prices of everything begin to steadily increase, and the flood of luxury imports creates pressure on middle-class or socially mobile families to purchase items seen as representative of class privilege. Brought together, this created immense pressure on families to add other sources of income, despite the idea that this was an era during which Egyptians could supposedly *all* prosper. Adding sources of income was often done via small investments in business. We see Dhat doing everything from buying electric pots and selling them to her co-workers, to buying a sewing machine and sewing clothes to sell. While these schemes initially promise vast returns on minimal investment, they always end badly with Dhat exhausted from all the extra work she must put in. In many ways, these begin to constitute her ‘third’ shift.

One coping mechanism we see Dhat make use of is that of retreating into the bathroom. Several times, Dhat slowly walks to the bathroom, locks herself inside, sits down on the closed toilet seat, and proceeds to cry. The bathroom is also a confined space that cuts through the repetition of the different tasks of the household and the (labour) time put into those tasks. It is a space that gives the illusion of a pause or a break in time from the constant movement from one task to another. The bathroom as a sanctuary; in other rooms she is always surrounded by noise and people and demands. What is interesting about the bathroom is the steady decay that overtakes it. The bathroom is not only an escape from financial and marital difficulties, but also a physical manifestation of those difficulties. In one scene, the bathroom was run down, broken, and leaking water into their neighbour’s apartment, leading to a crisis in the family. After a visit to a couple who had been her university friends and who

were now evidently wealthy, Dhat comes away feeling even worse about her own apartment, and specifically her bathroom. It is only after Dhat uses her own money—which she saved through exhausting sewing work late at night—that the bathroom is fixed and rendered respectable.

From the 1980s, we begin to see numerous infrastructural collapses that the characters read through the inability (or reluctance) or the government to perform quality control checks. Alongside decaying material infrastructures, we also begin to see the steady deterioration of the social service system that was put in place in the 1950s. Where Dhat and Abdel-Meguid had benefited from public schools, universities, and hospitals, their own children—a mere one generation later—went to private schools because of the decreasing quality of public education. Middle class respectability and social mobility is very much built on the valorisation of education. The struggle to pay private school fees becomes not only the major impetus for Abdel-Meguid to migrate to Kuwait, but also remains the main source of worry for the family. Because Abdel-Meguid returns from Kuwait and cannot find a job in Egypt, it is left to Dhat to take on even more work to raise the money for their son's private school. Once again we see the increasing burden on women in particular to respond to economic crisis.

Sonallah Ibrahim's masterpiece is thus a fascinating lens into the gendered changes brought about by varying national projects in Egypt. We see how *infitaḥ* had very particular ramifications for women, especially because of the withdrawal of social services and the individualisation of the economic burden. The novel not only shows the multiple 'shifts' Dhat must complete each day to support her family, but also the embodied nature of this extra work, and the toll it takes on her. Most importantly, the novel refuses to absent the home when it comes to making sense of the neoliberal counter-revolution. Ibrahim shows us that the home is a crucial space in which we see the free market

seeping into the lives of Egyptians, transforming everything from daily rhythms to notions of respectability.⁵⁸ The home also offers a unique lens into the range of public infrastructures that hold society together, and how the free market, with its promises of growth and prosperity, in reality brought decay and collapse.

Conclusion

Novels allow us to trace the ways in which people make sense of changes around them. As Stuart Hall reminds us, if it is sense-making and theorising we are interested in, cultural artefacts such as novels and films are where we should begin. Responding to and in turn constituting large-scale shifts in the economy and politics of a given time and place, films and novels capture how people understand these changes, and in turn how these understandings shape the future. In this article we have used two influential Egyptian novels to centre the home as a critical site of analysis through the political eras of Gamal Abdel Nasser and Anwar el Sadat, arguing for a narrative that takes seriously the home as a lens through which to rethink how we understand Egyptian capitalism. In doing so, we have shown that social reproduction was always-already part of the story of modern Egypt, addressing a haunting absence in much of the literature on the history of capitalism in Egypt. Through attuning ourselves to the affective dimensions of political transformations of the postcolonial state, we are able to explore how these historical moments *feel*, accessing them through a different register inside the home.

On some level this is an unexceptional story, but it is also a specific one; reading the home as a critical site of socio-political analysis in works of art makes us ask different questions about its place within capitalism in Egypt. In this sense, it is not a study of the machinations of capitalism in these historical periods, but about how the home complicates existing histories and theories of capitalism.

We are not simply interested in those two historical moments, but in gesturing towards the role of the home today that continues to be an invisibilized gendering site of exploitation and class formation. Against important work that has sketched out Egyptian capitalism through the centuries, we use the two novels to trace what this has looked like from the vantage point of the home, an always-already political space. The centrality of care work to the functioning of capitalism cannot be erased when the home becomes the starting point; similarly, the experience of doing care work and the depletion that often comes with it becomes part of the story of capitalism, something we are able to trace through the female protagonists in both novels. Moreover, both the novels and the work of Silvia Federici, Claudia Jones and Himani Bannerji point to the classed, racialised and national intersections that permeate care work, ensuring that we do not see it as simply the domain of “women” as a type of universal category.

From Third Worldism to neoliberal capitalism, the haunting spectre of labour in the home appears as a disruptive force. To focus on this absence in relation to capitalism can also tell us about the limits and horizons of political revolutionary projects. While the *Open Door* gets us inside the home, it doesn't centre it as a site of critical analysis. It depicts the home as having a door that needs to be passed, to be crossed in order to reach the 'revolution'. In other words, it has a very specific notion of revolutionary subjectivity – it's only about joining the resistance, not about rethinking the division of labour and class formation within the home. On the other hand, *Dhat* offers a critical reflection of the home space. Readers are suffocated by the unending repetition of household tasks, their mundane violence, and how they transgress the household into a changing society. Both novels in their own ways gesture to the fact that the home is absent in postcolonial Egypt. While the home in the *Open Door* is an uncritical space that is outside of history and politics, in *Dhat*, the home becomes the site

of the plot – the action, the inaction, labour, intimacy, and feelings precisely to demand a shift of gaze into the home. In that sense, our engagement with both novels does different things.

Al-Zayyat and Ibrahim both sketch out the tensions on the one hand and the dreariness on the other embedded within the politics and labour of the home. From the anecdotes about the domestic worker Sayyida in *The Open Door* to the feelings of exhaustion and hopelessness in *Dhat*, the home is brought to life as a political space through which the dramatic changes within Egyptian capitalism can be traced and made sense of. Reading these novels alongside one another also shows the multiplicities within the home as a political space: with Sayidda, for instance, we are faced with the tensions and contradictions surrounding class, gender and labour, refracted through the prism of sexuality and bourgeois family norms. With *Dhat*, this energy falls away and instead we are drawn into a repetitive cycle of work that never seems to end. Taken together, these novels represent very different experiences of what it means to be a woman during different historical moments in Egypt. Yet they both bring to light the workings of capitalism in a postcolonial country in and through the home, rendering it an undeniably political space. More specifically, they bring to light what we argue haunts readings of capitalism in Egypt – the absence of the home. Above all, this means a methodological shift in how we approach the study of capitalism in Egypt, as well as the different sites of revolutionary politics.

Unresolved, the absence of the home, continues to haunt any study of Egyptian capitalism today as the country witnesses acute inequalities that end up burdening the home even further, coupled with mass projects of unhoming. In our current moment of economic crisis and austerity, deepening military rule, and moral panics about “Egyptian family values,” it is more important than ever to centre the home as a political space. Paying attention to who is doing care work and how care work is experienced attunes us to what is happening in Egypt’s political economy more broadly, and, more importantly, who is most adversely affected by it. For women across the world, the

experience of the home is extremely varied. Yet it almost always involves work, even when it is not recognised as such. This work is what allows capitalism to function as it has for centuries, and without it political economy as we know it would not exist. For this reason alone, as well as the tremendous energy it takes from women, it is important that we rethink our conceptual starting points in analysing global capitalism. Indeed, if labour produces the commodity, who produces labour?

-
- ¹ Al-Zayyat, *The Open Door*, 13.
- ² Sonallah Ibrahim sadly passed away on on August 13, 2025, as this article was undergoing its final revisions.
- ³ Ibrahim, *Dhat*, 26.
- ⁴ Ibrahim, *Dhat*, 27.
- ⁵ Al-Zayyat, *al-Taghrib wa al-qina' wa al-mararah*.
- ⁶ Al-Zayyat, *al-Taghrib wa al-qina' wa al-mararah*.
- ⁷ See Taha, *Insurgent Social Reproduction*.
- ⁸ See Taha, *Insurgent Social Reproduction* and Taha, *Thinking Through the Home*
- ⁹ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*.
- ¹⁰ This builds on an earlier article: Taha & Salem, *Social reproduction and empire in an Egyptian century*.
- ¹¹ Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*; Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*; Jakes, *Egypt's Occupation*; Barak, *On Time*; Ayubi, *Overstating the Arab State*; Beinín and Lockman, *Workers on the Nile*.
- ¹² Hammad, *Industrial Sexuality*, 82.
- ¹³ Hammad, *Industrial Sexuality*, 82.
- ¹⁴ Hammad, *Industrial Sexuality*, 82.
- ¹⁵ Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*.
- ¹⁶ Jones, *An End to the Neglect*; Bannerji, *Thinking Through*, 30; McNally, *The Dialectics of Unity and Difference*, 131, 143.
- ¹⁷ Hall, *Cultural Studies*, 59.
- ¹⁸ Hall, *Cultural Studies*, 59.
- ¹⁹ See: Navaro, *Diverting affect*; Khanna, *The Visceral Logics of Decolonization*; Behrouzan, *Medicalisation as a way of life*;
- ²⁰ Ahmed, S., 1999. Home and away: Narratives of migration and estrangement. *International journal of cultural studies*, 2(3), pp.329-347.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Hartman, *Wayward Lives*; Burton, *Archive Stories*.
- ²³ Popescu, *At Penpoint*, 111.
- ²⁴ Al-Zayyat, *The Open Door*, 942.
- ²⁵ Hatem, *Economic and Political Liberation*, 232.
- ²⁶ Hatem, *Economic and Political Liberation*, 232.
- ²⁷ Hatem, *Economic and Political Liberation*, 232.
- ²⁸ Al-Zayyat, *The Open Door*, 61.
- ²⁹ Al-Zayyat, *The Open Door*, 107.
- ³⁰ Al-Zayyat, *The Open Door*, 123.
- ³¹ Al-Zayyat, *The Open Door*, 125.
- ³² Al-Zayyat, *The Open Door*, 561.
- ³³ Naaman, *The Anti-Romance Antidote*, 324.
- ³⁴ Baron, *Egypt as a Woman*, 1.
- ³⁵ Al-Zayyat, *The Open Door*, 564.
- ³⁶ Al-Zayyat, *The Open Door*, 347.
- ³⁷ Al-Zayyat, *The Open Door*, 372.
- ³⁸ Al-Zayyat, *The Open Door*, 374.
- ³⁹ Al-Zayyat, *The Open Door*, 32, 374.
- ⁴⁰ Mossallam, *We are the Ones*, 307.
- ⁴¹ Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 7.
- ⁴² Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers Between History and Fiction*.
- ⁴³ Al-Zayyat, *'al-Taghrib wa al-qina' wa al-mararah,' Adab wa Naqd*.
- ⁴⁴ Al-Zayyat, *The Open Door*, 940-942.
- ⁴⁵ It was not surprising then when Latifa al-Zayyat's novel was nominated for the State Encouragement Prize in Literature, Abbas al-'Aqqad, the famous writer and a permanent member of the Higher Council for Literature and the Arts, threatened to resign in protest. Despite a unanimous vote by the committee in support of her nomination, the prize was withheld. Al-'Aqqad, considered a central figure in the traditional Arabic literary canon, was critical of the novel's "exaggerated use of the colloquial." See Elsadda (2012).
- ⁴⁶ Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero*, 3.
- ⁴⁷ Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 81-82.
- ⁴⁸ Taha, *Reimagining Bandung*.
- ⁴⁹ Ibrahim, *Dhat*, 22.

⁵⁰ Ibrahim, *Dhat*, 22.

⁵¹ Ayubi, *Overstating the Arab State*.

⁵² Hatem, *Economic and Political Liberation*, 233.

⁵³ Hatem, *Economic and Political Liberation*, 238.

⁵⁴ While beyond the scope of this article, we want to highlight the importance of migration in particular to the domestic worker landscape in contemporary Egypt.

⁵⁵ Mehrez, *Egyptian writers between history and fiction*, 129.

⁵⁶ Mehrez, *Egyptian writers between history and fiction*, 129.

⁵⁷ Mehrez, *Egyptian writers between history and fiction*, 131.

⁵⁸ In light of the previous section's discussion of middle-class social mobility and the pressure created by *infatih*, it is crucial to highlight that foreign domestic workers have increasingly come to represent status symbols for a new life of luxury that was popularised first in the 1970s, but especially from the 1990s onwards.

Bibliography

Al-Zayyat, L. (2017). *The Open Door*. The American University Press.

Al-Zayyat, L. (1992). 'al-Taghrib wa al-qina' wa al-mararah,' *Adab wa Naqd*, 10-14. Translated by Mai Taha

and Sara Salem (2023) "Alienation and Bitterness: Thinking Through Dhat with Latifa al-Zayyat." Kohl: A Journal for Body and Gender Research, Vol. 9, No. 1.

Al-Zayyat, L. et al. (1994). On Political Commitment and Feminist Writing. *The View from Within: Writers and Critics on Contemporary Arabic Literature*, 248-260.

Ayubi, N. (1994). *Overstating the Arab State*, Oxford University Press.

Bannerji, H. (1995). *Thinking Through: Essays on Feminism, Marxism, and Anti-Racism*. Women's Press.

Barak, O. (2013). *On Time*. University of California Press.

Baron, B. (2005). *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender and Politics*. University of California Press.

Behrouzan, O., 2015. Medicalisation As A Way of Life: The Iran-Iraq War and considerations for psychiatry and anthropology. *Medicine Anthropology Theory*, 2(3), pp.40-60.

Beinin, J., and Z. Lockman. (1998). *Workers on the Nile: nationalism, communism, Islam, and the Egyptian working class, 1882-1954*. American University in Cairo Press.

Bier, L. (2011). *Revolutionary Womanhood: Feminisms, Modernity, and the State in Nasser's Egypt*. Stanford University Press.

Bint al-Shati, (1958), 'Al-Masriyyat wa al-Suriyyat fi Ma'raket al-Wihda' [Egyptian and Syrian Women in the Struggle for Union], *al-Hilal*, April Issue.

Burton, A. (ed), 2005. *Archive Stories. Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*. Duke University Press.

Dessouki, A.H. (1981). 'Policy making in Egypt: A case study of the open-door economic policy', *Social Problems*, 28, 4: 410-416.

Elsadda, H. (2012). *Gender, Nation, and the Arabic Novel: Egypt, 1892-2008*. Syracuse University Press and Edinburgh University Press.

Federici, S. (2004), *Caliban and the Witch*. Autonomedia.

Federici, S. (2012). *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction and Feminist Struggle*. PM Press.

Ghannam, F. (2020). *Live and die like a man*. Stanford University Press.

Hall, S. (1980). 'Cultural studies: Two paradigms,' *Media, culture & society* 2,1: 57-72.

Hammad, H. (2016). *Industrial Sexuality: Gender, Urbanization, and Social Transformation in Egypt*. University of Texas Press.

Hartman, S., 2019. *Wayward lives, beautiful experiments: Intimate histories of social upheaval*. WW Norton & Company.

Hatem, M. (1992). 'Economic and Political Liberation in Egypt and the Demise of State Feminism', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 24, 2: 231-251.

-
- Ibrahim, S. (1998), *Dhat*. Dar Al-Mostaqbal Al-Arabi.
- Jakes, A. (2020). *Egypt's Occupation: Colonial Economism and the Crises of Capitalism*. Stanford University Press.
- Jones, C. (1949). *An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!*, Jefferson School of Social Science.
- Khanna, N., 2020. *The visceral logics of decolonization*. Duke University Press.
- Mehrez, S. (1994). *Egyptian writers between history and fiction*. American University in Cairo Press.
- Mersal, I. (2015). 'On Motherhood and Violence', *Makhazin*, Issue 2, September, Accessed June 2nd, 2020: <http://www.makhzin.org/issues/feminisms/on-motherhood-and-violence>
- McNally, D. (2015). 'The Dialectics of Unity and Difference in the Constitution of Wage-Labour: On Internal Relations and Working-Class Formation', *Capital and Class*, 39, 1: 131-146.
- Mitchell, T. (2002). *Rule of Experts*. University of California Press.
- Mitchell, T. (1991). *Colonising Egypt*. University of California Press.
- Mossallam, A. (2014) "'We are the ones who made this dam 'High!'" A builders' history of the Aswan High Dam,' *Water history* 6, 4: 297-314.
- Naaman, M. (2008). 'The Anti-Romance Antidote: Revisiting Allegories of the Nation' in Marlé Hammond and Dana Sajdi (eds.), *Transforming Loss into Beauty: Essays on Arabic Literature and Culture in Honor of Magda Al-Nowaihi*. The American University in Cairo Press.
- Navaro, Y., 2017. Diversifying affect. *Cultural Anthropology*, 32(2), pp.209-214.
- Popescu, M., 2020. *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies, and the Cold War*. Duke University Press.
- Taha, M. (2017). 'Reimagining Bandung for Women at Work in Egypt: Law and the Woman between the Factory and the 'Social Factory.' in Luis Eslava, Michael Fakhri, and Vasuki Nesiah (eds.), *Bandung, global history, and international law: Critical pasts and pending futures*, 337-54. Cambridge University Press.
- Taha, M. (2025). 'Insurgent Social Reproduction: the Home, the Barricade and Women's Work in the 1936 Palestinian Revolution.' *Theory, Culture and Society*, 42, 4 (online first).
- Taha, Mai (2023). 'Thinking through the home: Work, rent, and the reproduction of society.' *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 90(4): 837–858.
- Taha, M. and Salem, S., 2019. Social reproduction and empire in an Egyptian century. *Radical Philosophy*, 2019(2.04), pp.47-54.