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Ethnography of a Friendly Country

AN EGYPTIAN FEMINIST’S TRAVELOGUE AT THE DAWN OF THE COLD WAR

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In early 1947, the Egyptian Women’s Association received an invitation from the Indian politician and poet, Sarojini Naidu, to attend the First Conference of Asian Countries, which was to be held in New Delhi in March of that year. In the end, it was Ḥawā’ Idrīss (1909-1988), the cousin of the famous Egyptian feminist Hudā Sha’rāwī, who was sent to represent Arab women at the conference. She recounted her journey in a book published in 1970, which may be seen as both a travelogue and a decolonial memoir. Hawa Idris is little known outside Arabic-speaking feminist circles, but in her travelogue, published twenty years after the journey, she offers a unique perspective that combines amateur ethnography and political enthusiasm, even before the Egyptian revolution of 1952 and Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasser’s rise to power. These early years of the Cold War (1947-1952) are often overshadowed in the memory of Egyptian-Indian relations in favour of the great Nasser-Nehru era. Revisiting the memoirs of this Egyptian feminist, can be an opportunity to take a fresh look at this international upper-class society riven by sectarian and political issues.

“My advice, my dear, is not to let this unique opportunity pass you by!”¹ (Cairo-Delhi 1947)

A Research Fellow at the French Institute of Oriental Archaeology in Cairo, I am a historian of contemporary Egypt. My doctoral research focused on the social classification of Egyptian society during the era of Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasser. Presently, my work explores Egypt’s Indian horizon between the 1860s

and the 1960s—be it diplomatic, commercial, religious or scientific. The challenge of this kind of research lies in the fact that it does not correspond to a well-defined source base or one specific archival collection. My objective, and the beauty of it, is to piece together a documentary bouquet capable of shedding light on these Egyptian-Indian connections, studied from an Egyptian perspective—that is to say, through Arabic sources.

Sometimes one returns empty-handed after hours of searching; sometimes, around a street corner or in an archival box, one stumbles across a gem. Ḥawā’ Idrīss was mine.

Among all the libraries in Cairo, the one belonging to the American University remains one of the most monumental—both in terms of the scale of its building, now located in New Cairo outside the city, and the breadth of its collections. By chance—since my work does not directly engage with the history of Egyptian feminism—I requested access to the “Women’s History Archives” and began leafing somewhat distractedly through the personal papers of Hudā Sha’rāwī (1879–1947), the renowned Egyptian feminist who founded the Egyptian Feminist Union in 1923. The final file in the collection contains the papers of one of her young cousins, a certain Ḥawā’ Idrīss (1909–1988). There, I found drafts of sparkling and enthusiastic letters she had written to Vijay Lakshmi Pandit (1900–1990) on the occasion of her appointment as President of the United Nations in 1953; to Jawaharlal Nehru, urging him in 1960 to defend Palestine; to Violet and Joachim Alva (more on them shortly); and to Indira Gandhi,

¹ Ḥawā’ Idrīss, *Anā wa-l-Sharq*, (Cairo, 1970), 147.

congratulating her on her election as Prime Minister in July 1966.

The tentative threads of this correspondence become more clearly woven in the book accompanying the archive: its cover reads, in the plainest of fonts, “Me and The East [*Anā wa-l-Sharq*], by Ḥawā’ Idrīss, 1970.” “This is the story of my life,” she explains in the introduction, “without embellishment; the story of a human being who opened their eyes to the world around them, who worked for the nation [...], who entered, alongside others, the chaos of battles, who took part with their ideas and their faith, who fought with heroines and warriors with all their strength, from childhood to the present day.”²

It is this book I would now like to discuss, and more specifically the chapter devoted to the Asian Relations Conference held in Delhi in March-April 1948, which Ḥawā’ Idrīss attended as a representative of the Egyptian Feminist Union (*al-Ittihad al-nisā’i al-miṣrī*). Though largely unknown beyond Arabic-speaking feminist circles, her account—published twenty years after the trip—offers a unique perspective that blends amateur ethnography with political fervour, well before Egypt’s 1952 Revolution and Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasser’s rise to power. These early Cold War years (1947–1952) are often overshadowed in the memory of Indo-Egyptian relations by the celebrated Nasser–Nehru era. Revisiting the memoirs of this Egyptian woman, little known outside feminist historiography, offers an opportunity to reconsider that international, upper-class society—interwoven with sectarian and political stakes—which, to borrow Noor-Aiman Khan’s words, “shared a new sociopolitical lexicon and a sense of a shared future.”³

Ḥawā’’s purpose is not to recount “amusing travel incidents or strange and exciting adventures” to readers, “as they are accustomed to on such occasions, particularly in India, which is shrouded in mystery and surrounded by stories and

imagination.”⁴ Instead, she aims to give an honest account of “the facts and events [she] experienced over a period of time, [her] role in these events, and their relationship to the problems of the Middle East in the circumstances of the time.”⁵ It is therefore the story of a fervent feminist and decolonial activist, who believed in a new world where the rights of Palestine and freedom for all peoples would prevail.

In early 1947, the Egyptian Feminist Union received an invitation from the Indian politician and poet Sarojini Naidu (1879–1949) to participate in the First Asian Relations Conference, which was scheduled to take place in New Delhi in March of that year. When Hudā Sha’arāwī gathered her affiliates to discuss it, “no member was really enthusiastic about the trip, since it was the general opinion at the time — in Egypt, as in other Arab countries — that it was a dangerous undertaking.”⁶ One of the women present opposed Egypt’s participation in the conference out of solidarity with Indian Muslims and Muḥammad ‘Alī Jinnāḥ. Although Ḥawā’ never mentions her by name, I believe she was Amīna al-Sa’īd (1914–1995), a leading figure in Egyptian journalism. In December 1945–January 1946, while serving as Secretary-General of the Arab Union of Women, she travelled to Hyderabad for the All-India Women’s Conference. Upon her return, she criticised the Hindus and Nehru’s hypocrisy in the Cairo weekly newspaper *Ākhir Sā’a* and became an advocate for the Pakistani cause.⁷ This anecdote reveals the polarisation of Arab intellectual circles towards India on the eve of Partition. For Amīna al-Sa’īd, who had already visited India, questioning Jinnāḥ’s word was unacceptable — the Muslim cause was paramount and the All-India Muslim League had boycotted the conference. However, for Ḥawā’ Idrīss, out of “courtesy” as well as a “need to forge international friendships and win the support of many peoples”, Egyptian women could not refuse to attend. Both Amīna and Ḥawā’ reflect the indecision within the political sphere. The Egyptian government, who were also invited, took a long time to decide whether to send their consul in Bombay, Muṣṭafā Kāmil, and Professor ‘Abd al-

² Ḥawā’ Idrīss, *Anā wa-l-Sharq* (Cairo, 1970), 7.

³ Noor-Aiman Khan, *Egyptian-Indian Nationalist Collaboration and the British Empire* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 6.

⁴ Idrīss, *Anā wa-l-Sharq*, 138.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 139.

⁷ Amīna Al-Sa’īd, “Kunt fī l-hind”, *Ākhir Sā’a*, 1 and 22 March 1946.

Wahhāb ‘Azzām, dean of the Faculty of Arts. The Arab League and the Muslim Brotherhood were also represented. Ultimately, it was the plea of an Indian history professor from the University of Delhi who was passing through Cairo that convinced Hudā Sha‘arāwī to send her cousin, who was well-informed about women’s issues in the Arab world. Terrified at the thought of such responsibility, she found perfect support in Sayzā Nabrāwī (1897–1985), editor-in-chief of the feminist newspaper *L’Égyptienne*: “My advice, my dear girl, is not to let this unique opportunity pass you by.”⁸

And so Hawā’ Idrīss set off to discover India. Let us hear her own words as she sits on the plane taking her to Bombay:

“I felt a mixture of intense terror and pleasure, but fear was the driving force behind my first long-haul flight, taking me from Africa to Asia and from a familiar world to one that was completely different in terms of its environment, people, and customs, not to mention my participation in an important conference for the first time in my life, bringing together people from Asia and Africa. The pleasure came from the opportunity to visit India and see the immortal traces left by the civilisations that flourished there, as well as the chance to meet its great men and women. This is how I felt on 20 March 1947, as I sat aboard the huge plane flying through the sky on its way to India⁹.”

Upon arrival in Bombay, she was welcomed by an Egyptian delegation and immersed in festivities and warmth. This then carried her on to Ahmedabad and finally Delhi, where she was taken care of by Shāhid Ḥamīd, the secretary of the Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army.

On the afternoon of 23 March 1947, when the Asian Relations Conference opened, Ḥawā’ closely observed India’s efforts to unite the continent’s peoples in a manner similar to the Arab League. She also noted that “most of the Asian nations represented had granted women the right to vote in

their countries”, while Egyptian women, “despite their noble and glorious contributions to their nation, were still deprived of this right, receiving neither support nor assistance¹⁰.”



Fig. 1: Press caricature published by *Bint al-Nil* in 1954, a feminist magazine which was founded and edited by Doria Shafik. The legend says: "Indian women celebrated seven years since gaining political rights. Indian woman: "We got our rights after the British left India". Egyptian woman: "And we also got the British out..." (a critique of the delay in Egypt to give women suffrage, finally obtained in the 1956 Constitution). Photo: AUC Rare Books and Special Collections Library

While on a mission to present an overview of “problems related to labour and social services, the place of women and the feminist movement in the Arab world, and immigration and the freedom of peoples¹¹” — a report read on her behalf by Sarojini Naidu — Ḥawā’ distinguished herself by delivering a speech in favour of Palestine in response to the Israeli delegation’s address. Nehru concluded as follows: “I would like to emphasise that, in the eyes of Indians, Palestine has always been the land of the Arabs and will always remain so.”¹²

As a loyal delegate, Hawā’ briefly recalls the topics discussed during the conference, including the need to develop national industries, cooperate scientifically and technically, and strengthen labour

⁸ Idrīss, *Anā wa-l-Sharq*, 147.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 151.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 159-161.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 161.

¹² *Ibid.*, 182.

“Sociologists were right to say that a nation’s morality, the passions of its people, and their sense of life depend on many factors, including its songs and national music. This is because music and songs are a reflection of a people’s true feelings and character — whether they are moral and noble, or the opposite. If we closely examine the songs, music and dances of the Indians, we will find that they are distinguished by high qualities and a high status. Their songs and dance expressions combine passion, morality and good taste because they are either religious songs and dances or war songs of a particularly religious nature that symbolise honour and chivalry.”¹⁶

If the description of a cultural performance is a mandatory part of any travelogue and seems to indicate the social position to which Ḥawā’ Idrīss refers, her curiosity about Hindu civilisation and her recognition of its “morality” and “nobility” form part of a specific discourse in which cultural identity serves as a political statement. Her encounter with Indira Gandhi on the sidelines of the conference is evocative in this respect.¹⁷ Rather than celebrating the common Islamic bond between the Arab world and India, there is a sense of admiring recognition of a different civilisation, observed with curiosity and delight. This polite discovery of the Other can undoubtedly be explained by the social homogeneity that characterises the circles in which Ḥawā’ moves in Cairo and Delhi, as hinted at in his account.

It is only natural that her encounters with Nehru and then Gandhi should feature so prominently – after all, isn’t that the whole point of autobiographical narrative? – that Ḥawā’ dwells on anecdotes that cast her in a favourable light? However, her journey is also punctuated by encounters that reveal the world to which she belongs. In Bombay, for example, she meets a Belgian woman who regularly attends Hudā Sha’arāwī’s Tuesday salons,¹⁸ and then Prince Kazim Effendi, who invites her to the home of his cousin, Princess Dürrüşehvar, in Hyderabad. She was the only daughter of the last Ottoman caliph, Abdulmejid II, and became Princess of Berar through marriage.

Through Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay (1903–1988), one of the founders of the All-India Women’s Conference, as well as because of her striking stance for Palestine, she earned the friendship of the intellectual circles surrounding the conference, notably Violet and Joachim Alva, a Christian Indian couple and members of the Indian parliament. They commissioned an article from Ḥawā’ for their magazine *Forum*, which was published on 13 April 1947. She was also welcomed by Indian students whose knowledge of the Middle East she admires for their “mature, conscious mentality and penetrating mind, perhaps due, in addition to their culture, to the spirit of Sufism that dominates the lives of Indians.”¹⁹

This familiarity, born of a shared socio-political background, helped foster diplomatic friendships across borders. Once back in Egypt, Ḥawā’ continued to correspond with various people she had met in India, notably the Alvas. Encouraged by Fu’ād Abāza, an Egyptian businessman and member of the powerful Abāza clan, she dared to send Nehru a telegram in the summer of 1950, ensuring that rumours of India’s possible recognition of Israel were unfounded. She transcribed the text in her memoirs:

“Alexandria, 23 September 1950:

His Excellency Pandit Nehru

New Delhi, India:

I have fond memories of the 1947 conference, at which you declared that Palestine would remain an Arab state. However, I must express my disappointment at your government’s intention to recognise Israel as a state. I hope that this will not happen.

Ḥawā’ Idrīss.”²⁰

Of course, there was no reply. But her friend, Joachim Alva wrote to her in February 1951 to inform her that he had submitted a request to the Indian Congress for “full and absolute support for Egypt in its demand for the withdrawal of British forces from the Canal

¹⁶ Ibid., 208.

¹⁷ Ibid., 214–222.

¹⁸ Ibid., 224.

¹⁹ Ibid., 240.

²⁰ Ibid., 221.

Zone²¹.” Moreover, while Ḥawā’ was seeing her friend Violet Alva off at Cairo airport, she bumped into the Pandit, who assured her that he had “given the necessary orders, and ‘I think you sensed that we have not yet recognised Israel as a state’.”²²

All this took place in the early years of the Cold War, when Egypt was still ruled by King Farouk. Noor-Aiman Khan clearly demonstrated the bonds of friendship that united certain Egyptian and Indian political elites, such as Muṣṭafā al-Naḥḥās, who served as prime minister several times between 1930 and 1952, and Pandit Nehru. In many ways, Ḥawā’'s case is another variation on this theme. Her memoirs bear witness to the reserve expressed by many socio-political elites, both Egyptian and foreign, towards the Free Officers who seized power on 23 July 1952.

She recounts welcoming her friend Joachim Alva to Cairo in 1954, during the trial of the Muslim Brotherhood. They had been declared enemies of the regime following the assassination attempt on Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasser in Manshiyya on 26 October 1954. Alva attended a hearing involving Yūsuf Ṭala’t, then met Lieutenant Colonels Gamāl Sālīm, the Deputy Prime Minister and brother of the Minister of National Guidance Anwar al-Sadat, Minister of State, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the *al-Jumhūriyya* newspaper and Minister of Social Affairs and Labour. All of these men were Free Officers and were responsible for judging the case. Back in India, Alva delayed writing the article that he had hastily sold to his Egyptian friends. In April 1955, he wrote an article for the *Hindustan Times*, an excerpt of which is reproduced in Ḥawā’'s book and below:

“The author of these lines was extremely happy and delighted to have the opportunity, for the second time, to share his insights on Colonel Anwar al-Sadat. He has recently been mentioned in India, where he has left a deep impression on the people with his strong personality and unwavering commitment to his country's cause. Colonel Anwar al-Sadat is the founder of the revolutionary movement in

Egypt and was imprisoned for six years. Today, Egyptian leaders who have awakened from their slumber are asking themselves: ‘Who are we in relation to the Arab, African, and Islamic worlds?’ There is no doubt that they will not forget Egypt’s role at the heart of Africa, where a fierce struggle is taking place between five million white people and two hundred million Africans. Egypt currently supports liberation movements in Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and other parts of Africa. It is a bridgehead for freedom and against foreign occupation worldwide. Colonel Anwar al-Sadat told me that he and President Nasser would visit India en route to Jakarta to attend the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung, and that he was looking forward to seeing him again in India.”²³

Alva’s laudatory speech about Anwar al-Sadat reminds us that, even in 1954, Nasser did not appear to be the natural leader that the revolution was expected to produce.²⁴ Nevertheless, he confided in Ḥawā’ in a letter dated 18 December 1955 that, despite being impressed by the “patriotism and determination of the leaders of the revolution in Egypt”, he, “as many people in [his country]”, believed that “the administration of the state must always be entrusted to civilians,”²⁵ a conviction widely held by the elites of monarchical Egypt.

Through the voice of an Egyptian feminist member of the monarchist upper class, this article has sought to restore some Egyptian-Indian connections at a time when the highly popular Nasser–Nehru duo did not yet exist. While the Eastern and Western blocs were preparing their arsenals, Egypt was searching for a way forward. The *raīs* had not yet returned triumphantly from Bandung, nor had he delivered his speeches in his “metallic, incisive, pathetic, ironic, defiant and sincere voice”, which would soon change the Middle East.²⁶

On the Egyptian historical scene, the figure of Ḥawā’ Idrīs embodies both the recent efforts to excavate unknown figures of national history and the untaken paths of modernity and rights. In 2017, Women and

²¹ Ibid., 241.

²² Ibid., 224.

²³ Ibid., 250.

²⁴ Jean Lacouture, *Nasser* (Édito-Service, 1983), 102.

²⁵ Idrīs, *Anā wa-l-Sharq*, 251.

²⁶ Mohamed Berrada, *Comme un été qui ne reviendra pas: souvenirs d'étudiant pendant l'été 1956 au Caire* (Actes Sud, 2001), 31.

Memory Foundation, based in Cairo and dedicated to recovering Arab women’s voices in history, organised an exhibition on Ḥawā’ Idrīss – “one the forgotten pioneers of women’s and civil society work in Egyptian history”²⁷ – on the occasion of the launch of a new edition of *Anā wa-l-Sharq*.²⁸ Born in the Caucasus and soon orphaned, she was raised with her sister, Ḥuriyya, in the household of their aunt, Hudā Sha’rāwī, in Cairo. Educated at the Boarding School of the American College for Girls, from which she obtained her baccalaureate, she went on to dedicate her life to feminism and social service as a member of the Egyptian Women’s Union led by Hudā Sha’rāwī. She later became the president of the Women’s Union Sisters Association (*Shaqīqāt al-Ittiḥād al-Nisā’ī*), through which she participated in numerous conferences of women’s associations across the Middle East and South Asia, and volunteered for the Red Crescent in Syria during World War II.

However, like many of her contemporaries, her struggle was ultimately absorbed by the sweeping Nasserist revolution. Despite her efforts to advocate for women’s suffrage before Muḥammad Naguīb, the first President of the Egyptian Republic, after the military coup of July 1952, her commitment to social work and feminism dissolved into the “state feminism” developed within the emerging Nasserist State.²⁹ All spheres of civil engagement in social work in the interwar period were progressively controlled and incorporated into state welfare policies.³⁰ For Ḥawā’ Idrīss, there remained only the satisfaction of having served her lifelong “great national and human causes” and of having “held [her] mission”, whereas people had already forgotten what she had done. A short item published in *al-Ahrām* on July 1975, pleaded her cause, albeit weakly, when she was violently expelled from the hotel where she had been

living since Hudā Sha’rāwī’s house was destroyed in 1963.³¹

India perhaps marked the climax of her commitment – a devotion she continued to hold onto, as she wandered through her memories more than twenty years after her return to Egypt, by then a homeless militant.



Fig. 3: Hawa Idriss, Women and Memory Forum
Photo: Creative Commons

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²⁷ Mahmoud Atef, “Ḥawā’ Idrīss: sīra mawāziyya li-l-ḥaraka al-nisawīyya al-miṣriyya”, *al-Araby*, February 15, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/2s3wt6pd>.

²⁸ The Women and Memory Forum, “Al-Mar’a Wa-l-Dhākira’ Taḥtafilu bi-l-Itlāq Kitāb Ḥawā’ Idrīss ‘Anā wa-l-Sharq’”, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/3r6wdert>.

²⁹ Mervat Hatem, “The Paradoxes of State-Feminism in Egypt”, in *Women and Politics Worldwide*, eds. Najma Chowdhury and Barbara J. Nelson (Yale University Press, 1994), 226-42.; Laura Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood: Feminisms, Modernity, and the State in Nasser’s Egypt* (Stanford University Press, 2011).

³⁰ Antoinette Ferrand, “Surveying Cairo: The Machinery of Social Reform in the Nasser-Era Administration”, *The Proceedings of the Royal Academy for Overseas Sciences*, 2025. <https://www.kaowarsom.be/documents/PDF%20BULLETIN/FERRAND.pdf>

³¹ “Ḥawā’ Idrīss, wāḥida min za’imāt al-ḥaraka al-nisā’īyya muḥaddada bi-l-ṭarad min ghurfati-hā bi-aḥad fanādiq al-Qāhira”, *al-Ahrām*, July 20, 1975, 7.

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