ROCZNIK ORIENTALISTYCZNY, T. LXXVII, Z. 2, 2024, (s. 5–18)
DOI: 10.24425/ro.2024.152515

Artykuły / Articles

ANDREA MARIA NEGRI
(University of Bologna, Italy)
ORCID: 0000-0003-4579-9445

Crowning Nasser Through Stories of Kings: the Films *Wā Islāmāh* and *An-Nāṣir Salāḥ ad-Dīn*

Abstract

This article explores how historical fiction in cinema has been used to disseminate and entrench the myth and aura of Jamāl ʿAbd an-Nāṣir (1918–1970) among Egyptians and the Arab world. I focus on the traits of kings in two films: *Wā Islāmāh* (1961, Oh Islam) and *An-Nāṣir Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn* (1963, The Victorious Saladin). These films project struggles for independence of the time into the past, thus arguably emphasizing the role of the Free Officers' Revolution in rescuing Egypt from the corrupt and dystopian world of colonization. This portrayal also highlights internal enemies – leaders who legitimized this colonial universe. Within the ethos of the revolution, the relationship between the king, symbolizing the president, and the Egyptian people is depicted through a cinematic portrayal of a personified relationship, embodying the figure of a benevolent father determined to guide the family, i.e., the nation. These films functioned as metaphors for the Egyptian leader, disseminating ideas about the nation, the revolution, and the new socialist relationship between the state and its citizens. In the first film, adapted from Bā Kaṯīr's novel, this aspect is particularly pronounced, as the adaptation injects leadership ideals into the story, emphasizing specific traits while erasing others.

Keywords: Nasser, *Wā Islāmāh*, An-Nāṣir Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn, Egyptian cinema, Bā Kaṯīr

Introduction

The period of Ǧamāl ʿAbd an-Nāṣir's (1918–1970) leadership from 1952 until his death in 1970 represents a crucial moment in Egyptian history, marked by his pursuit of pan-Arab unity and his commitment to a broad movement of Third World solidarity against colonialism and dependence. The Nasserist program acted as both a continuation and expansion of the path to complete independence, deeply intertwined with Egypt's overall process of liberation and reform.[1] This era saw the end of the monarchy and the inauguration of the republicasalkan era. Fueled by revolutionary fervor, the state, under Nasser's leadership, initiated ambitious economic policies centered on welfare, known as the socialist experiment.[2] This aspect of his socialist program represents, as Shechter claims, "a moral economy that was closely intertwined with the principle of social justice," with the state seeking to be the guarantor of justice in economic relations.[3] Nasser also presented himself as a new model of leader in a personified relationship with the people, openly positioning himself as the champion of a state that should pursue social justice, equality, and modernity. The importance of Nasser and Egypt in the Arab world at the time can also be seen in the Nasserist movement, which was regarded as a political model of national development in other emerging nations of the time.[4]

Nasser, however, transcend his role as mere historical transitions and instead function as a site of imagination that extend beyond historical reality.[5] This is evident in how Nasser, after his death, remains intertwined with a persistent sense of nostalgia in Egyptian art and literature.[6] Nasser functions as the imaginary embodiment of justice and idealism, serving as a projection for political discontent.[7] The mythic status of Nasser is partly a result of Egypt' numerous historical achievements during his presidency, including leading the country to its final step toward independence and his victory in the symbolic battle against France and Great Britain for control of the Suez Canal. Furthermore, his socialist economic policies, though later dismissed by Anwar as-Sādāt (1918–1981), represented a profound political ambition for an equitable society.

---

1 Reem Abou El-Fadl, 'Nasserism', in: *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Middle Eastern and North African History*, ed. Amal N. Ghazal and Jens Hanssen, Oxford 2021, p. 225.

2 Sara Salem, 'Haunted Histories: Nasserism and The Promises of the Past', *Middle East Critique* 28/3 (2019), pp. 261–262.

3 Relli Shechter, *The Egyptian Social Contract: A History of State–Middle Class Relations*, Edinburgh 2023, p. 6.

4 Joel Gordon, *Nasser's Blessed Movement: Egypt's Free Officers and the July Revolution*, New York 1992, pp. 4–5; Lina Khatib, 'The Orient and Its Others: Women as Tools of Nationalism in Egyptian Political Cinema', in: *Women and Media in the Middle East: Power through Self-Expression*, ed. Naomi Sakr, London–New York 2004, p. 75; Ella Schochat, 'Egypt: Cinema and Revolution', *Critical Arts* 2/4 (1983), p. 27.

5 Viola Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema: Gender, Class and Nation*, Cairo 2007, p. 101.

6 Omar Khalifah, *Nasser in the Egyptian Imaginary*, Edinburgh 2017, p. 1.

7 Ibidem, p. 209.

Nurturing the myth and aura of a great leader was achieved by exploiting the potential of mass media, particularly cinema and radio. These media were crucial in disseminating the ideas of the revolution, nationalism, and the state tout court, reaching wide audiences previously unreached, including the illiterate.[8] The centrality of cinema for the government can be seen in its nationalization in 1963, eleven years after the 1952 revolution.[9] Jane Gaffney underscores how cinema served as tangible proof for the masses of the cultural revolution brought by the Free Officers as for the first time, cinema was directed towards engagement, vividly raising social issues and reflecting the changes initiated by the revolution.[10] The sense of a new order was also conveyed through new images of ideal rulers who, as Viola Shafik and Jane Gaffney have noted, served as reflections of Nasser as a leader within the ethos of the Free Officers' revolution.[11]

By analyzing the attributes of the king in two significant films, *Wā Islāmāh* (Oh Islam, 1961) – directed Enrico Bomba and Andrew Marton with the collaboration of Šādī ʿAbd as-Salām – and *An-Nāṣir Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn* (The Victorious Saladin, 1963) – directed by Yūsuf Šāhīn – I show how these films symbolized and exalted Nasser, projecting the ideal of a popular socialist leader. I argue that these films imbue the character of the king with idealized qualities that symbolize and exalt Nasser as a personalized leader deeply concerned with the welfare of the people, i.e., a father figure. I argue that within this socialist perspective, crowning Nasser through films was pursued by identifying him as the father figure through stories that emphasized the king with the sense of paternal morality. The morality of the good father's government was thus contrasted with the bad governments in the age of colonialism, who were essentialized as archetypes of moral corruption and vice. This cinematic portrayal contributed to the creation and perpetuation of Nasser's myth within the Arab world, influencing subsequent leaders and resonating profoundly in Egypt and beyond. This impact was bolstered by the advancement of Egyptian cinema at a time when the film industry was still in its early stages in much of the Arab world.[12]

What follows is divided into two sections. The first part analyzes the politics of adaptation from Bā Kaṯīr's novel in its cinematic version, highlighting the specific traits of the leader selected from this story. The second part outlines the characteristics of An-Nāṣir Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn.

---

[8] Beth Baron, *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics*, Berkeley 2005, p. 8.

[9] Carolina Bracco, 'The Changing Portrayal of Dancers in Egyptian Films', *Anthropology of the Middle East* 14/1 (2019), p. 16.

[10] Jane Gaffney, 'The Egyptian Cinema: Industry and Art in a Changing Society', *Arab Studies Quarterly* 9/1 (1987), p. 59.

[11] Viola Shafik, *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity*, Cairo 1998, p. 21; Gaffney, 'The Egyptian Cinema', p. 59.

[12] Christa Salamandra, 'Creative Compromise: Syrian Television Makers between Secularism and Islamism', *Contemporary Islam* 2/3 (2008), p. 178.

Wā Islāmāh and *An-Nāṣir Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn* as stories of Nasser's nation

The Egyptian films *Wā Islāmāh* and *An-Nāṣir Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn* stand out as two of the most expensive and ambitious films of the Nasser era. They are celebrated as emblematic of both the golden age of Egyptian cinema and the era of Nasser.[13] In particular, *An-Nāṣir Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn* is considered the most successful venture in the history of Egyptian cinema.[14] Viola Shafik notes that both films aim to "construct the magnificence of a legendary figure from the past and recode it to evoke a leader from the present."[15] Central themes such as Egyptian nationalism, Arabism, socialism, and a sophisticated representation of political Islam form the crux of the narrative structure,[16] effectively transmitting the ethos of the new order to the masses. These films are, in fact, notably pedagogic, featuring a clear narrative that is easy to follow and distinctly demarcates between good and evil. As Rahma Bevelaar underscores, their narrative structure is centered on "binary oppositions between foreign/indigenous, moral/immoral, authentic/imported" serves to make a vision intelligible and "convey and inculcate a national consciousness."[17]

These films clearly distance themselves from political Islam, intentionally avoiding any pan-Islamic identifiers. Instead, they emphasize Egyptian nationalism as a unifying theme in their narratives. This aspect can be seen in the adaptation of the 1945 novel *Wā Islāmāh* by ʿAlī Aḥmad Bā Kaṯīr (1910–1969) into a film of the same name is particularly noteworthy due to the significant contrast between the secular tone of the film and the Islamic undertones of the original novel. Bā Kaṯīr's claims that he was not affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood was possibly because such an association was considered dangerous after the 1952 revolution,[18] yet his stories were particularly favored in the Muslim Brotherhood's circles.[19] Bā Kaṯīr's work, which mainly consists of plays and novels, consistently positions Islam and Islamic identity at the center of modernity

---

[13] John M. Ganim, 'Reversing the Crusades: Hegemony, Orientalism', in: *Race, Class, and Gender in 'Medieval' Cinema*, ed. Lynn Tarte Ramey and Tison Pugh, The New Middle Ages, New York 2007, p. 46; Omar Sayfo, 'From Kurdish Sultan to Pan-Arab Champion and Muslim Hero: The Evolution of the Saladin Myth in Popular Arab Culture', *The Journal of Popular Culture* 50/1 (2017), p. 66; Schochat, 'Egypt Cinema and Revolution', p. 30.

[14] Ganim, 'Reversing the Crusades', p. 45; Sabry Hafez, 'The Quest for/Obsession with the National in Arabic Cinema', in: *Theorising National Cinema*, ed. Valentina Vitali and Paul Willemen, London 2006, p. 235.

[15] Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema*, p. 107.

[16] Abou El-Fadl, 'Nasserism', p. 225; Yushi Chiba, 'Special Feature "Media in the Middle East: Latest Issues" A Comparative Study on the Pan-Arab Media Strategies: The Cases of Egypt and Saudi Arabia', *Kyoto Bulletin of Islamic Area Studies* 5/1–2 (2012), p. 47; Landau Jacob M., *Studies in the Arab Theater and Cinema*, Philadelphia 1958, p. 169; Hafez, 'The Quest for/Obsession', p. 233.

[17] Bavelaar Rahma, 2023. 'Anti-Colonial Masculinity, the Catholic Film Center and the Screening of Religious Difference in 1950s Egypt. The Multiple Lives of Husayn Sidqi's *Night of Power*', in: *Cinema in the Arab World: New Histories, New Approaches*, ed. Ifdal Elsaket, Daniel Biltereyst, and Philippe Meers, London 2023, p. 97.

[18] Bankole Ajibabi Omotoso, 'ʿAlī Aḥmad Bā-Kathīr, a Contemporary Conservative Arab Writer – an Appraisal Op His Main Plays and Novels' (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 1972), p. 32.

[19] Marvin Carlson, 'The Religious Drama of Egypt's Ali Ahmed Bakathir', in: *Religion, Theatre, and Performance: Acts of Faith*, ed. Lance Gharavi, New York 2012, p. 120; Mohammad Salama, 'Islamism Writes Back: 'Alī Aḥmad

and national identity. *Wā Islāmāh* adapted from his work shift the focus to Egypt as the center of the Arab world, thus diverging from the pan-Islamic vision represented in his novel. The cosmopolitan space in the novel Bā Kaṯīr which also could be attributed to his life experiences, having been born in Surabaya, the capital of the Indonesian province of East Java, and having traveled across the Indian Ocean, Somalia, Ethiopia, the Hijāz, before finally settling in Egypt reflect a space that is unified by religion and not divided by modern states. The novel's story spans regions from India to Afghanistan, promoting a sense of an Islamic cosmopolis where the protagonist feels at home. The film adaptation eschews this cosmopolitan representation of space, focusing exclusively on events pertaining to Egypt and thus presenting a vision rooted in national, rather than religious, identification.

Furthermore, Bā Kaṯīr's epic recognizes the Ummah as an entity with space-time continuity, tracing its expansion through the battles initiated by the Prophet and then through the *futūḥāt*, the early Islamic conquests. In this tale, Bā Kaṯīr portrays ideal Islamic kings as agents of history, working tirelessly for the advancement of Islam. The story unfolds with the protagonist fighting against perceived enemies of Islam, such as the Tatars and Christians. These monarchs are depicted leading the Ummah, making decisions that advance the declared agenda of expanding Islam. In *Wā Islāmāh*, benevolent Islamic kings see their rule as a call to martyrdom, dedicated to both the defense and expansion of the Islamic world. This is the fate of the protagonist, Qutuz, and his uncle, Ǧalāl ad-Dīn. This link with the origin of Islam is also entrenched through language. Notably, Bā Kaṯīr was a staunch supporter of Arabic, deeming Egyptian Arabic unsuitable for artistic purposes.[20] He incorporated extensive quotations from the Quran into his classical Arabic fiction, lending a sacred quality to the plot. The placement of Quranic passages at the beginning of the chapters seems to further consecrate the narrative, as if their content were used and expanded to construct the story.[21]

By focusing on the Egyptian setting, the film arguably establishes intertextual connections between its narratives and the history of Egypt.[22] The film depicts the transition from monarchy and colonialism to a new form of government, where the king's opponents are not necessarily religious enemies, as in Bā Kaṯīr's works, but are seen more closely as enemies of the state.[23] In these films, the Tatars, not the Crusaders, are the main antagonists, reinforcing Arabism as a central theme. The conflict in these cinematic stories is framed as oppressor versus oppressed, rather than a clash of religions or civilizations. The film ultimately portrays a struggle between the colonizers and their corrupt Egyptian counterparts on one side, and the colonized on the other. Mentions

---

Bākāthīr's The Red Revolutionary and the Dismantling of the Secular', in: *Islam and the Culture of Modern Egypt from the Monarchy to the Republic*, Cambridge 2018, p. 126.

[20] Omotoso, 'ʿAlī Aḥmad Bā-Kathīr', p. 9.

[21] Eeqbal Hassim, 'The Significance of Qur'anic Verses in the Literature of Ali Ahmad Bakathir', *NCEIS Research Papers* 1/3 (2009), p. 2.

[22] Ganim, 'Reversing the Crusades', p. 46.

[23] Omotoso, 'ʿAlī Aḥmad Bā-Kathīr', p. 38.

of Ǧihād in *Wā Islāmāh* are marginal with the only significant reflection of Bā Kaṯīr's influence appearing in the film's final scene, where Qutuz's love interest urges the Arabs to join the Ǧihād. However, this appeal seems incongruous, since Qutuz has already gathered a substantial army to defeat his enemies under the flag of Egypt. The films parallel historical enemies such as the Tatars and Crusaders with contemporary adversaries such as colonialism and King Fārūq I (1920–1965), perceived as enemies of the Free Officers. An-Nāṣir Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn's successful conquest of Jerusalem could be interpreted as a mirror of the nationalization of the Suez Canal.[24] This aspect underlines the victorious portrayal of the king, who faces the antagonism of Great Britain and France, supporters of the Israeli attack on Egypt in 1956.[25] This event, representing the fall of imperialism, was widely celebrated on the radio.[26]

The virtuous king against the vicious queen in *Wā Islamah*

The king's alignment with socialist ideals is evident in the character of the king in *Wā Islāmāh*, who is portrayed as a man of the people. This portrayal reflects Nasser's self-image as emerging from humble, middle-class, and rural origins.[27] The film depicts the common people and the lower classes as loyal supporters of the king. Qutuz, embodying the benevolent king, supports the ideal of renunciation of wealth and material goods. This is in stark contrast to the corrupt, wealth-obsessed depictions of evil rulers such as Šağar ad-Durr and the Tartars. Qutuz is portrayed as a ruler who experienced the hardships of the lower social classes, having been enslaved from a young age. This fact is often highlighted in the film; the scar of his former enslavement, etched into his flesh, serves as a constant reminder of his origins, despite his rise to power. Although Qutuz rises through the ranks of the court thanks to his expertise and diligence, he remains deeply connected to his roots as a man of the people. Despite his royal lineage, he refrains from exploiting his ancestry for personal gain. As depicted in the film, he adheres to his social class through his simple lifestyle and habits, eschewing the luxuries of court life and avoiding participation in sumptuous banquets and ceremonies. Despite his growing influence at court, Qutuz consistently wears the iconic soldier's helmet throughout the film. This sartorial choice underscores his commitment to serving the nation, emphasizing his role as a soldier and servant of the state.

The film places significant emphasis on virtue as a crucial attribute of the ideal king, with virtue depicted as abstention from sexual pleasures and relationships. This theme is woven into the epic's underlying love story between Qutuz and Ǧihād. In the film, Qutuz refrains from engaging with women or pursuing romantic interests. The plot

[24] Sayfo, 'From Kurdish Sultan', p. 75.

[25] Abou El-Fadl, 'Nasserism', p. 229.

[26] Andrew Hammond, 'Cinema and Television', in: *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Arab Culture*, ed. Dwight F. Reynolds, Cambridge 2015, p. 173.

[27] Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema*, p. 101.

revolves around his aspiration to marry the girl he grew up with in exile. His chosen love, Ǧihād, is depicted more as a sibling than a romantic partner. Ǧihād is the first woman he meets after his mother, and he intends to maintain this familial bond with her throughout his life. Although they are not blood relatives, they are raised together from a young age, which, according to Islamic jurisprudence, defines them as *maḥram*, or unmarriageable relatives.[28] Their connection is more rooted in memories of their shared childhood, symbolizing a relationship of unity and harmony to which they aspire.[29] The film begins with a scene showing their childhood home invaded by Tatars, marking the end of their idyllic harmony[30] and their transition into slavery. When a young Qutuz witnesses the sale of Ǧihād to another master, it signifies the end of his childhood. From this point, Qutuz is portrayed as an adult throughout the rest of the film. His ideal of virtue and renunciation of pleasure is highlighted when he reunites with Ǧihād, now a slave awaiting marriage in the castle's harem. During their first meeting, Qutuz appears disinterested and stoic as he watches the dancers, searching for Ǧihād. His disinterest is further demonstrated when he interrupts the show to ask if any of the dancers bear signs of slavery, such as Ǧihād, on their shoulders. This question confuses the dancers, unsure whether to answer him or continue dancing. When he finally locates her, Qutuz's virtuous nature is further emphasized, recalling the hero of Muṣṭafā Luṭfī al-Manfalūṭī's (1876–1924) translated pedagogical novels.

The characterization of the virtuous king in the film is significantly focused on his resistance to seduction, a dynamic often described in colonizer-colonized relationships, where power manifests in the ability to manipulate and control others' minds.[31] Queen Šaǧar ad-Durr is portrayed as an internal enemy aligned with foreign invaders, emphasizing the idea that "a national enemy cannot defeat the nation without the help of a direct or indirect internal ally."[32] Her depiction in the film resembles her portrayal in the novel by Ǧurǧī Zaydān (1861–1914), where she is "willing to use her sexuality to achieve her goals, but she is also strongly driven by her own passions. She is cunning and skilled at influencing men."[33] In the film, the Queen exerts control over a group of belly dancers in her court, using them to consolidate her position through marital alliances. Belly dancers have often been seen as emblematic of colonial legacy and orientalist imagery.[34] They

---

[28] Soraya Altorki, 'Milk-Kinship in Arab Society: An Unexplored Problem in the Ethnography of Marriage', *Ethnology* 19/2 (1980), p. 234.

[29] Hasan El-Shamy, 'The Brother-Sister Syndrome in Arab Family Life Socio-Cultural Factors in Arab Psychiatry: A Critical Review', *International Journal of Sociology of the Family* 11/2 (1981), p. 314.

[30] Yaseen Noorani, 'Estrangement and Selfhood in the Classical Concept of Waṭan', *Journal of Arabic Literature* 47/1–2 (2016), p. 19.

[31] Shaden M. Tageldin, *Disarming Words: Empire and the Seductions of Translation in Egypt*, Berkeley 2011, p. 9.

[32] Qussai Samak, 'The Arab Cinema and the National Question: From the Trivial to the Sacrosanct', *Cinéaste* 9/3 (1979), p. 32.

[33] Skovgaard-Petersen Jakob, 'The Crusades in Arab Film and TV: The Case of Baybars', in: *Cultural Encounters during the Crusades*, ed. Jensen Kurt Villads, Kirsi Salonen, and Helle Vogt, Odense 2013, pp. 301–302.

[34] Bracco, 'The Changing Portrayal', p. 6.

symbolize corruption and vice, performing in cabarets owned by Armenians, Italians, and Greeks, where they were licensed to serve alcohol and offer prostitution services.[35] This depiction of vice and dancers may also reflect Nasser's stance towards oriental dance. Although it was never officially banned under Nasser, it was considered a negative representation of Arab women and regulated accordingly, with dancers required to wear more modest clothing that covered their stomachs and legs.[36] The queen's seduction strategies are at odds with the virtue and integrity of Qutuz, who remains impervious to such ploys.[37] This stark contrast further solidifies the narrative concept of the ideal ruler as one who is virtuous and resistant to the lures of power and vice.

The relationship between the king and the women in the film can be interpreted as a symbol of the king's relationship with the nation. The film elevates the romantic cliché to a deeper symbolism of the king's search for origins and connection to his homeland. The romantic plot thus transforms into a metaphorical journey of the king to rediscover his roots and create a stronger bond with his native land. Given his love for Ǧihād it is reasonable to infer that Qutuz did not experience romantic love beyond sibling's affection. The destruction of the house – unlike in the novel, where the destruction occurs outside the home – symbolizes the shattering of an idyllic and harmonious environment, signifying the loss of the innocence and stability of the king's early life. By researching his origins and reestablishing connections with his roots, the king strives to achieve internal and external balance, ultimately contributing to the re-establishment of order and harmony within the kingdom. This pure love signifies a return to harmony, reflecting the theme of recovering lost peace, which was interrupted by Tatar imperialism in *Wā Islāmāh*. The discovery of the woman can be seen as emblematic of the king's love for his homeland and his fight to liberate it. Finding the woman is like rediscovering the very essence of Egypt. The meeting with his beloved transcends mere chance or romantic infatuation; it evolves into an enduring love that lasts throughout the king's life.

Furthermore, the union between the woman and the king in the film represents not merely the result of a chance meeting but a journey of liberation. As a slave imprisoned in the court and accused of treason for her alignment with foreign Tartars, she becomes a metaphor for a nation colonized and subjected to monarchical rule. Her imprisonment is vividly depicted through the humiliation of a half-naked dance and the loss of her honor. This representation aligns with Shafik's concept of "gendered national iconography" during times of national crisis, symbolizing the violated nation – a prevalent motif during decolonization's struggle[38]. Her rescue by the righteous king signifies the restoration of her honor and dignity, embodied by her virtuous attire. To achieve this liberation, the king must overcome various challenges, reinforcing the vision of women as embodiments of honorable and submissive femininity, as expected in Egypt. The colloquial reference

[35] Ibidem, p. 9.
[36] Ibidem, p. 16.
[37] Skovgaard-Petersen, 'The Crusades in Arab Film and TV', p. 307.
[38] Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema*, p. 94.

to Egypt as Umm ad-Dunyā (Mother of the World) by Egyptians is not accidental.[39] As Shafik notes, confrontations with the external and internal "Other" are typically portrayed as masculine endeavors, suggesting that the nation is defended by men against men or opened to men by men, indirectly casting the nation in a feminine light.[40] Thus, the film's depiction of women takes on mystical qualities, serving both as symbols of protection and embodiments of patriotism.

In this context, Qutuz takes on the role of a liberator rather than a lover towards Ǧihād. This gendered representation aligns with the traditional vision of women as symbols of the nation and bearers of national identity.[41] This symbolism of the nation is a discourse that, as Baron underlines, portrays women "as Mother of the Nation."[42] Consequently, the nation becomes a family linked to the concept of honor, where women must reflect purity.[43] Drawing a parallel to Eugène Delacroix's famous painting "La Liberté Guidant le Peuple," the woman in the narrative clearly embodies Egypt as a nation in the film's final scene. This theme is a recurring motif in Egyptian cinema, as highlighted in Shafik's analysis of *Fī al-layla al-badawiya* (In the Country Night), where a similar comparison is made between the image and the anti-colonial uprisings.[44] In this framework, the difference is often presented as gendered, with the woman as an object to be protected and the man as a savior and protector.[45] The liberation process corresponds to the paradigm of male activity and female passivity, as suggested by Bracco.[46] This aspect, introduced in the film but absent in the novel, conceptualizes the woman as a metaphor for the nation, with the king emerging as the savior who rescues her. In contrast, the queen in the novel acts as a martyr for her husband, sacrificing her life to save him.

In contrast to the novel, the film adaptation of the Qutuz story departs significantly to offer a more optimistic outcome for the king. The novel is filled with man-made conflicts and obstacles that impede Qutuz's progress, ultimately leading to his betrayal and death. A critical element of Qutuz's character in the novel is his rivalry with Baybars, a character portrayed differently in the film. In the novel, Baybars is depicted in an ambiguous light, seemingly envious of Qutuz's status and influence. Furthermore, he is a slave to Qutuz's adversary and plots to marry the queen and betray the nation to the Tartars. Driven by envy, Baybars assassinates Qutuz after the latter's final victory over the Tartars. Despite these challenges, Qutuz stands out for his commitment to putting the interests of the Ummah above his personal grievances and desire for revenge. On his deathbed, Qutuz crowns Baybars and implicitly encourages his followers to forego avenging his death. This nuanced consideration for the well-being of the Ummah is highlighted by Bā Kaṯīr

[39] Khatib, 'The Orient and Its Others', p. 73.
[40] Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema*, p. 90.
[41] Khatib 'The Orient and Its Others', p. 72.
[42] Baron, *Egypt as a Woman*, p. 5.
[43] Ibidem, p. 7.
[44] Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema*, p. 96.
[45] Bavelaar, 'Anti-Colonial Masculinity', p. 94.
[46] Bracco, 'The Changing Portrayal', p. 19.

as the moral core of the story. Although he faces death due to betrayal, the hero's primary concern is the collective well-being of the religion. In contrast, the film adaptation omits these events involving Baybars. This narrative shift can be interpreted as an effort to reflect Nasser's leadership through the character of Qutuz. The film ends with the coronation of Qutuz as Egypt's new ruler, heralding a promising future for both Mamluk Egypt and the Free Officers' Revolution. By excluding Baybars' betrayal, arguably the film eliminates the notion of internal conflicts between the Arabs and their leader, thus depicting a unified and cohesive Arab identity under the guidance of a single leader.

An-Nāṣir Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn: the wise, star and father of the nation/family

The narrative of *An-Nāṣir Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn* can be seen as a continuation of the story in *Wā Islāmāh*. Qutuz represents an archetypal leader who rises to power through revolution, while Saladin is depicted as an exemplary ruler, demonstrating remarkable skill in managing power and governing the state. An important attribute attributed to Saladin, perhaps influenced by the European myth surrounding him, is his wisdom and competence. Saladin's acumen spans various fields: politics, medicine, military strategy, and nationalism. His deep intuition and ability to discern truth from deception make him an unshakable figure, impervious to conspiracies or compromise. His selection as leader is justified by his distinction not only among the rulers of the Crusades but also among the Arab leaders who submit to his authority in anticipation of success. This type of wisdom, when paralleled with the narrative of *Wā Islāmāh*, aligns with the inherent virtue of the ruler, completely absent in his adversaries, particularly the Crusaders. As Shafik points out, Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn al-Ayyūbī's victory over the Crusaders was not due exclusively to his military skill but also to his high moral standing.[47] This dichotomy between good and evil is consistent with the representation in *Wā Islāmāh*, where femininity is associated with sensuality and corruption. The representation of the Crusaders is exemplified by the effeminate depiction of the princes, characterized by slim builds and long blond hair, which contrasts sharply with the portrayal of Saladin, who embodies the traits of an ideal soldier, characterized by vigor and masculinity. Furthermore, Saladin's virtue is likely linked to his celibate status. This is not a criticism of marriage as a form of corruption, but rather an indication of his total dedication to the well-being of the nation and his resistance to any form of seduction. This celibacy thus symbolizes his unwavering attention and commitment to national goals.

In the film of *An-Nāṣir Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn*, the king is portrayed as a unifying figure among the Arabs, with his actions reflecting his identity as a man of the people. The depiction of him, likely devoid of aristocratic and opulent features, underlines his bond with the common people. This is exemplified when he is mistaken for a messenger due to his unassuming attire, a detail highlighted during an episode at court in which he is

[47] Shafiq, *Popular Egyptian Cinema*, p. 106.

invited to meet the Crusader leaders.[48] A strong sense of Arabism permeates the narrative, highlighted by the consistent use of Standard Arabic, a common feature in historical films. The film, however, moves away from an identity rooted exclusively in religion. This is explicitly shown in the depiction of the king's army as being made up of both Muslim and Christian soldiers, with the king acting as protector of both faiths. Nevertheless, the Muslim population within his kingdom is shown as more prominent, particularly in scenes depicting Muslims experiencing violence during prayer, thus highlighting the cruelty of the Crusader attacks. Furthermore, the narrative portrays the Arabs choosing Saladin as their leader in their quest for liberation from the Crusaders. This representation promotes the idea of Saladin being elected leader and protector of the Arab world. The theme of Arabism in the narrative reflects the historical backdrop of the formation of the United Arab Republic, which existed from 1958 to 1961. Therefore, the narrative is set within a broader discourse on pan-Arab unity and identity, as illustrated by the political developments of that era.

Saladin's virtues, as portrayed in the narrative, are accentuated by his wisdom, which explains his exceptional ability to rightly lead the state and skillfully manage power. A notable demonstration of this wisdom is his aversion to unnecessary wars, portraying him as a compassionate ruler. His constant efforts towards reconciliation with the Crusaders further reinforce this portrayal. However, in this context, reconciliation does not imply the surrender of the Crusaders. Rather, it is seen as a strategic retreat that maintains the possibility of friendly relations between the two sides. Saladin, portrayed as a Nasser-like figure with a preference for diplomacy over revenge, consistently avoids unnecessary violence. This aspect of Saladin's character is vividly illustrated in the final scene of the story, where he allows his soldier to marry his Crusader love interest after their departure. Furthermore, Saladin, in his prudence, ensures that Christians maintain the right of pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the focal center of the conflict. In doing so, he effectively neutralizes one of the Crusaders' main justifications for war. The final scene, in which Richard the Lionheart is welcomed into Jerusalem, serves to emphasize Saladin's steadfast dedication to peace. This scene is crucial as it encapsulates Saladin's sagacity and diplomatic skill, underlining his relentless pursuit of harmonious coexistence and mutual respect between different religious and cultural communities.

Saladin's most distinguishing characteristic in the film is his star status. A key aspect of his portrayal is his extraordinary qualities, which far surpass those of any other character. As John M. Ganim perceptively notes, Saladin's character is "relatively hagiographic," starting as an impressive figure and evolving to near perfection.[49] This notion is evident from the beginning of the film, where people eagerly discuss Saladin, creating an atmosphere of mystery and anticipation. The film opens with individuals actively searching for Saladin, reflecting a strong desire to meet him. In several scenes, he is the center of attention, with the crowd applauding him more like a pop star than a statesman. This

[48] Ibidem, p. 107.
[49] Ganim, 'Reversing the Crusades', p. 54.

portrayal is validated as Saladin consistently proves himself to be infallible, emerging as the primary problem-solver and victor. The film strongly emphasizes Saladin's charisma, determination, discretion, and good judgment, highlighting his exceptional leadership skills. He is shown to be meticulous in his actions, further elevating his status. Saladin's superiority is also underlined by his numerous acts of mercy and justice. His extraordinary capacity for forgiveness distinguishes him from ordinary soldiers and, likely, from the average spectator. Furthermore, his experience in medicine is portrayed, enhancing his erudition. One of the most notable traits about him is his courage, especially when he enters the Crusader camp to cure Richard, risking prison or death. He shows courage in war and is not afraid of losing his life. Even after a military defeat, when the Crusader prince challenges Saladin to a duel to decide the winner, Saladin's courage shines as he faces his opponent, risking his life even though he has already achieved victory. This courage not only affirms Saladin's overwhelming superiority over his enemies but also over his allies. His effortless triumph implies that his enemies could never have succeeded, regardless of their efforts. The gradual depiction of Saladin as an almost divine figure presents him as a flat character with static features, which simplifies prediction and interpretation. His exceptional qualities identify him as the "good father of the nation,"[50] the only figure capable of facing contemporary challenges. Constantly offering solutions, strategies, and methods for success, he represents the ideal father figure, guiding his "children" towards well-being. This paternal authority is accentuated in the final scene of the film, where Saladin allows his soldier to marry his Crusader love interest.

Conclusions

As Omar Khalifa notes "Nasser has both produced and been produced by the Egyptian imaginary."[51] Both films, *Wā Islāmāh* and *An-Nāṣir Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn*, play a significant role in the mythologization of Nasser, enshrining his image in the collective Egyptian and Arab consciousness as the successor to the historical figures of Saladin and Qutuz. As Viola Shafik observes, history can serve as a powerful tool in the struggle for political and cultural influence, elevating a figure by reinterpreting them within a museum-like narrative.[52] *Wā Islāmāh* focuses on the events that led to the revolution carried out by the Free Officers in Egypt, while *An-Nāṣir Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn* encapsulates the spirit and ethics underlying the revolutionary leader's actions. Nasser's relationship with the Egyptians is personalized, making the leader an enigmatic father figure, a theme that persisted even after his era.[53] This analysis seeks to illustrate the connections between the events of the stories and the contemporary history of Egypt. At the heart of these narratives is a clear dichotomy between corrupt and incompetent rulers, emblematic of the old regime and

[50] Ibidem, p. 56.
[51] Khalifah, *Nasser in the Egyptian Imaginary*, pp. 3–4.
[52] Shafik, *Arab Cinema*, p. 164.
[53] Khalifah, *Nasser in the Egyptian Imaginary*, p. 9.

its collusion with colonial powers, and the new virtuous, just, and independent leader. The heroes of Nasserist narratives symbolize the dawn of a new era. The old regime is primarily represented through foreigners or malevolent and seductive women, marked by corruption, vice, and mismanagement.

In both films, the colonizers and their Egyptian allies are consistently portrayed as morally corrupt, seductive, and hedonistic. As a result, the revolution is framed in moral terms as a battle against vice. Beyond intense patriotism and devotion to the nation and the Arab world, the kings personify wisdom and effective leadership based on sound morality and principles. These traits make them immune to seduction, the lure of pleasure, and corruption. Having established his new kingdom, the king becomes a symbol of the purity of wisdom, values, and virtues that he wishes to instill in his people. It can be argued that the people themselves elect their ruler based on these attributes. Consequently, the king, through his virtues, takes on a paternalistic role, directing his people towards virtue, purity, and integrity, while ensuring their well-being. In this light, the historical narratives depicted in these two films help consolidate Nasser's image as the supreme leader of Egypt and the Arab world. They weave the story of a chosen leader who embodies the virtues and aspirations of his people, guiding them towards a better future.

References

Abou El-Fadl Reem, 'Nasserism', in: *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Middle Eastern and North African History*, ed. Amal N. Ghazal and Jens Hanssen, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2021, pp. 225–247.

Altorki Soraya, 'Milk-Kinship in Arab Society: An Unexplored Problem in the Ethnography of Marriage', *Ethnology* 19/2 (1980), pp. 233–244.

Bā Kaṯīr ʿAlī Aḥmad, *Wā Islāmāh*, Maktabat Miṣr, Al-Qāhira 1974.

Baron Beth, *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2005.

Bavelaar Rahma, 2023. 'Anti-Colonial Masculinity, the Catholic Film Center and the Screening of Religious Difference in 1950s Egypt. The Multiple Lives of Husayn Sidqi's *Night of Power*', in: *Cinema in the Arab World: New Histories, New Approaches*, ed. Ifdal Elsaket, Daniel Biltereyst, and Philippe Meers, World Cinema, Bloomsbury Academic, London 2023, pp. 93–120.

Bracco Carolina, 'The Changing Portrayal of Dancers in Egyptian Films', *Anthropology of the Middle East* 14/1 (2019), pp. 6–22.

Carlson Marvin, 'The Religious Drama of Egypt's Ali Ahmed Bakathir', in: *Religion, Theatre, and Performance: Acts of Faith*, ed. Lance Gharavi, Routledge, New York 2012, pp. 117–226.

Chiba Yushi, 'Special Feature "Media in the Middle East: Latest Issues" A Comparative Study on the Pan-Arab Media Strategies: The Cases of Egypt and Saudi Arabia', *Kyoto Bulletin of Islamic Area Studies* 5/1–2 (2012), pp. 47–60.

El-Shamy Hasan, 'The Brother-Sister Syndrome in Arab Family Life Socio-Cultural Factors in Arab Psychiatry: A Critical Review', *International Journal of Sociology of the Family* 11/2 (1981), pp. 313–323.

Freitag Ulrike, 'Dying of Enforced Spinsterhood: Ḥaḍramawt through the Eyes of ʿAlī Aḥmad Bā Kathīr (1910–69)', *Die Welt Des Islams* 37/1 (1997), pp. 2–27.

Gaffney Jane, 'The Egyptian Cinema: Industry and Art in a Changing Society', *Arab Studies Quarterly* 9/1 (1987), pp. 53–75.

Ganim John M., 'Reversing the Crusades: Hegemony, Orientalism', in: *Race, Class, and Gender in 'Medieval' Cinema*, ed. Lynn Tarte Ramey and Tison Pugh, The New Middle Ages, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2007, pp. 45–58.

Gordon Joel, *Nasser's Blessed Movement: Egypt's Free Officers and the July Revolution*, Oxford University Press, New York 1992.

Hafez Sabry, 'The Quest for/Obsession with the National in Arabic Cinema', in: *Theorising National Cinema*, ed. Valentina Vitali and Paul Willemen, St Edmundsbury Press, London 2006, pp. 226–253.

Hammond Andrew, 'Cinema and Television', in: *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Arab Culture*, ed. Dwight F. Reynolds, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2015, pp. 164–181.

Hassim Eeqbal, 'The Significance of Qur'anic Verses in the Literature of Ali Ahmad Bakathir', *NCEIS Research Papers* 1/3 (2009), pp. 1–27.

Khalifah Omar, *Nasser in the Egyptian Imaginary*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2017.

Khatib Lina, 'The Orient and Its Others: Women as Tools of Nationalism in Egyptian Political Cinema', in: *Women and Media in the Middle East: Power through Self-Expression*, ed. Naomi Sakr, I.B. Tauris, London-New York 2004, pp. 72–88.

Landau Jacob M., *Studies in the Arab Theater and Cinema*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 1958.

McLuhan Marshall, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Routledge, London 2010.

Noorani Yaseen, 'Estrangement and Selfhood in the Classical Concept of Waṭan', *Journal of Arabic Literature* 47/1–2 (2016), pp. 16–42.

Omotoso Bankole Ajibabi, ''Alī Aḥmad Bā-Kathīr, a Contemporary Conservative Arab Writer – an Appraisal Op His Main Plays and Novels' (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 1972).

Ricci Ronit, *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia*. South Asia across the Disciplines, University of Chicago Press, Chigago 2011.

Salama Mohammad, 'Islamism Writes Back: 'Alī Aḥmad Bākāthīr's The Red Revolutionary and the Dismantling of the Secular', in: *Islam and the Culture of Modern Egypt from the Monarchy to the Republic*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2018, pp. 123–139.

Salamandra Christa, 'Creative Compromise: Syrian Television Makers between Secularism and Islamism', *Contemporary Islam* 2/3 (2008), pp. 177–189.

Salem Sara, 'Haunted Histories: Nasserism and The Promises of the Past', *Middle East Critique* 28/3 (2019), pp. 261–277.

Samak Qussai, 'The Arab Cinema and the National Question: From the Trivial to the Sacrosanct', *Cinéaste* 9/3 (1979), pp. 32–34.

Sayfo Omar, 'From Kurdish Sultan to Pan-Arab Champion and Muslim Hero: The Evolution of the Saladin Myth in Popular Arab Culture', *The Journal of Popular Culture* 50/1 (2017), pp. 65–85.

Schochat Ella, 'Egypt: Cinema and Revolution', *Critical Arts* 2/4 (1983), pp. 22–32.

Shafik Viola, *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity*, American University in Cairo Press, Cairo 1998.

Shafik Viola, *Popular Egyptian Cinema: Gender, Class and Nation*, American University in Cairo Press, Cairo 2007.

Shechter Relli, *The Egyptian Social Contract: A History of State-Middle Class Relations*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2023.

Skovgaard-Petersen Jakob, 'The Crusades in Arab Film and TV: The Case of Baybars', in: *Cultural Encounters during the Crusades*, ed. Jensen Kurt Villads, Kirsi Salonen, and Helle Vogt, University Press of Southern Denmark, Odense 2013, pp. 299–312.

Tageldin Shaden M., *Disarming Words: Empire and the Seductions of Translation in Egypt*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2011.