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Caricatures as a Means of Communication in the Late Ottoman Context: Rifqī's Cairo in the 1920s, a Scene on the Tram

Abstract

The cartoonist Rifqī (died 1939?) began his career around 1919 in Istanbul. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, he emigrated to Italy and later to Egypt to continue his work there. Little is known about his biography, including his name. In Cairo, he quickly gained fame as the chief cartoonist of the humour magazine Al-Fukāha, for which he worked from 1926 to 1933. His works can often be described as ethnographic and artistically sophisticated. In addition to simple 'humorous themes,' he was particularly interested in 'modern technology' and 'society in transition.' The image discussed here deals with the question of social emancipation in Egypt, with a particular focus on the appearance of women in public life.[1]

Keywords: Rifqī, cartoonist, the 1920s in Cairo, public transport, women, *Effendiyya*

In this article, I examine a drawing by the cartoonist Rifqī in which he addresses a combination of themes that repeatedly preoccupied him. These are the concepts of 'modern road traffic' and 'interaction between the genders.' To provide some context, I would first like to describe the environment in which the cartoonist worked. Rifqī must have been an unusual personality with a colourful biography; I will therefore first look at some of his personal details before turning to the drawing itself.

Caricatures of the Middle East have only in recent years become the subject of Islamic studies research.[2] Older studies, such as those by Gendzier (1966)[3] and Marsot (1971),[4] have obviously had less of an impact. [5]The reason for this lack of interest can only be guessed at; perhaps it has something to do with the fact that caricatures played only a minor role in the general media discourse of the late 20th century. At least in Germany, political caricature magazines such as *Kladderadatsch* and *Simplizissimus* ceased to play a role after the Second World War; in addition, most caricature and humour magazines from the Middle East were hardly known to Western researchers. It is only in relatively

1 I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Anna Kollatz and Veruschka Wagner for inviting me to the Istanbul Caricature Event and encouraging me to submit my contribution to the publication. I would also like to thank my reviewers for their extremely valuable literature references and for kindly correcting some citation errors.

2 Elmas 2016, 21–2.

3 Zdafee 2020, 6, note 27, with reference to the work of Gendzier 1996, 16.

4 *ibid*., 7, note 31, with reference to the work of Marsot 1971, 2–15.

5 A good overview of the history of research, including literature on the subject of 'caricature research,' can be found in Zdafee, 2020, 6, note 27, and pp. 7–8, with footnotes.

recent years[6] that research has devoted itself to the topic of Middle Eastern caricatures on a larger scale, because it has become clear that this medium, which for a long time was considered a cultural fringe phenomenon in Islamic studies, actually offers very direct access to the cultural history of the geopolitical area under investigation. Cartoons have been produced throughout the Middle East since the 19th century and especially since the 1920s. The main 'hotspots' of this scene were–besides Beirut–Istanbul and Cairo.[7] Perhaps one can imagine the journalistic situation at that time as a kind of 'start-up scene': driven by the enthusiasm of publishers, authors and readers on the one hand, with the constant pressure of financial constraints and political repression on the other, and in any case incredibly lively and experimental. The region was undergoing a dramatic period of national and cultural self-discovery, confrontation with the colonial powers, and social and economic development. The outcome of this process varied greatly. The declining Ottoman Empire, for example, experienced a more authoritarian new beginning and behaved differently from Egypt, where the discourse was more pragmatic and emancipatory (and, of course, anti-British). What the two had in common was a population that took a keen interest in current affairs and socio-political issues.

However, acceptance and use of the numerous classic newspaper formats were limited by widespread illiteracy and poverty, which restricted their use. This created a gap for humour magazines, which offered short texts and, above all, numerous caricatures. These humour magazines were often small (*Aydede* and *Ayine* consisted of four pages, presumably a DIN A3 sheet folded in the middle; *Al-Fukāha* was limited to 20 pages) and it can be assumed that they were often displayed in public tea and coffee houses, where they could be seen and explained or discussed by a large number of interested parties.[8] The descriptions by El-Menshawi and Gläser,[9] Kollatz,[10] Quiering,[11] Wagner,[12] and Zdafee[13] provide a good and easily understandable overview of the conditions at that time. In addition, the important collections of the Bonn-based 'Translatio' project, with its digitised journal volumes from the Middle East and Near East dating back to 1860, have made large image and text corpora available to interested researchers for the first time.[14] Anna Kollatz provides the following definition and rationale for the emergence of this new field of research:

6 E.g. through the works of Baron 1989 and 2005; Kholoussy 2010 and Zdafee 2020.
7 Zdafee 2020, 6–7; Kollatz 2022a, 117–8; Wagner 2022, 129–30.
8 Kollatz 2022a, 127 above. Even the last sultan, Vahiettin, was a subscriber to Aydede, as its editor Refik Halit reported: Çeviker 1993, 3 (without pagination).
9 El-Menshawy and Gläser 2022..
10 Kollatz 2022a, 117–28 and Kollatz 2022b, 148–64.
11 Quiering 2022.
12 Wagner 2022, 129–30.
13 Zdafee 2022.
14 Access link: Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Bonn. URL: https://digitale-sammlungen.ulb.uni-bonn.de/topic/view/3085789 (last accessed 19 February 2026); for general information about the project: 'Project Translatio'. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Project_Translatio (both last accessed on 27 July 2025).

> We assume that caricatures are a multi-graphic form of communication that condenses the social discourse of their time through satirical exaggeration. It follows that these representations can serve as 'signposts' for exploring the social, political and intellectual discourse of their time...[15]

She continues:

> In principle, we encounter two types of caricatures here: Those that make us laugh spontaneously, and those that leave us with question marks in our eyes... but this should not obscure the fact that such a spontaneous impression of understanding may also be based on a misunderstanding, or that a caricature may have other, deeper and possibly coded meanings in addition to the superficial, easily understandable joke.[16]

But the significance of caricatures is not only historical. Their special characteristics also make them suitable for modern language and culture teaching. Another quote describes the importance of the subject for modern research and teaching:

> Caricatures are also well suited as an 'introduction' to the subject matter, as their pointed presentation and relatively small amount of text make them accessible to interested parties, learners and students alike...[17]

My first encounters with Arabic cartoons took place during my initial Arabic studies, when I regularly translated from Egyptian daily newspapers. It was always the cartoons that captivated me first. They were visually much more appealing than the texts and often provided direct access to specific topics of everyday life. In addition, the accompanying texts were usually written in Egyptian dialect. If you wanted to get to the bottom of the punchline, you had the pleasure of discovering the written everyday language on the one hand and, on the other hand, the feeling of having come a little closer to the culture of the host country. By participating in several seminars at the Institute for Islamic Studies at the University of Heidelberg, my interest in the topic of 'cartoons' was rekindled. Among other things, we discussed the caricatures of an artist who can be considered one of the most interesting representatives of this group of works. He is known to us by the pseudonym 'Rifqī,' but we know little more about him than that he began his career in Istanbul around 1919 and continued it in Cairo after 1923. The little information we have about 'Rifqī' comes from two sources:

In a small compilation on early cartoonists in Egypt, the Egyptian journalist ʿAbder-Raḥmān Bakr reported what he had learned about 'Ali Rifqī' from his contemporaries: 'Ali Rifqī' grew up in Istanbul, had a professional background as a graduate of a military academy and surveyor, and emigrated after Atatürk's victory to work first in Italy and later in Egypt.[18] In Cairo, where he found a new home with his two brothers, he initially worked as a technical draughtsman and then worked for the humour magazine *Al-Fukāha* until

15 Kollatz 2022a, 121.
16 *ibid.*
17 *ibid.*
18 Bakr 2017, 6, and, specifically on Rifqī, 23–4; another summary in Kollatz and Wagner 2025, 14–5.

1933. During this time, he became dissatisfied with the editors' increasingly 'pro-Atatürk' stance–after all, this was precisely why he had turned his back on Turkey–and left the newspaper to open a biscuit and pastry factory with his brothers. However, this project failed, and he died not long afterwards as a relatively young man.

In the 1990s, Turkish cartoon expert Turgut Çeviker[19] studied the work of the cartoonist 'Ahmet Rıfkı' and published many of his works from 1921–1924 in a small anthology, together with several chapters of commentary. In his edition, he reports or quotes similar information about Rıfkı's biography to that found in Bakr:[20] The cartoonist named 'Ahmet Rıfkı'[21] came from upper-class circles, as his father had been Minister of Agriculture. During the War of Independence, he worked as a military interrogation specialist for the Istanbul government, an activity that earned him the additional name 'traitor' (Turkish '*hain*').[22] Towards the end of the war, he presumably left the country in September/October 1922, lived in Italy for a while,[23] later worked in Cairo, and died there at a young age. The main source for these statements is the memoirs of Rifqī's former employer and editor of the humour magazine 'Aydede,' Refik Halit Karay;[24] however, Çeviker limits the reliability of these statements from the outset.[25]

We first encountered Çeviker's edition of the early works of the cartoonist, whom he refers to as 'Ahmet Rıfkı,' in the spring of 2024[26] and, based on our knowledge at the time, our first question had to be whether the identity of the cartoonist discussed here could be determined with any certainty. According to Çeviker, 'Ahmet Rıfkı' worked in Istanbul from 1921 to 1923/24 for the magazines *Tatlı-Sert*, *Aydede*, and *Zümrüdüanka*. In Egypt, the name of the chief cartoonist of *Al-Fukāha* is given as ''Alī Rifqī.' The situation was further complicated by the fact that there is also a late Ottoman contemporary poet of the same name ('Ahmet Rıfkı') and with a similar biography. So at first we could not be sure 'whether and, if so, how many' people we were dealing with.

The identity of the late Ottoman writer Ahmet Rıfkı was quickly clarified: he is clearly a separate person, with known dates of birth and death. The poet and theologian lived from

19 Çeviker 1993; Elmas 2016, 21; note 35 illustrates how much Çeviker has contributed to this topic. Unfortunately, Heidelberg University Library does not hold any of Çeviker's works. For more on the author, see also İşik 2001–2004, vol. 1, 525.

20 Çeviker 1993, 1–2 (without pagination).

21 Çeviker uses the Turkish transcription with an ı at the end.

22 Öngören in Çeviker 1933, 11 (without pagination).

23 It is not entirely clear where exactly he stayed there. His own contribution from *Zümrüdüanka*, published by Çeviker 1993, 14 (without pagination), refers to his new home in Naples. But Refik Halit writes about San Remo, Kollatz and Wagner, 2025, 14–5.

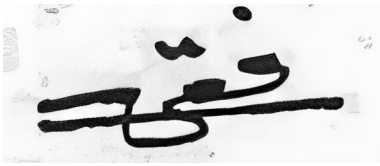
24 Wasti 2019.

25 Çeviker 1993, 3 (without pagination). See also Kollatz and Wagner 2025, 14–5.

26 During the first Istanbul Cartoon Symposium in March 2024, Erdem Çolak from Middle East Technical University Ankara brought the publication to our attention. He immediately took the trouble to find the small and now out-of-print publication for me in a second-hand bookshop that happened to be nearby, so that I was able to hold it in my hands just a few hours later; I am extremely grateful to him for his kindness.

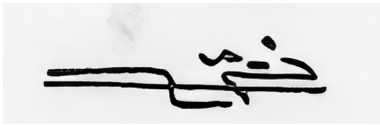
1881 to 1937 and died in exile in Greece.[27] As for the two different first names of the cartoonist in Istanbul and Cairo, closer inspection revealed that none of the signatures known to me–neither in Turkey nor in Cairo–mention a first name at all. Colleagues have informed me that 'Rifqī' or 'Rıfkı' is a kind of 'common name' in Turkey,[28] and if it is correct that the cartoonist came from upper-class Istanbul circles, he or his family may not have wanted to see the family name constantly appearing in the context of caricatures. Therefore, I assume for the time being that 'Rıfqī' was a pseudonym. The main argument for accepting that both names refer to one and the same person is the signature, which can be found in identical form in both the Istanbul cartoons up to 1924 and in the works from the Egyptian period from 1926 onwards. This signature is very distinctive: the initial letter *r* is placed as a horizontal line below the other letters *f-q-ī*. Some signatures appear to be more handwritten:

Figure 1. Aydede*, no. 2, from 5 January 1922, title.*



Later, the letters become more stylised:

Figure 2. Aydede*, no. 47, from 12 June 1922, 2.*



In September 1922, they occasionally resemble graphic cut-outs that could be pasted in (Fig. 3).[29] The basic form did not change later during Rifqī's time in Cairo (Fig. 4).

Further substantial evidence for the assumption of a single identity are the similarities in the motifs: Çeviker's collection of Rifqī's works from 1921 to 1924 shows a number of image and text motifs, particularly in the subject areas of 'Social Situation, Economy/Transport' and 'Women: Fashion, Behaviour, Gender Relations,' which we encounter again in the Egyptian publications from 1926 onwards.[30] The cartoonist Rifqī thus embodies two

27 Topçuoğlu 2001.

28 Conversation with Erdem Çolak and Ilkim Okyar on 24 April 2025, during the '2nd Cartoon Workshop' in Heidelberg, April 2025.

29 Other examples are *Aydede*, no. 76, from 21 September 1922, title, and *Aydede*, no. 84, from 19 October 1922, title.

30 One example can be found in Kollatz and Wagner 2025, 10–1. Another is the topic of 'Traffic and Transport systems of the Future,' cf. Çeviker 1993, 4, (from *Zümrüdüanka*, dated 22 November 1923) with the series 'Egypt in the year 2000' in *Al-Fukāha*, no. 2, 8 December

Figure 3. Aydede*, no. 74, from 14 September 1922, title page and detail, below.*

Figure 4. Al-Fukāha*, no. 1, from 1 December 1926, title.*

different cultures of the early 20th century: the Ottoman-Turkish and the Egyptian. His work offers an insight into both the final years of Ottoman rule and the late 1920s in Egypt.[31] The Istanbul humour magazine *Aydede* and its editor Refik Halit (Karay) were among the opponents of the Anatolian uprising, and after Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) finally seized power, Refik Halit was officially exiled and had to leave the country.[32] Under the presumably very liberal working conditions of the early days in Istanbul–Aydede was published on a small scale every two weeks during 1922–Rifqī produced a wide variety of cartoons on political, cultural and general entertainment topics. His stance can basically be described as 'bourgeois-liberal' and definitely opposed to the so-called 'Anatolian uprising,' but just as important is his non-conformist view on all kinds of issues. The keyword 'against' (*Karşı*) in the title of Çeviker's publication is certainly very aptly chosen for his work and personality. A number of different illustrators worked for *Aydede*, lightening up the editorial section with caricatures. The magazine existed for just under a year. Rifqī made no secret of his criticism of Mustafa Kemal and his party members in his drawings; nor did he refrain from mocking the representatives of the old Istanbul administration and its media. This independence will not only have won him friends and may have been the reason for his emigration. At the end of 1922, when the end of the sultanate was foreseeable, Rifqī left his homeland for good.[33] After a short time in Italy, Rifqī moved on to Egypt, where he came into contact with the publishers Imīl and Šukrī Zaydān from the Dār-al Ḥilāl Publishing House.[34] The two were planning to publish the humour magazine *Al-Fukāha*.[35] Rifqī became the chief cartoonist of the new magazine and from then on probably had to work under time pressure to ensure that the weekly issues were filled, either by himself or by other artists. He also frequently created the front pages. This led to a high degree of professionalisation in his work. The development of his own style is his most impressive achievement. During his Istanbul phase, the range of his early artwork was enormous and was characterised only by the absence of an individual signature style. Rifqī had copied motifs and styles from other cartoonists, among other things.[36] In Egypt, Rifqī developed his own style in full-page, large-format images that make the covers of *Al-Fukāha* look as if adorned by paintings (Fig. 5 and 6). Other drawings resemble sketches (Fig. 7 and 8), while others are rendered in an almost exaggerated style (Fig. 9 and 10). Others, on the other hand, are minimalistic (Fig. 11).

1926, 9; no. 3, 15 December 1926, 9, and specifically see the article by Anna Kollatz in this volume. The special topic 'The Victims of the Trams' is another example: Çeviker 1993, 125 (from *Aydede* no. 15, 20 February 1922) vs. *Al-Fukaha*, 1 December 1926, 7.

31 For a very helpful overview of this period, see Gingeras 2016, esp. 235–6. 'Downfall and Repudiation' and Demirel 2018.

32 Wasti 2019.

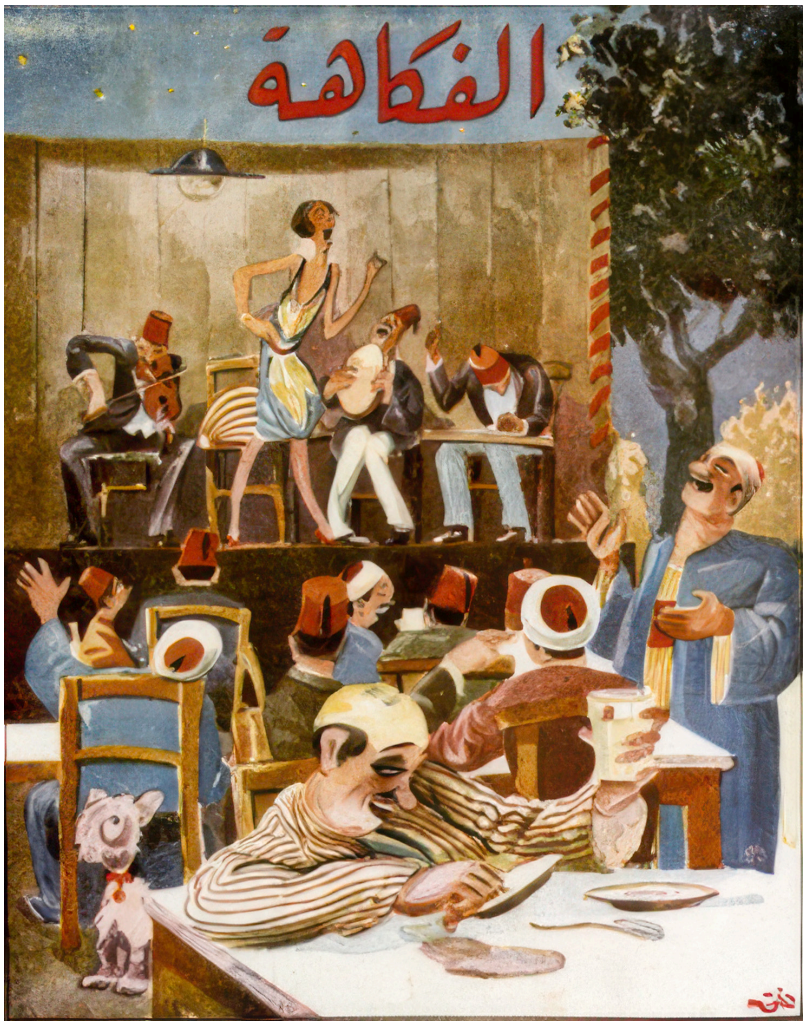
33 For the exact date, see Çeviker 1993, 3.

34 Ayalon 1995, 78.

35 Zdafee 2020, 34, 49, 75.

36 E.g. in Çeviker 1993, 200, where Rifqī draws a portrait of his colleague Ahmet Münif Bey 'in his own style,' or in *Aydede*, no. 21 of 13 March 1922, where an unknown artist first formulated the idea of the 'tram as the scourge of humanity' and thus may have been the inspiration for Rifkī's frequent use of this motif.

Figure 5. Al-Fukāha*, no. 34, 20 July 1927, title page.*



For the editors of *Al-Fukāha*, it was important that the new magazine have a broad impact, and certain striking topics such as 'modern society with all its extreme innovations' were perhaps better suited to this than others. The fact that this category also included the so-called classics of humorous literature, such as 'Alcohol-intoxicated Men,' 'Angry Wives,' 'Emancipated Young Women,' and 'Destructive Technology/Modern Road Traffic'[37] was one of the working conditions that Rifqī had to (or wanted to) accept.

37 E.g. Kollatz and Wagner 2025, 26–7, 31 (left); generally on the subject of 'Women in contemporary Egyptian caricature': Zdafee 2020, 137–8.

Figure 6. Al-Fukāha*, no. 37, 10 August 1927, title page.*

I would now like to turn to the image announced at the beginning, which deals with 'modern road traffic' and 'gender interaction.' The full-page image is entitled 'The Well-Behaved Boy' and appeared in February 1928 on the cover of *Al-Fukāha* (issue no. 64, Fig. 12).

The setting is a tram or trolleybus compartment in which there are 15 people of different origins. Most of them are men from the *Effendīyya* class.[38] They are distinguished by their red *ṭarbūš* caps (fezzes), high-necked shirts, and formal European-style suits. The

38 Kollatz 2022a, 117–28, 125 with footnote 31, with reference to El-Menshawy and Gläser 2022.

Figure 7. Al-Fukāha*, no. 34, 20 July 1927, 10.*

Figure 8. Al-Fukāha*, no. 51, 16 November 1927, 7.*

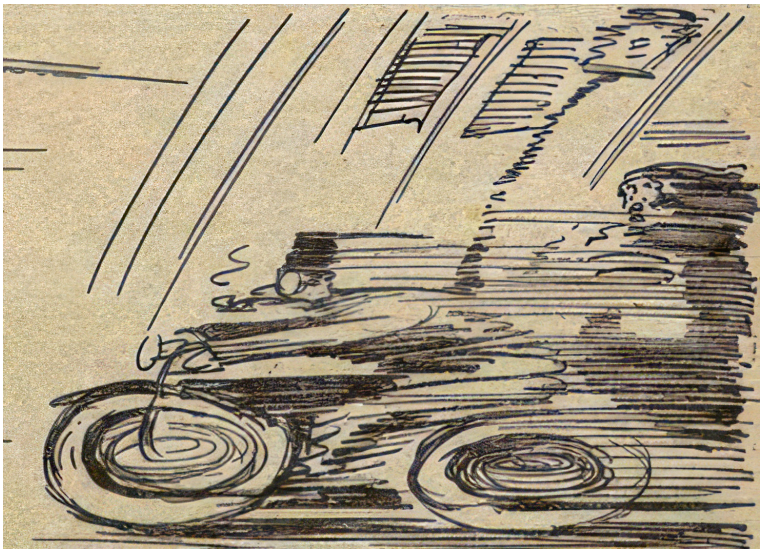


Figure 9. Al-Fukāha*, no. 1, 1 December 1926, 7.*

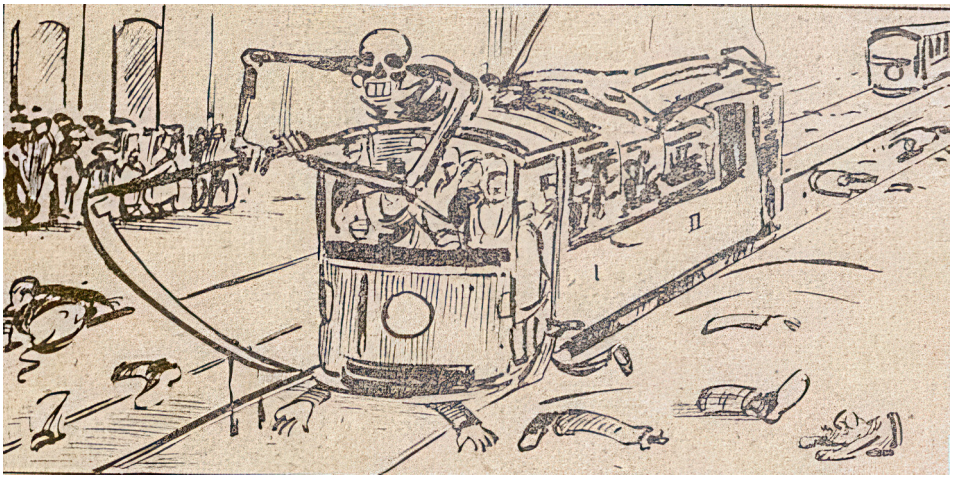
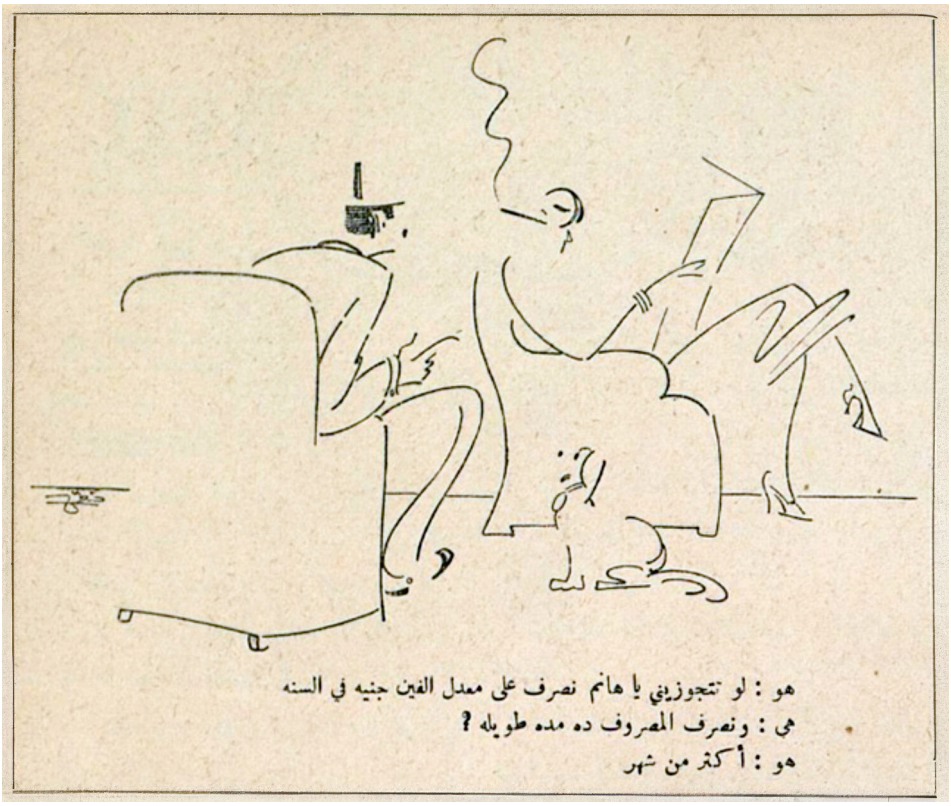


Figure 10. Al-Fukāha*, no. 9, 29 January 1927, 8.*

centre of the picture is dominated by a young woman standing with a suitcase in her right hand and an umbrella in her left; she is wearing modern high heels, and a bob cut covered by a black cap. She is unveiled and wears a short, modern, formal, and inconspicuous dark dress. She is unaccompanied, and the small suitcase in her hand reinforces the impression that she is travelling alone. In the foreground on the left of the picture, a man in traditional

Figure 11. Al-Fukāha, *no. 27, 1 June 1927, 11.*



Egyptian clothing can be seen: he is wearing a red and white striped *jallābīya*, a long dark robe over it, black shoes, and a small white turban on his head. He is clean-shaven and has a small black moustache. His son sits on his knee wearing a miniature version of the 'Effendi' outfit: a small *ṭarbūš*, striped shorts, tiny elegant slippers, and a sailor's blouse. In the background of the car, a second group of traditionally dressed passengers can be seen: a woman wearing an *ʿabāyah*, a long dark coat that extends over her head. Her face is almost completely covered by a white veil, only her eyes are visible. She is followed by a man in a *jallābīya*[39] and white headdress. Finally, there is a young man on the left who appears to be standing on the outside of the carriage; he seems to be calling out to someone else on the street.

Rifqi's cartoons are usually easy to understand from the image alone, with the captions serving mainly to reinforce the effect.[40] In this case, however, the situation is different. It is

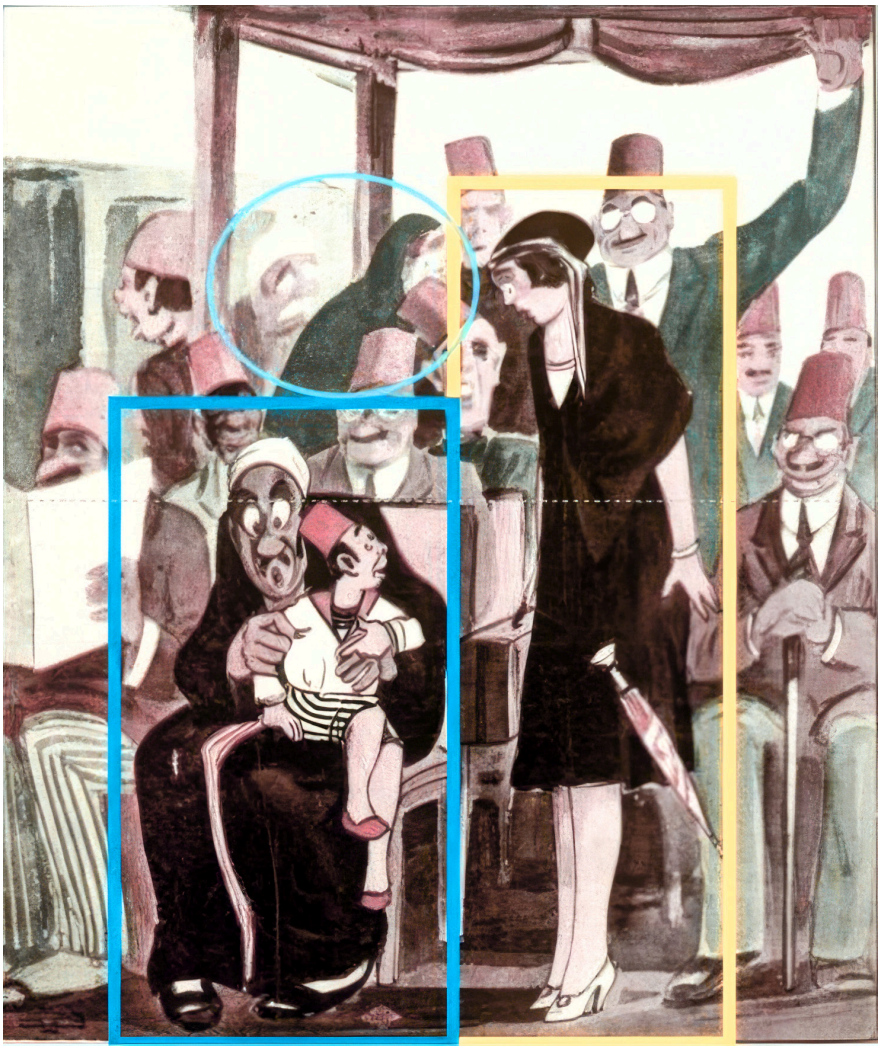
39 Wehr 1958, 116. A long, shirt-like garment worn by villagers; in the city, it is also worn by domestic servants and sometimes by the middle class in private settings.

40 Some examples in Kollatz and Wagner 2025, 10, 12, 27, 31, 33, 35.

Figure 12. Al-Fukāha*, no. 64, 15 February 1928, title page.*

clear that there must have been some interaction between the Effendis, the father with his son, and the young woman in the middle of the compartment. The men around the young woman have their eyes fixed on her; some are grinning and are obviously amused by something. The boy's father looks frightened, his eyes are wide open, his feet are turned inwards, and he seems to be clutching his son with both hands. The young woman herself

Figure 13. Central figures from Figure 12.



is frozen, her eyes are also wide open, she is blushing, and the umbrella is falling from her left hand. Her gaze is directed at the little boy. However, the actual content of the scene remains unclear until one reads the caption. It says: 'The well-behaved boy,' and the text itself reads:

'The boy sitting on his father's lap (to the standing woman):
"*Would you like to take my place?*[41] (تنفضلي تقعدي مطرحي؟)".

41 Wehr 1958, 641, does not cite a 7th word stem of this verb so this is most likely a dialectal form.

From today's perspective, the boy's statement seems only moderately problematic. After all, he is merely following the basic rules of etiquette, according to which children should give up their seats to adults. One would therefore assume that he is simply parroting a learned phrase without considering that he does not actually have a seat of his own to offer. However, the strong reaction of the entire group, including the young woman and his father, suggests that a different dynamic has been triggered here. I would like to try to analyse this in the following. Let us consider the groups we see represented in the carriage compartment:

- The Effendis. They are the majority in the car and they appear amused by the boy's remark and focus their attention on the young woman's reaction.
- The 'Young Modern Women,' represented here by a single individual. Her shocked reaction and the fact that the Effendis stare at them mockingly show that their position seems to be precarious.
- The traditionally dressed women, that is, wearing long robes and face veils, possibly even accompanied by a man in public spaces; represented by the woman in the back, whose face is at eye level with that of the young woman.
- The traditionally dressed country-people, whose typical clothing consists of the *jallābīya*, a long overcoat, sturdy shoes, and a small turban; the most conspicuous representative is the boy's father, another is the companion of the woman at the back left.

The first two groups will be briefly examined below.

The Effendis

This group has been described frequently.[42] As members of a new social group that formed in the late 19th century, they saw themselves as distinct from the traditional peasant milieu. Their formal secular education and their roles in the renewal of the state led to a general self-image as forward-looking, both politically and in their personal lives. Their role models were the modern middle classes of Europe. However, all authors emphasise that the *Effendiyya* was clearly stratified internally, ranging from lower-middle-class civil servants in the state administration, who tended to embody a petty bourgeois milieu, to leading journalists and state politicians. The *Effendiyya* also differed in their ideas about the role of religion and thus also in their cultural demarcation from the West. Finally, the economic situation played a significant role: in the years after the First World War, the number of lower-level employees rose due to increased educational opportunities on the one hand and reduced upward mobility opportunities on the other; many of them lived on the poverty line during the economic crisis of the 1920s.[43] For many of them it was not possible to start a family in accordance with their social status because the material demands of the bride's family were beyond their means. The contemporary term for this generally difficult situation faced by young men was 'marriage crisis' and seems to have

42 Ryzova, 2014. A brief and accurate overview can be found in Kholoussy 2010, 7, and further in Beinin 2008, 309.

43 Ryzova 2014, 9–10.

triggered a significant social debate.[44] Some of 'our' Effendis, who are seated around the young woman may have found themselves in exactly the situation described by a well-known journalist of the time a few years later:

> You are the victims of this society, which... pays you a miserable salary... and forces you to be an Effendi, to wear a fez and a suit... to ride the tram, read the newspaper and sit in the coffee house... But if you, my brother, wore a galabija... you would find thousands... who would love to marry you.[45]

The 'Young Modern Women'

On the group of 'Young Modern Women' much research has been done, investigating the Egyptian women's struggle for equality, access to education, and the demand to shape their own lives.[46] A key issue in this context was the partial veiling of the face, which was worn particularly by middle- and upper-class women in cities. Many women's rights activists had been rebelling against this since the beginning of the 20th century, and similar public demonstrations had taken place long before Huda Shaarawi's famous self-unveiling at Cairo Central Station in 1923.[47] A year later, Rifqī himself drew a cover page that made his sympathies for the 'unveiling' side quite clear (Fig. 14).

Beyond this demonstrative gesture, there had been a public debate about women's equality since the end of the 19th century,[48] and a key issue was the demand to be allowed to pursue a career outside the home.[49] Nabawiyya Musa, who was one of the first to assert her right to an academic education as a teacher in around 1906, is perhaps the most prominent example.[50] In addition, the women's rights movement was supported by a number of associations, books, and newspapers,[51] the most prominent voice of which from 1923 onwards was the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU).[52] Here, Huda Shaarawi, Nabawiyya Musa, and Saiza Nabarawi published their demands for gender equality. In addition to publishing such gender-specific topics, the leading women's rights activists had entered the political arena alongside men when they came together in 1920 in the Wafdist Women's Central Committee (WWCC), thus linking the demand for political independence from England with the women's issue. Huda Shaarawi was also a leader here, and Safiya Zaghlul was active as an 'associate member' of the Wafdist Women's Central Committee.[53]

44 Kholoussy 2010.
45 Kholousy 2010, 7, with reference to an article by Ahmad al-Sawi Muhammad in *Al-Ahram*, 11 May 1931.
46 Badran 1995, provides a very good overview of the topic.
47 E.g. by Nabawiyah Musa ca. 1909, Badran 1995, 58, 67, 69, with reference to Baron 1989.
48 E.g. by Zaynab Fawwaz in 1897, see Badran 1995, 65, and Bahithad al-Badiyah in 1911, see Badran 1995, 69, and Qasim Amin in 1898, see Kholoussy 2010, 4.
49 Already represented in the late 19th century by Zaynab Fawwaz, see Badran 1995, 66.
50 Badran 1995, 39, 53–4.
51 E.g. *Al-Mar'a al-Misriyya*, see Kholoussy 2010, 4, or *al-Fatah*, 1892, see Beinin 2008, 312.
52 Badran 1995, 92–3.
53 *ibid.*, 80–1.

Figure 14. Al-Fukāha*, no. 117, 19 February 1929, title page.*
'Mother and daughter: progress/development of the generations.'

'Our' young woman in the tram compartment in 1927 is thus symbolic of almost two generations of struggle for women's equality and can also claim to be a fellow fighter for the cause of Egyptian national emancipation.[54]

54 Beinin 2008, 314–5.

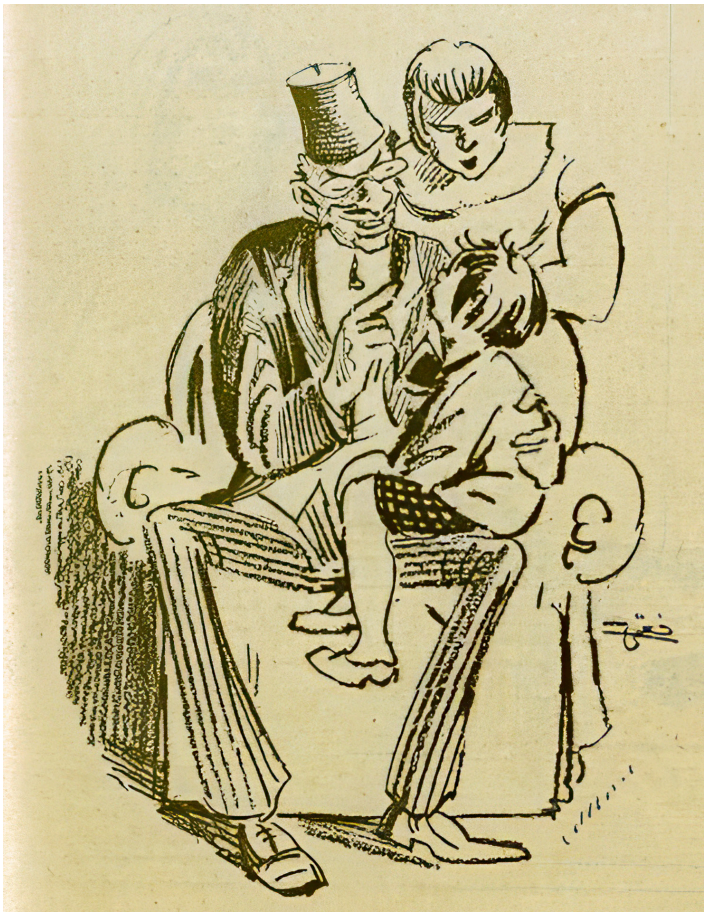
Figure 15. Detail from Fig. 12, boy's head.

Let us return to the little boy's remark, which apparently had the potential to erupt the emotionally charged atmosphere by making the men around the woman laugh. The simplest explanation for this success is probably that the young woman provides a projection screen for the erotic fantasies of this group of men. The boy's remark puts these fantasies into words with a slight shift ('would you like to sit in my place/on my lap?'). The collective amusement that ensues results from the realisation that apparently everyone has just had a similar fantasy. This in turn strengthens the collective emotion and creates an exclusive distinction between the men and the young woman. Indeed, one could even go a step further in this analysis: On closer inspection, it is noticeable that the boy does not actually look like a child–rather, he has the body proportions of an adult man, and this also applies to his head with its receding hairline and sideburns (Fig. 15).

Rifqī's depictions of children are sometimes drawn in this way, but where he wants to emphasise the difference between them and the grown-ups he follows the conventions, namely with a larger head and childlike hairstyle (Fig. 16 and 17).

If we follow this line of reasoning, we have a young man who deliberately uses a dirty joke to attack the young woman. Either way, the young woman has clearly noticed the vulgarity of the 'invitation.' Rifqī has made an artistic effort to emphasise the drama: the interaction between the woman and the boy is underlined by falling lines from the top right to the bottom left, formed by the arms and heads of the men standing around them (Fig. 18): in this way, even those men who appear to be neutral spectators are drawn into the story. The only other person who is as shocked as the young woman is the father hold-

Figure 16. Al-Fukāha*, no. 12, 16 February 1927, 4.*

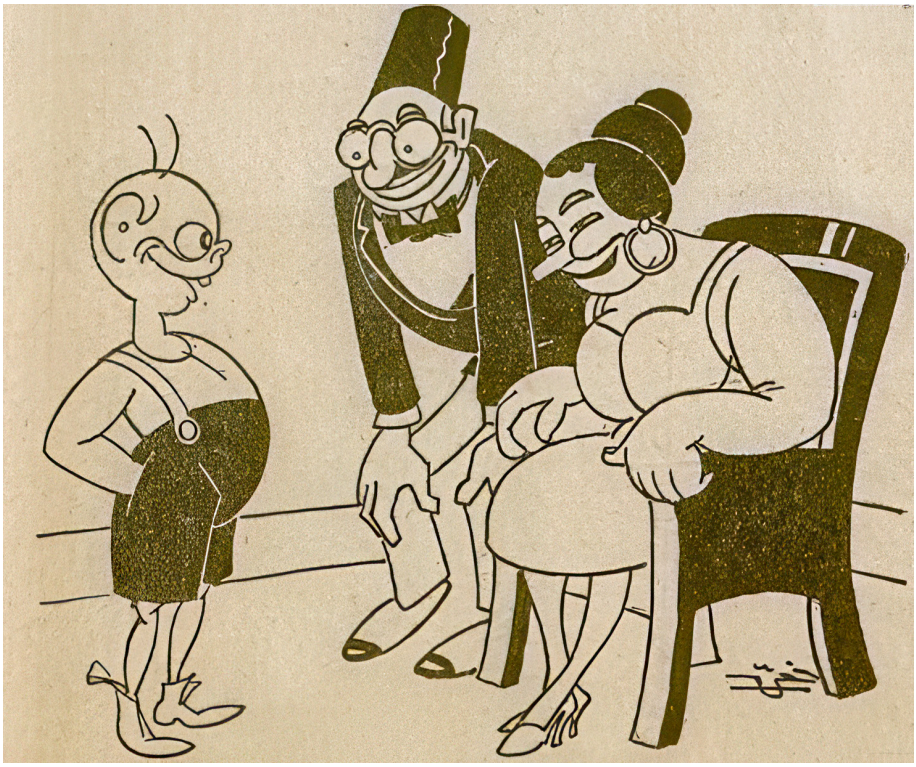


ing the boy on his lap: with wide eyes, feet turned inwards and hands clasped around the boy, he shows how incapable he is of controlling the situation.

But the story does not end here. Rifqī has endeavoured to show that while the situation is entertaining for the men, it is threatening for the woman. Changing the perspective within the image from a frontal to a bird's-eye view of the people involved, it becomes clear how the young woman is surrounded by men (Figs. 19, 20). It is not difficult to understand that for a single young woman to be surrounded by staring and grinning men within a confined public space such as a tram or a bus, must have been just as intimidating a hundred years ago as it is today. This threatening situation is also described in contemporary words:

> As soon as a woman steps onto the street, she is bombarded with obscenities from all sides, causing her to stumble over her skirt. Some of the mob may follow her, insulting

Figure 17. Al-Fukāha*, no. 18, 13 March 1927, 8.*



her reputation in front of those who do not know her and addressing her directly–these immoral people–without embarrassment or shame.[55]

If we match the conflicting parties against their socio-cultural backgrounds we may possibly gain yet another prespective. I would like to assume that the individual stories of the two protagonists–boy and young woman–are quite different: the boy could be understood as the son of a father who–judging by the quality of his clothing alone–is a settled man from the countryside who has decided that his boy should receive a good education in the capital.[56] The boy already wears clothes similar to those of the other 'Effendis' on the tram, and it can be assumed that his goal and that of those around him is that one day he too should become a member of this community. The reaction of the men around him shows that they are willing to consider him one of their own already; in any case, none of them show any disapproval of his remark–rather, they seem to register that he is already capable of reproducing their kind of humour.

55 Baron 1989, 370–86 (with further examples).

56 Ryzova 2014, 1, tells the story from the novel 'The Saint's Lamp' (author Yahiya Haqqi), in which a successful village craftsman sends his son to the city for training.

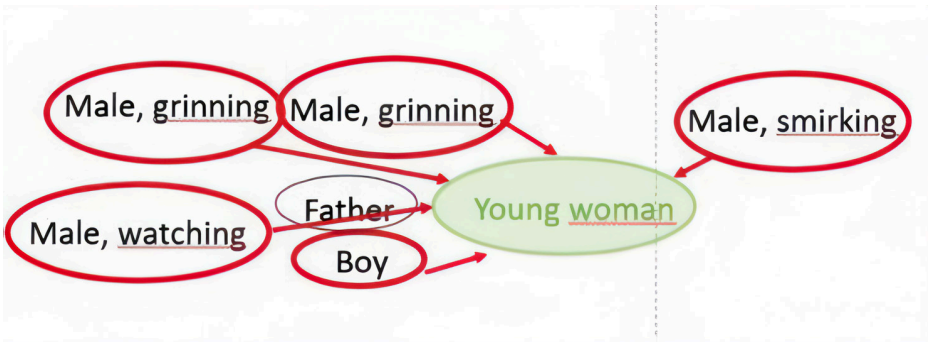
Figure 18. Illustration of the 'falling lines.'

For the young woman, 'background' and 'perspective' appear less linear and more conflictual. Margot Badran[57] and Beth Baron[58] have shown that the removal of the veil was part of a long-running public debate until the late 1920s. While this particular discourse always oscil-

57 Badran 1995, 89–90.
58 Baron 1989.

Figure 19. View of the men looking at the young woman.

Figure 20. Men looking at the young woman, bird's-eye view.



lated between the poles of 'women's right to self-determination; versus 'distancing oneself from Western moral corruption,' clothing became the single most distinctive way of expressing modernity. Ultimately, this will have been a generational issue, as Rifqī has illustrated above in Fig. 14. But of course, the demand for self-determination included the right to education, employment,[59] and physical health, all of which were among the earliest demands of Egyptian women's rights activists.[60] They had to fight against numerous obstacles, from government agencies[61] to their own families.[62] 'Our' main character probably belonged to the small group of young women who not only received a liberal upbringing and education, but also possibly pursued a career. In any case, this can be deduced from her appearance: she is young, wears modern clothes, has short, only partially covered hair, carries a suitcase, and is travelling alone. At that time, she was clearly still in the minority and a provocation to traditionally minded people. The veiled and accompanied woman boarding the tram on the left suggests that the traditional part of society probably still had a very different view of women's behaviour in public.[63] Rifqī has produced a number of examples of how conservative groups imagined the consequences of this progress, primarily that the traditional role of men would be dissolved and ridiculed.[64] The young woman on the tram therefore finds herself in a much more complex situation than the boy on his father's lap: her social and educational status cannot be taken for granted, nor can her right to an appearance that corresponds to this status. All the Effendis involved reinforce the boy's attitude with their reaction, and the only one who seems horrified is his father. One can speculate as to why this is the case: perhaps it was simply a device used by the cartoonist to highlight the outrageousness of the son's remark, or perhaps he also wanted to illustrate how morally questionable the *Effendiyya*'s behaviour is: While on the one hand they proudly demand freedom and equality on the basis of their superior education, on the other hand they pursue completely different principles in their private lives.[65]

Beyond this observation, there may have been yet another level of interpretation that Rifqī had in mind. 'Modern Egypt' was repeatedly illustrated as the image of a young woman, in the round, painted, or in drawings (Fig. 21).[66] The motifs could be very different, ranging from a woman from the countryside to a politician or a young urban woman. In Rifqī's work, the allegory usually wears a flowing dress, often revealing her knees, her face is unveiled, her hair partially covered. Her forehead is crowned with a small diadem bearing three stars above a crescent moon.[67] These represent the flag of the 'Kingdom of

59 Badran 1995, 166–7.
60 *ibid*., 143–4. and 146.
61 For example, the account of the struggle Nabawiyya Musa had to wage for her right to education, Badran 1995, 38–9.
62 *ibid*., 144, 148, 149.
63 Nabawiyya Musa described very vividly in her memoirs how severe this bullying behaviour by her male classmates and students was: Badran 1995, 43.
64 E.g. Quiering 2022, 175, 178, figures. 2, 3 and 4.
65 Badran 1995, 171.
66 Baron 2005, 67, 71, 80, 215, 192–3.
67 Figure 21 and p. 22; see also *Al-Fukāha*, no. 8, 19 January 2027, title page.

Figure 21. Al-Fukāha*, no. 21, 20 April 1927, 7.*
'Foreign privileges, monopolistic companies, foreign criminals, cocaine, hashish, white slavery–all these are malicious worms that feed on the blood of Egypt.'

Egypt' (1922–1953).[68] The young woman always appears distinctly feminine, but depending on the theme of the drawing, she is depicted as fragile or combative and occasion-

68 Britannica, 'Flag of Egypt'. URL: https://www.britannica.com/topic/flag-of-Egypt (last accessed 20 August 2025).

Figure 22. Al-Fukāha*, no. 34, 20 July 1927, 3.*
'The celebrations in London.' Caption: 'John Bull: "Do you like the dance, my dear?" Egypt (while carefully watching out for the sharp nails): "The dance is nice, but God grant that (our) heels remain intact."'

ally even erotic, often in direct connection with 'John Bull,' the personification of British imperialism.[69]

Although 'our' young woman in the tram is not explicitly depicted as an embodiment of rising Egypt, the image motif itself, with its underlying themes, perhaps allows for a comparison with another image that Rifqī had drawn almost a year earlier, in December 1926. It is titled 'On the Road to Freedom' and we see a 'young Miss Egypt' depicted as a self-confident, aggressive, and fearless warrior in a chariot. She is racing along a path towards the sun, which is inscribed with the word 'Freedom.' A number of different male figures try to hinder her on her way: there are men wearing *ṭarbūš* and suits, i.e. representatives of the *Effendiyya*, men wearing turbans and long coats, i.e. representatives of the clergy, and in the front right we see a representative of the imperial powers wearing European clothing. They all try to hinder the young woman's journey, either with staves that they stick in the spokes or with stones that they have placed in her path. But the text inscription shows that the combative chariot driver will not be stopped by this (Fig. 23).

It is noteworthy that the men try to dissuade the young woman from her path in two ways: through physical obstacles such as 'stones in her path' and 'holding the horse back,' as well as by putting sticks in the spokes and in addition also through 'psychological warfare' by trying to ridicule her. The term 'ākas-ha' could easily be translated with this meaning.[70]

While the protagonist here remains completely unimpressed by the obstacles and unequivocally explains to her opponents how she will prevail, the sad conclusion from the 'scene in the tram' is completely opposite. Here we see that the *Effendiyya* class does not show solidarity with women in their struggle for political and social participation, but instead abuses the little power it has to humiliate women. In the final consequence this means that by marginalising half the population, the future of the entire country is called into question. As has been noted before, the boy's father is only man who seems genuinely shocked by his son´s remark. His respect for the young Egyptian woman's integrity is obvious, and perhaps Rifqī wanted to show a glimmer of hope here. If the new class of *Effendiyya* was not prepared to understand how important respect and dignity were for the future of their country, then perhaps there remained the hope that at least the traditional rural population, which since Rousseau at the latest has been credited with particular moral integrity, would possess the better moral compass for the path of Egyptian society into the future.

69 'John Bull' is often portrayed as a synonym for 'Great Britain'/'British imperialism' throughout the Middle Eastern media. See Bower and Erikson 1976; Taylor 1992, 95, fn. 6.

70 Wehr 1958, 567, verb stem *'akasa* – in the 3rd stem with the meaning 'to disturb, harass, tease,' etc.; imperative of the 3rd person singular with feminine ending.

Figure 23. Al-Fukāha, *no. 5, 29 December 1926, 3.*
'On the road to freedom
The reactionaries: "Stop the wheel of the cart, you – put stones in her way,
you–harass/annoy/tease her (عاكسها)
and you–hold on to the horse's tail."
Egypt: 'You deserve it, you who stand in my way, I will destroy you!'

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