

Faten Hamama and the 'Egyptian difference' in film

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In 1963, Faten Hamama made her one and only Hollywood film. Entitled *Cairo*, the movie was a remake of *The Asphalt Jungle*, but refashioned in an Egyptian setting. In retrospect, there is little remarkable about the film but for Hamama's appearance alongside stars such as George Sanders and Richard Johnson. Indeed, copies are extremely difficult to track down: Among the only ways to watch the movie is to catch one of the rare screenings scheduled by cable and satellite network Turner Classic Movies.

However, Hamama's foray into Hollywood is interesting by comparison with the films she was making in "the Hollywood on the Nile" at the time. The next year, one of the great classics of Hamama's career, *Al-Bab al-Maftuh* (The Open Door), Henri Barakat's adaptation of Latifa al-Zayyat's novel, hit Egyptian screens. In stark contrast to *Cairo*, in which she played a relatively minor role, Hamama occupied the top of the bill for *The Open Door*, as was the case with practically all the films she was making by that time.

One could hardly expect an Egyptian actress of the 1960s to catapult to Hollywood stardom in her first appearance before an English-speaking audience, although her husband Omar Sharif's example no doubt weighed upon her. Rather, what I find interesting in setting 1963's *Cairo* alongside 1964's *The Open Door* is the way in which the Hollywood film marginalizes the principal woman among the film's characters, while the Egyptian film sets that character well above all male counterparts. Indeed, I would venture to suggest that while parts for women in Hollywood were almost invariably of secondary or tertiary importance in the 1950s and 1960s, women in the Hollywood on the Nile were at least as likely as men to occupy the headline roles in films.

No doubt critics might suggest that *The Open Door* is exceptional as the adaptation of a novel written by a woman and focused on a woman's experience, though the fact this particular novel was seen fit for adaptation is likewise significant. But comparing the milestones of Hamama's career with those of her colleagues in Hollywood at the time is instructive. Among such colleagues, there are three whose careers are both roughly

comparable in terms of stardom and contemporaneous with Hamama's — Grace Kelly, Natalie Wood and Elizabeth Taylor.

Kelly is perhaps best known for her collaborations with Alfred Hitchcock — like *Dial M for Murder* (1954), *Rear Window* (1954) and *To Catch a Thief* (1955) — but in each of these films she shares the screen with a dominant male character. She won an Oscar for Best Actress for *The Country Girl* (1954), and this is arguably the one role of her career in which she clearly supersedes her co-stars — Bing Crosby and William Holden — in importance.

Wood began her career much like Hamama, as a child star in films like *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947). After prominent parts in *The Searchers* (1956) and *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), she went on to her signal roles in *Splendor in the Grass* and *West Side Story* (both 1961). In both of these she dominates the screen, while in subsequent parts — notably *Inside Daisy Clover* (1965) and *This Property Is Condemned* (1966) — she shares the screen with dominant male characters.

Finally, Taylor likewise lit up the screen as a child star in *National Velvet*, before coming into her own with roles in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958), *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1959), *Butterfield 8* (1960), *Cleopatra* (1963), and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966). It would be hard to suggest that Taylor was at all superseded in these roles by male co-stars, and that is what made her unquestionably the leading Hollywood actress of her generation.

What sets Hamama apart from these Hollywood luminaries is the sheer volume of roles in which she dominated the screen. From 1958 onward, there is scarcely a film in her expansive filmography in which she was forced to share the top of a bill. There are the obvious examples, like *Sayyidat al-Qasr* (Lady of the Palace, 1958), *Duaa al-Karawan* (The Nightingale's Prayer, 1959), *Nahr al-Hubb* (River of Love, 1960), *The Open Door*, and *Al-Haram* (The Sin, 1965). But one might equally cite films like *Ard al-Salam* (Land of Peace, 1957) and *La Anam* (Sleepless, 1957), in which she shared the screen with large ensemble casts, yet still seemed to remain the central player. Or one might turn to earlier films, like *Aisha* (1953) or *Al-Yatimatayn* (The Two Orphans, 1948), in which she had scarcely left adolescence and yet was nonetheless carrying the action forward. And in later films, like *Imbaturiyat Mim* (Empire of M, 1972), *Oreed Hallan* (I Need A Solution, 1974) and *Afwah wa Aranib* (Mouths and Rabbits, 1977), despite the manifestly changing times, she remained the central point of reference on screen. Arguably every film cited here was a vehicle first and foremost for the career of Faten Hamama, and in this, she far exceeds Elizabeth Taylor, her nearest Hollywood peer.

Further, most of the leading men of the Egyptian screen could only have dreamt of the stardom Hamama possessed. Emad Hamdy, Farid Shawqy, Ahmad Mazhar, Rushdy Abaza and Omar Sharif all had remarkable careers, but nowhere near the success Hamama enjoyed in “the Hollywood on the Nile.” Among leading men, perhaps only Ismail Yassin and Abdel Halim Hafez could carry a film in the way that Faten Hamama could. But of course their stardom had roots in the adjoining arts of comedy and music, quite apart from the strength of their onscreen presence.

What I find so remarkable and compelling about all this is that Faten Hamama was scarcely alone among Egypt’s actresses in holding such sway in the star system. Indeed, as well as Hamama, stars such as Shadia, Magda, Naima Akif and Souad Hosni were entirely capable of carrying the success of a film on their shoulders without the assistance of a leading man. The “Egyptian difference” that I cited in the title — the difference between Hollywood and the Hollywood on the Nile — is the dominant role of women in 1950s and 1960s Egyptian cinema.

How is one to explain this remarkable phenomenon? There are scholars who would suggest that this Egyptian difference is rooted in the revolutionary politics of those two decades. A prominent role for women in film permitted Egyptian artists to explore revolutionary social change on screen in a way that Hollywood artists would not or could not.

Whatever the explanation, this Egyptian difference yielded a cinema in the 1950s and 1960s that was more daring, more complex, and more progressive than most Hollywood cinema of the time. Accordingly, the passing of Faten Hamama, arguably the principal symbol of this Egyptian difference in cinema, is one that I mourn bitterly. With each passing day, I feel Egyptians distancing themselves from this enormously rich heritage. This is not, of course, to say that Egyptians should dwell in the past, merely to suggest that there is much we have forgotten about that past, and much we can still learn from it.