

Staging Revolution: A Close Reading of Ya'qub Sanu's *Al-Durteyn*

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Faculty Introduction

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“Staging Revolution” investigates the role and importance of Ya'qub Sanu, an Egyptian playwright for the social, economic, and political reforms that took place in Egypt in the second half of the nineteenth century. By focusing on one of Sanu's earliest plays, *al-Durteyn* (*The Rival Wives*), this article analyzes how Sanu advocated social reform and launched a serious criticism to Khedive Ismail (1863-1879) of Egypt and his political and economic reforms. Canonical literature on *al-Durteyn* usually portrays the play as a powerful criticism of the practice of polygamy in Egypt. “Staging Revolution” argues that while this is true, this social criticism cannot be isolated from the political context in which this play was written. “Staging Revolution” confirms that *al-Durteyn* was the beginning of Sanu's long fight for social and political reform in Egypt and demonstrates that *al-Durteyn* plays an important role in this long journey.

Abstract

Ya'qub Sanu was an Egyptian playwright, journalist, and political dissident who, throughout his prolific career, cultivated works which challenged the political, social, and cultural reforms and centralization of Egypt's Khedive Ismail. Though modern scholarship regards Sanu's later journalism as the primary vehicle for political criticism, little attention is given to his earliest theatrical pursuits commissioned by Ismail. The following research paper examines Sanu's *al-Durteyn*, or *The Rival Wives*, a one-act satirical drama which critiques the institution of polygamy in Egypt and resulted in the decommissioning of Sanu's theater and subsequent exile from Egypt. The essay provides a thorough background of Sanu's political developments and pursuits, followed by a character, plot, and literary analysis of *al-Durteyn* which places the allegorical devices employed by Sanu within the political and social context of 19th-Century Egypt. In doing so, this paper argues that Sanu's *al-Durteyn* utilizes polygamy as a vehicle to directly criticize and challenge the rule of Ismail and advocate for the advancement of the Egyptian masses.

Ya'qub Sanu is an Egyptian playwright, journalist, and political dissident whose artistic and literary contributions mobilized the masses and laid the foundation for artistic resistance in the Arab world. Throughout his prolific career, Sanu cultivated theater that challenged the reformation and centralization of Egypt's political, social, and cultural institutions known as the Tanzimat.¹ Though criticism of Khedive Ismail and British imperialism were staples of Sanu's later work, Sanu's early theatrical life is not only characterized by the absence of political criticism but the approval of Ismail and his reforms.² Indeed, in 1870, Ismail sponsored Sanu's theater troupe to perform three plays at Azbakeya Garden: *Anisa 'ala al-Muda* (*A Fashionable Young Lady*), *Ghandzr Misr* (*The Egyptian Dandy*), and *al-Durteyn* (*The Rival Wives*).³ Ismail and his

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elite spectators revered the former two plays, awarding Sanu the title of *Moliere Masr*.⁴

From this point on, Sanu's theater became explicitly anti-Khedral, highlighting the negative impacts of Western culture on Egyptian society.⁵ Sanu fervently articulates his disapproval of polygamy in *al-Durteyn*, but the text isn't just commentary in a vacuum. Rather, Sanu uses polygamy to tell a story of a neglectful, idle ruler who is ill-equipped to lead his people. Through Sanu's use of allegorical character development and storyline, I contest popular scholarship and argue that *al-Durteyn* pushes beyond the specific practice of polygamy to challenge Khedral rule over Egypt, as well as advocate for the advancement of the Egyptian people.

Years Leading Up to *Al-Durteyn*: Sanu and Ismail's Political Arena

Ya'qub Sanu is an Egyptian-Jewish playwright and nationalist whose work has inspired millions in Egypt and across the world into revolt. A polyglot and linguist, Sanu exhibited incredible intelligence and

¹ Robert Hunter, *Egypt Under the Khedives, 1805-1879: From Household Government to Modern Bureaucracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 15. Matti Moosa, "Ya'qub Sanu and the Rise of Arab Drama in Egypt," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 5, no. 4 (1974), 402.

² Beth Baron, *Egypt as Woman: Nationalism, Gender and Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 59.

³ Moosa, "Ya'qub Sanu and the Rise of Arab Drama in Egypt," 405.

⁴ Moosa, "Ya'qub Sanu and the Rise of Arab Drama in Egypt," 405.

⁵ Moosa, "Ya'qub Sanu and the Rise of Arab Drama in Egypt," 410.

creativity from a very early age. Sanu's father nourished this talent, sending Sanu to the Italian city of Livorno to immerse himself in the study of art, literature, and theater.⁶ While studying in Livorno, scholars believe that Sanu was introduced to and involved with the revolutionary and insurrectionist Italian Nationalist Movement.⁷ The movement, led by Giuseppe Mazzini, called for the establishment of a republican government in which all members of society had access to equal representation and participation in government and society.⁸ As Sanu returned to Egypt in the subsequent years, these political underpinnings would deeply guide his career.

In Egypt, Sanu undertook a teaching position at the Polytechnic Institute of Cairo, and later Al-Azhar University. As a professor, Sanu convened meetings with Egyptian students and youth to discuss nationalism and the reimagined Egypt he sought to cultivate; that is, a country where all classes are protected by the state.⁹ Participation in these meetings flourished, and many of Sanu's pupils would play integral roles in the impending Urabi revolt of 1882.¹⁰ As these gatherings became popular, Sanu became acquainted with and guided by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, a religious scholar and progressive reformer who challenged the tyrannical rule of Khedive Ismail.¹¹ Having cultivated a community of intellectuals and progressives in Egypt, al-Afghani encouraged Sanu to develop an Egyptian theatre and use it as a vehicle for popular education and the dissemination of nationalist thought.¹² It is through this political context and motivation that Sanu established the first Indigenous Arab Theater in Egypt. At first, Khedive Ismail supported and sponsored the establishment and cultivation of Sanu's theater.¹³ However, as we'll explore in this essay, the production of *al-Durteyn* resulted in the immediate closure of Sanu's theater, and the eventual exile of the political playwright. To understand why Ismail may have closed Sanu's

⁶ Irene Gendzier, "James Sanau and Egyptian Nationalism," *Middle East Journal* 15, no. 1 (1961), 17.

⁷ Gendzier, "James Sanau and Egyptian Nationalism," 18.

⁸ Michael Huggins, "The "Nation" and Giuseppe Mazzini, 1842–48," *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua* 17, no. 3 (2013), 15.

⁹ Gendzier, "James Sanau and Egyptian Nationalism," 19.

¹⁰ Gendzier, 22.

¹¹ Gendzier, 20.

¹² Gendzier, 20.

¹³ Moosa, "Yaqub Sanu Arab Drama in Egypt," 406.

theater and what Sanu was challenging through his work, we must first explore Khedive Ismail, his reforms, and the function of a theater in the context of Ismail's reforms.

Khedive Ismail (1863-1879) was the viceroy of Egypt whose modernizing reforms played an instrumental role in Egypt's bankruptcy and subsequent British occupation of 1882.¹⁴ As a leader, Ismail was primarily concerned with establishing a country autonomous politically from the Ottoman Empire.¹⁵ In pursuit of this, Ismail's early reforms primarily targeted the agrarian sector of Egyptian society. His development of a robust cotton-producing industry proved to be quite lucrative and quickly gave Khedival Egypt economic notoriety.¹⁶ Building on the success of these reforms, Ismail not only invested in modernizing public infrastructure, but in foreign development. Some examples of these investments are the development of public education, the establishment of European consulates and private schools, and most notably, the construction of the Suez Canal.¹⁷ Ismail, taking on more grandiose projects than Egypt could financially support, turned to European capital to finance his reforms. He established several finance syndicates, such as the Anglo-Egyptian bank, to support this flow of loans and credit into Egypt.¹⁸ As Ismail's reforms began to take place, however, the socio-cultural, economic, and political impacts became increasingly prevalent. The proliferation of European private schools in Egypt, for example, established a curriculum that portrayed traditional Egyptian culture as uncivilized. The elite Egyptian youth that studied there "regarded their own country to be backward, as they were repeatedly being told by their European school teachers, whose grimaces at the sound of Egyptian dialect branded humiliation deep into their souls."¹⁹ Similarly, the development of the Khedival bureaucracy negatively impacted Egypt's peasant population, expropriating peasant land and entrenching

¹⁴ Hunter, *Egypt Under the Khedives*, 35

¹⁵ Hunter, *Egypt Under the Khedives*, 37.

¹⁶ John Bowen, "The Conflict of East and West in Egypt," *Political Science Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (1886), 297.

¹⁷ Bowen, "The Conflict of East and West in Egypt," 301.

¹⁸ Albert Baster, "The Origins of British Banking Expansion in the Near East," *The Economic History Review* 5, no. 1 (1934), 77.

¹⁹ John Livingston, *In the Shadows of Glories Past: Jihad for Modern Science in Muslim Societies, 1850 to the Arab Spring* (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 51.

the bureaucracy's governing power over peasant life.²⁰ Compounding these impacts, the unprecedented decline of cotton exports from Egypt resulted in the accumulation of untenable debts to Britain and France, peaking in 1875 when Egypt "...accumulated an unfunded (floating) debt of £18,000,000."²¹

Unable to pay, Egypt was trapped in a loan-debt cycle in which Britain, through their financial investment, exerted

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power over the majority of Khedival institutions. Ismail is a testament to this, as he was forced to sell his stocks in the Suez Canal back to Britain in 1875, giving the country complete control over the waterway.²² It was this acquiescence and capitulation to European capital at the expense of Egyptian self-determination that propelled progressive reformers like Sanu into political action.

Reflecting on the modernizing reforms undertaken by Ismail, theatrical institutions function as both a manifestation of cultural modernization, as well as a platform for popularizing state reforms. It was at the Azbakeya Gardens--a public development modeled closely after Parisian streets and financed by Britain--that Khedive Ismail erected Egypt's first institution for theatrical production: The Khedivial Opera House.²³ The Khedivial Opera House housed several international theatre troupes who performed traditional European operas for Egypt's elite and expatriate populations.²⁴ Later, Ismail used the Khedivial Opera House to pursue his largest cultural project: *Aida*. Adapted to the stage by Giuseppe Verdi, *Aida* illustrates a prosperous imperial Egypt, using the setting and symbolism of ancient Egypt to glamorize a vision of Egyptian modernity.²⁵ Over time, Egyptian historians agree that it later became more accessible

²⁰ Robert Hunter, "State-Society Relations in Nineteenth-Century Egypt: The Years of Transition, 1848-79," *Middle Eastern Studies* 36, no. 3 (2000), 151.

²¹ Atkins, Richard A. "The Origins of the Anglo-French Condominium in Egypt, 1875-1876." *The Historian* 36, no. 2 (1974): 264-82. 266.

²² Bowen, "The Conflict in Egypt," 317.

²³ Adam Mestyan, "Arabic Theater in Early Khedival Culture, 1868-72," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 46, no. 1 (2014), 119.

²⁴ Mestyan, "Arabic Theater in Early Khedival Culture, 1868-72," 120.

²⁵ Katherine Bergeron, "Verdi's Egyptian Spectacle: On the Colonial Subject of 'Aida,'" 149.

to the Egyptian masses.²⁶ As Adam Masteyan articulates in his essay *Khedival Culture and the Arabic Theater*, by January of 1872, “the Arabic theatre had become popular amongst Egyptians...by April...the Arabic theatre was indeed popular among the ‘modern and idle people.’”²⁷ As

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we can see, the establishment of the Khedivial Opera House had both objective and subjective utility

in Ismail’s reforms. Objectively, the existence of an Egyptian theater was a cultural marker of development, much like the Parisian cities Ismail sought to emulate. Subjectively, the theater allowed for Ismail to produce and commission productions that romanticized both his political reforms and the cultural proximity with Western Europe. In this vein, theatres existed as a literal and symbolic iteration of Ismail’s reforms and Western cultural and political domination; all of which Sanu vehemently opposed. From this, we are able to not only understand the power of Sanu’s theater, but the specific political motivations that allow us to interpret *al-Durteyn* not only as a broad criticism of Polygamy but a targeted and critical articulation of anti-Khedival sentiment.

The reason behind Sanu’s decision to engage in political discourse at this particular moment is not well-documented. Though no other copies of the two other plays commissioned alongside *al-Durteyn* were recorded, secondary accounts of the play analyzed by Matti Mousa in his journal “*Ya’qub Sanu’ and the Rise of Arab Drama in Egypt*” describe them as containing themes of love and morality.²⁸ Reflecting on the political developments during *al-Durteyn*’s 1872 commission, many of Sanu’s primary criticisms of Ismail were entrenched through decisive Ottoman policies. It was that same year that the Ottoman Sultan Abdul-Aziz granted Ismail borrowing privileges without authorization from Istanbul.²⁹ As the Cambridge History of British Foreign Policy articulated, “There was neither limit nor intelligence in his borrowing.

²⁶ Mestyan, “Arabic Theater in Early Khedival Culture,” 119.

²⁷ Mestyan, “Arabic Theater in Early Khedival Culture,” 121.

²⁸ Moosa, “Yaquub Sanu in Egypt,” 416.

²⁹ Afaf Marsot, “The Porte and Ismail Pasha’s Quest for Autonomy,” *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 12 (1975), 96.

He took money whenever it was to be had, and with oriental largess of spirit, never haggled about the rate of interest, with the result that harpies robbed him right and left.”³⁰

Given the increased popularity of Azbakeya Garden and the Arab theater, paired with the contemporaneous political trajectories, it is not unfeasible to posit that Sanu felt impelled to political agitation. In the absence of clearly articulated political motivations, however, we must approach and examine *al-Durteyn* with critical thought and historical context.

Synopsis of *Al-Durteyn*

Al-Durteyn begins with Sabha, King Ahmad’s first wife, lamenting her disdain for Ahmad’s decision to marry another wife. She examines, questions, and ultimately rejects the marriage, preparing herself for confrontation as Ahmad approaches the room. Ahmad tries to frame his marriage as a benefit to both himself and Sabha, stating “My intention with marrying another woman is to give you an easy life; because Fatouma [his second wife] is a nice girl, she will serve as your maid while you remain the head of the household.”³¹ Sabha, after reflecting on the vulgarity of her husband’s decision and the social inequality confining her to it, is introduced to Fatouma. Immediately the two make passive attacks at one another’s appearance and character, only to realize that King Ahmad married both of them under the pretense of one acting as a servant to Ahmad and the other. After this realization, the level of calamity maintained throughout the play deeply deteriorates. After Bajar, Fatouma’s brother physically attacks Sabha with Fatouma’s encouragement, both Fatouma and Sabha plead with Ahmad to choose one over the other, threatening him physically if he does not oblige. Bajar then intervenes, using their friendship to persuade Ahmad into leaving Sabha. King Ahmad decides to remove himself from the situation completely, divorcing both wives and ending his friendship with Prince Bajar. At the end of the play, Sabha pleads with King Ahmad once more: “...for the sake of Mahmoud, not to break this relationship for the sake of us living together for fifteen years, to which King Ahmad reluctantly accepts.”³²

³⁰ Israel Shenker, “Egypt Once Eluded Def Atilt at a Price,” *The New York Times*, November 9, 1975, 44.

³¹ Yaqub Sanu, *al-Durteyn*, (Hindawi Foundation, 1963); 8.

³² Yaqub Sanu, *al-Durteyn*, 16.

Allegorical Allegations: Ahmad and Bajar as Ismail and Reforms

It is well known that Sanu's theatrical focus was on performance and not literary production. That being said, however, there is much to say about the impact of symbolism on plot structure and character development. In *al-Durteyn*, Sanu writes of Malak (King) Ahmad, an evasive and dishonest husband who marries a second wife, Fatouma, without the consent of his current wife Sabha. Through symbolic and seemingly arbitrary associations with royalty, I argue that Sanu uses the characters of Malak Ahmad and Bajar as a medium for delegitimizing, criticizing, and emasculating Khedive Ismail.

Titles are key indicators of status and position, and deeply shape the way people interact with each other. Considering this context, it is unprecedented that Sanu would attribute royal names to two non-royal subjects in *al-Durteyn*. Unlike the vast majority of public cultural projects at this time in the Ottoman Empire, *al-Durteyn* did not use royal institutions to push a moral or philosophical message; in fact, Sanu alludes to the relative middle-to-lower class character of the play. As Sabha laments and reflects on Ahmad's decision to marry Fatouma, she angrily exclaims "Whenever I put the hijab on and put makeup and jewelry... the people would look at me and say 'she must be from the palace and coming to the stores undercover.'" ³³ That being said, both Ahmad and Bajar are given titles of high social authority, the former being referred to as "king" and the latter "prince."³⁴ While Egypt was not a European-style monarchy, many of Ismail's reforms institutionalized a similar dynastic and lineage-based character. In 1863, for example, Sultan Abdulaziz granted Ismail a change in royal succession from the oldest surviving male heir to directly male primogeniture. Through this purchase, Sultan Abdulaziz correspondingly granted Ismail the title of Khedive, or Lord, a term without political precedent in Egypt and deeply indicative of the political pursuits of Khedive Ismail.³⁵ The adoption of the Khedival title highlights both the political and social implications of royal titles and their importance to Ismail. Hence, the connection of royalty with non-royal, middle-class men functions to both devalue and delegitimize the titles and those who hold them. Furthermore, by collapsing layman

³³ Yaqub Sanu, *al-Durteyn*, 8.

³⁴ Yaqub Sanu, *al-Durteyn*, 7.

³⁵ Bowen, "The Conflict in Egypt," 308.

characteristics with prestigious titles, Sanu allows for the audience to critically evaluate the decisions made by royal figures through removing the social/hierarchical distance between the two groups. To this end, it can be understood that Sanu is encouraging audience members to critically engage with those supposed to represent power and the state. As we continue to examine *al-Durteyn*, the not-so-royal Malak Ahmad deeply embodies deceitful, evasive, and subservient traits. Up until the play's final moments, we see Malak Ahmad advancing his interests at the expense of his wives and friends. The characteristics of Malak Ahmad are microcosms of Sanu's criticisms of Ismail. Many of his later comics employ the same satiric tactics to criticize

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Ismail. Having established both the symbolic and character-driven elements of Malak Ahmad, I explore Sanu's use of him as an allegorical vehicle to criticize and challenge the moral and political character of Khedive Ismail.

In *al-Durteyn*, Sanu methodically couples intellectual satire with the emotional response to allegory. We see this continuously throughout the play; however, this dynamic is most actively articulated through Malak Ahmad's subservience to Bajar. In scene five, we see this culminate through the supposed old friends confronting the question of marriage and divorce. In this scene, Bajar very clearly demonstrates an authoritarian relationship with Malak Ahmad. After employing similar tactics to persuade Malak Ahmad to divorce Sabha in favor of Fatouma, Bajar holds Malak Ahmad by the neck and exclaims "what would you prefer: to die, or to marry my sister?"³⁶ Through this interaction, we see Sanu's balance between allegory and satire develop quite clearly. With regards to the former, the image of Bajar holding such physical power over Malak Ahmad's decision-making demonstrates the power imbalance between Ismail and Britain. As previously discussed, Ismail's inability to pay back Egypt's debts provided Britain leverage in the political and economic decisions taken by Ismail. This leverage, of course, was waged at the expense of the Egyptian people, whose interests and autonomy was threatened by British dominion. Thus, the relationship between Bajar and Malak Ahmad exists as an allegory for British imperialism

³⁶ Yaqub Sanu, *al-Durteyn*, 15.

and Khedival subservency. To the latter, however, Sanu criticizes this power relationship by emasculating and infantilizing the “royal” Malak Ahmad. In the same scene, Sabha and Fatouma both pursue their marital interests by physically threatening Malak Ahmad. Fatouma, for example, exclaims “if you do not punish Sabha for what she did to me, I am going to pluck your beard one hair at a time,”³⁷ while Sabha exclaims “if you don’t get rid of this woman, I will poke out your eyes.”³⁸ As was previously discussed, Ismail invested significant resources into symbolic and aesthetic developments modeled after British and French cultural spaces. From purchasing the title Khedive to constructing Azbakeya Garden, Ismail entrenched Egyptian debt to be seen on par with Egypt’s European counterparts. In the context of *al-Durteyn*, where Sabha and Fatouma are vying for Malak Ahmad to accept their demands, they both direct their energy to Malak Ahmad’s aesthetic features. Fatouma’s attack on Malak Ahmad’s beard threatens the way people perceive him, and Sabha’s threat to his eyes threatens his literal ability to see. To compound this, Malak Ahmad responds with a youthful self-obsession, exclaiming “please don’t do anything to my beard, it’s very precious to me.”³⁹ Through this, Sanu almost paints Malak Ahmad as child-like,

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being more concerned with the attacks on him than how his decisions have impacted the people around him. By

portraying Malak Ahmad as incapable of responding to and handling his wives, Sanu uses emasculation to portray Ismail as incapable of managing Egyptian relations.

Womanhood, Family, Nationalism, and Sanu

The imagery of women and femininity to personify progress is not new to Sanu, and has deep roots in the history of the women-led political agitation in Egypt. Not only does Sabha personify vigilance, but she also challenges relationships of power in its most broken-down, intimate form: the family. By challenging Malak Ahmad’s polygamous marriage through the vantage point of Sabha, I argue that Sanu uses the traditional Egyptian family unit to advocate for the material shift and democratization of state power.

³⁷ Yaqub Sanu, *al-Durteyn*, 15.

³⁸ Yaqub Sanu, *al-Durteyn*, 15.

³⁹ Yaqub Sanu, *al-Durteyn*, 15.

Within the context of *al-Durteyn*, Sabha exists as a figurative and literal iteration of progress against state-sanctioned oppression. In regards to the former, the figurative relation of Sabha challenging Malak Ahmad's decisions is the image of traditional power conceding to the power of the disenfranchised. Not confined to *al-Durteyn*, the use of underrepresented peoples as agents of progress has a well-documented history in revolutionary art and literature. As Historian Lynn Hunt articulates, "The proliferation of the female allegory was made possible... by the exclusion of women from public affairs. Women could be representative of abstract qualities and collective dreams because women were not allowed to vote or govern."⁴⁰ Though patriarchal laws prevented the formal participation of women in Khedival politics, it would be ahistorical to neglect the role of women in mass-political mobilization. Indeed, women in Egypt played an essential active role in 19th Century uprisings against the Pashas. In Judith Tucker's 1983 journal "*Women and State in Nineteenth-Century Egypt: Insurrectionary Women*," Tucker articulates the decisive and distinctive role Egyptian women played in mass political action against oppressive social and political infrastructure. In the 1806 revolts against Mamluk Alfi Bey, for example, Egyptian women are credited with both leading physical confrontations against Mamluk officials and popularizing anti-Mamluk propaganda. As Tucker elaborates, "in the evening, from atop the knolls which functioned as the ramparts of the town, they sang couplets which they had composed about the cowardice and effeminate conduct of Alfi."⁴¹ Despite disenfranchisement by the state, women joined-in and led the charge in several decentralized formations.⁴² Until the reforms of the early 20th century, women were crucial in this sector of political organization; and, much like their legacy against Alfi Bey, remained notorious for their political dissidence. So much so that, in advance of an Ottoman Sultan's visit to Egypt, Khedive Ismail issued an official order to all women of lower orders to stay indoors, for, as he articulated in a letter to the Sultan, "Arab women are outspoken and might shout out their grievances."⁴³ Indeed, the political history of women in the

⁴⁰ Ashley Palin, "Women, Art and Revolution: Feminine Symbolism and Democracy in Revolution Era France," *The Northerner Historical Review* 1 (May 9, 2013): 4.

⁴¹ Judith Tucker, "Women and State in 19th Century Egypt: Insurrectionary Women," *MERIP Middle East Report*, no. 138 (1986), 11.

⁴² Judith Tucker, "Women and State in 19th Century Egypt: Insurrectionary Women," 10.

⁴³ Tucker, "Women and State in 19th Century Egypt: Insurrectionary Women," 12.

struggle against oppression is clearly articulated through *al-Durteyn*. In several ways, Sabha's dialogue, actions, and position within the play embody the aforementioned literal and figurative revolutionary sentiments and moments.

In *al-Durteyn*, Sabha persistently pursues representation in her relationship by challenging Malak Ahmad's marital decision. Despite attempts by Malak Ahmad, Fatouma, and Bajar to pacify and ultimately disregard her, Sabha unwaveringly articulates and advocates for her interests. In scenes two and three, for example, Sabha laments her relationship with Malak Ahmad and the lack of formal mobility allotted to women; exclaiming "What a shame. Us women, we cannot get married to two men, otherwise I would've gotten married to a man and brought him as a co-husband to Malak Ahmad."⁴⁴ This discontent does not remain within the passive confines of verbal communication and interpersonal critical investigation. Following consolidated efforts by Sabha, Fatouma, and Bajar to pressure Malak Ahmad into a marriage decision, Sabha threatens to poke out Malak Ahmad's eyes. Building from this figurative embodiment, however, we see Sabha's successful campaign to reaffirm their marriage as a demand to democratize state relationships by democratizing marriage.

Succeeding Malak Ahmad's rage-induced divorce of Sabha and Fatouma in scene six, Sabha meets him alone on stage stating "for the sake of Mahmoud (implied that this is their son), for the sake of our fifteen-year marriage, [do not] break-up this relationship."⁴⁵ Reflecting on the night's upheaval, Malak Ahmad agrees to remarry Sabha, exclaiming "If someone wants to live a miserable life, he gets a second wife, but those who want to live happily do not make a pendant of women."⁴⁶ Sanu's articulation of Sabha as obtaining equal decision-making power as Malak Ahmad is not unprecedented in artistic portrayals of nationalism. The emergence of 19th-Century Egyptian nationalist thought often took form through the image of the family unit. Early nationalist tendencies "...deployed an array of family metaphors to smooth over ethnic and other differences and build a sense of collective identity."⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Yaqub Sanu, *al-Durteyn*, 9.

⁴⁵ Yaqub Sanu, *al-Durteyn*, 16.

⁴⁶ Yaqub Sanu, *al-Durteyn*, 16.

⁴⁷ Baron, "Egypt as Woman," 17.

Indeed, the image of the family has been a common representative of state relationships; however, the particular political moment in which Sanu wrote *al-Durteyn* was characterized by a shift in familial power. Beginning in the late 1870s, Egypt underwent a series of structural changes--of them, the dismantlement of the slave and concubine systems--that reshaped the makeup of elite Egyptian families.⁴⁸ The abolition of these social practices challenged the patriarchal power dynamics that persisted through relationships of bondage. Similarly, we see Sabha's character grow from a position of both social and familial subservience to a crucial decision-maker in the fate of their marriage. As was previously discussed, Sabha's position as a woman challenging power abstractly represents progress and enlightenment, and concretely represents historical iterations of the peasant revolt. Grounded in this historical context, Sanu's portrayal of Malak Ahmad as accepting the demands put forth by Sabha builds on the democratization of the family unit. It challenges the traditional organization of the patriarchal family

by portraying Malak Ahmad as incapable of making decisions on behalf of his family, instead highlighting the intrinsic knowledge and

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power of Sabha as his marital counterpart and the immense benefit of marital partnership rather than subservience. To this end, the metaphor of Malak Ahmad and Sabha's family unit can be read as a microcosm of state relationships maintained by Khedive Ismail to the Egyptian people. Much like Malak Ahmad, the decisions made by Khedive Ismail had quantifiably negative impacts for Egypt and its people; impacts that plundered the economy and deprived Egypt's peasant class of autonomy and self-determination. This storyline, however, portrays an alternative trajectory. Through democratizing the process of decision-making power in Malak Ahmad and Sabha's marriage, Sanu highlights both the benefits and necessity of democratizing state power.

Conclusion

In the contemporary Arab political imagination, the life, and works of Ya'qub Sanu provide a foundation for political action, criticism, and artistic resistance against oppression, despotism, and dictatorship. Sanu's

⁴⁸ Baron, "Egypt as Woman," 21.

comics and biting satire breathe new life in contemporary Egyptian revolts, paying homage and testimony to the universality of his nationalist beliefs, and the immense work ahead for a vibrant, rich, and historically just world. Yet, to lay this foundation, Sanu had to challenge immense censorship and cultivate a medium for resistance that had never before been used in Egypt. While Sanu's *al-Durteyn* is a powerful criticism of the institution of polygamy in Egypt, we cannot divorce the character structure, allegorical representations, historical context, and biting satirical plotline from the political context he was living under. As Khedive Ismail continued to exploit and over-tax the peasant populations to pay back his grandiose loans taken from Europe, Sanu used his platform and closeness to Khedive Ismail to articulate a deep need for political change. Therefore, Sanu's *al-Durteyn* must be read as a deeply nuanced and targeted criticism of Khedive Ismail and his reforms. ■

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Student Biography

Alexander Kerry is a fourth-year student at Sam Houston State University majoring in Theater and minoring in Middle Eastern Studies. As a Palestinian theater student, one of Alex's primary research interests includes the use of art and culture in anti-colonial resistance, particularly in the post-'67 Palestinian context. This interest was further developed in Dr. Emiralioglu's "Middle East Since 1700," course, in which the discussion on modern Arab history introduced Alexander to early iterations of cultural hegemony in late-Ottoman Egypt. This produced a serious inquiry into the role of artistic resistance during the end of the Ottoman empire, inspiring this essay. Following his graduation in Spring 2021, Alexander hopes to continue his research through a Ph.D. program in theater.