

BIG LITTLE WOMEN

a film by
Nadia Fares

produced by
Luna films

in co-production with
AfterAll Films Cairo

BIO-FILMOGRAPHY

Nadia Fares is an Egyptian Swiss director, writer and producer. She has graduated from New York University, Tisch School of the Arts where she has received her Master of Fine Arts in Film and Television.

Her first feature film “Honey and Ashes” received multiple international awards and critical acclaim for its groundbreaking depiction of contemporary Arabic women. Variety called it “edgy and intelligent”.

Her newest feature script “Diplomatic Corps” was accepted into the New York Writers Lab backed by Meryl Streep and Nicole Kidman.

She works and lives in Los Angeles, Cairo and Geneva.

“Big Little Women” is her first feature documentary.

www.nadia-fares.com



BIG LITTLE WOMEN / 2022 / 86min / Feature Documentary

SWISS STORIES IN LOS ANGELES / 2019 / 5 episodes x 42min / Doc Series

THE JOURNEY OF GECKOS / 2018 / 24min / Short Documentary

CHECKPOINT TUNISIA / 2017 / 26min / TV Documentary

GIRLSGOWHEELS / 2015 / 10min / Short Documentary

HIT MAN FOR RENT / 2013 / 26min / TV Documentary

THE RECRUITED / 2012 / 26min / TV Documentary

EXPECTATIONS / 2011 / 30min / Short Fiction / Honorable mention at the Los Angeles Movie Award

SMALL DIFFERENCES / 2003 / 85min / Feature Film / Collection “Masculin/Féminin, ARTE, France

SPRING BREAK / 1999 / 26 min / Short Fiction

MIXED UP / 1999 / 15 min / part of ID Swiss / Nominated for the Swiss Film Prize

HONEY AND ASHES / 1996 / 86min / Feature Film / Over 18 international awards: Locarno, San Francisco, Monteéal, Saarbrücken, Montpellier, Annonay, Namur, Milano, Burkina Faso, Toronto, nominated for the Swiss Film Prize.

LOGLINE

Three generations of women rebel against patriarchal prohibitions. In this cinematic letter, Swiss-Egyptian film director Nadia Fares pays tribute to her father as she recounts 75 years of women's struggles both in Egypt, her father's country, and in Switzerland, her mother's country, where she grew up.

PITCH

How to speak with tenderness of feminist struggles to an enlightened patriarch?

Painting her story with a very personal and poetic brush, Nadia Fares transforms a tribute to her beloved Egyptian father into a chronicle of the condition of women in Egypt and in Switzerland. She explores the impact of patriarchal traditions in the East and the West, revealing them as mirror images.

SYNOPSIS

A letter addressed to a "cool patriarch" is the poetic approach taken by this film, which retraces the history of feminism in Egypt and in Switzerland. Mirror effect, paradox.

Three generations of Egyptian women fight for their rights but their progress is often followed by discouraging setbacks and resignation. The history of women's struggles is intertwined with that of the political and social struggles of an entire nation. When President Nasser liberates Egypt from colonial rule in the 1950s and 1960s, he also frees women from the harshest constraints imposed on them by the country's patriarchal traditions.

Those same years witness the youth and education of Nawal El Saadawi (1931-2021), the renowned feminist intellectual who,

through her pen and her activism, lays the theoretical foundations of the struggle against the restrictions placed on women by Egyptian society. Nawal is an intellectual who throws herself into the fray; her insightful and uncompromising arguments tie in closely with women's struggles and their transgressions against patriarchal prohibitions. For her writings and activism, she pays a heavy price: first imprisonment, then exile.



In the 1950s and 1960s, Abdelghany Fares decides to pursue his pharmaceutical studies in Switzerland, where he meets a young Swiss woman. The film's director, Nadia Fares, is born of this union. Her mother's choice to marry an Egyptian man in the early 1960s in Switzerland sends a strong dissenting message. Images and testimonies in the film reflect the political and social situation at the time – while Egyptian women have been voting since 1956, Swiss women will have to wait more than a decade to become enfranchised.

The family of Nadia's mother conspires to have the young Egyptian father, a foreigner from Africa, expelled from Switzerland. A nice Swiss suitor is quickly found for Nadia's mother – the Swiss version of an arranged marriage. This disgraceful scheme is sealed by a burdensome family secret revealed much later. Nadia and her mother also pay a heavy price for this.



Meanwhile, the condition of women in Egypt has regressed and the secular ambitions of Nasser's policies have become a distant memory. The veil and the burqa are back in place along with the genital mutilation of young girls, which, although officially prohibited, remains a deeply rooted custom in the rural areas of the south.

What resurgence of Egyptian feminism can we hope for today? The women's movement was dealt a severe blow during the 2011 demonstrations in Cairo. The protestors, at first welcomed by the crowds in Tahrir Square, were then violently suppressed and the wave of optimism crashed.

A different kind of feminism is now emerging, one that is direct, buoyant, pragmatic and effective. The young women in the film are finding ways to escape from the "marital career plan" suggested by their families and are instead riding their bicycles across Cairo to distribute meals to the needy and, above all, to connect with the strong women who live in these poor neighborhoods. Is a bicycle an honorable means of transportation for a young woman?



The horizon for feminist struggles stretches far beyond that of young bourgeois women in the process of emancipation. Seeking renewed inspiration and answers to their questions, our activists turn to Nawal El Saadawi, a pioneer of Egyptian feminism, for her enlightened views.

INTERVIEW WITH NADIA FARES

Your film is somewhat of a paradox: judging by its form and its direct and personal tone, it seems to have been written and shot as a tribute to your father, who died in 2014. The real subject, however, is the history of feminism in Egypt.

NF : Yes, in form my film appears to be a tribute to my father but in fact I am honoring the courage of all women fighting for equal rights in both the East and the West. By marrying an African man, my mother broke a taboo that was still very strong in Switzerland in the 1950s and 1960s. She paid for this transgression when my maternal grandfather, the Swiss patriarch of the story, conspired to have this undesirable husband deported, tearing apart my parents and my whole family. In Switzerland as in Egypt, a patriarch often has the authority to crush the fate of the women in his family. Using my own story, I show two sides – which are mirror images – of the patriarchal system.

The destiny of my father, who was closely acquainted with both the East and the West, serves as the axis around which the story of women's struggles in Egypt and in Switzerland pivots. Like most Egyptian men, my father was of course a patriarch, but as I say in voice-over at the end of the film, he was a "cool patriarch". Nawal El Saadawi, the pioneer of feminism throughout the Middle East, who left us last year, insists on the fact that men are also the victims of patriarchy. Like his peers, my father had to conform to the standards of behavior that Middle Eastern societies impose on husbands and fathers in the region. "What kind of man are you? What respect do you deserve if you cannot even control your wife and daughters?" Any man who fails to observe patriarchal traditions exposes himself to scorn or to outright exclusion. Who is bold enough to take such a risk? My father, both in Switzerland and after his forced return to Egypt, managed to strike an honorable balance between, on the one hand, what each of these

two countries demanded of him and, on the other hand, what a "modern" conscience told him about the need for the condition of women to evolve. Part of the affection and respect I have for him comes from my awareness that he did the best he could within the boundaries imposed on him by fate and circumstances.

Nawal El Saadawi, whom you just mentioned, is the strong point of your film. Born in 1931, she radiates intellectual vivacity and activist energy in front of your camera. Her insights are strong and precise. She dominates the screen as she recounts the feminist struggles taking place in Egypt and explains how they tie in with the country's history.

NF : Until her last breath, Nawal poured her energy into the struggle and strove to pass on her fighting spirit to today's young women in Egypt but also elsewhere thanks to her international influence.



A truly courageous woman, she paid a high price for her commitment after a conservative backlash followed the death of President Nasser, a progressive force, in 1970. The years of Sadat's presidency were difficult for her. Her activism and her writings denouncing the practice of female genital mutilation led to her dismissal from the Ministry of Health. Her troubles culminated in 1981 when she was imprisoned for breaking the "Law of Shame." Nawal's essays and more literary works, which have been translated into many languages, left a deep imprint on Egypt's recent history with their emphasis on the interconnection and complementarity between the feminist movement and other social struggles.

What legacy has Nawal El Saadawi left for today's militants ?

NF : Nawal fought above all against patriarchal institutions in a bid to secure equal rights for women in Egypt and to have traditional female genital mutilation banned. She aimed her efforts at the superstructures of the State and of society as a whole, and at the moral constraints imagined by society. Her weapon of choice was a sharp pen. The activism of today's young women of Cairo seen in my film is directed at the mothers and daughters of the capital's underprivileged neighborhoods – women who will never read a line written by Nawal.

These young women began by emancipating themselves from the destiny that their rather bourgeois families envisioned for them: to marry a good boy, bear children and devote themselves entirely to their husbands and families instead of working and gaining their own independence. Having taken that first step, they embrace their freedom and ride their bicycles into the poorer quarters of the city to meet the women living there. They bring along hot meals in a bid to start up a dialogue about the main priorities of

the women's movement and to change mentalities regarding the place of women in society. Their arrival on bicycles, an unseemly means of transportation for any "decent" Egyptian woman, alone starts up discussions. These encounters are not always easy or smooth sailing. The feminist struggles of the young cyclists are often misunderstood by the women they meet, who would rather prepare their daughters to defend themselves physically against men who show them disrespect.



Women from the underprivileged areas, very combative on a daily basis, remain attached to patriarchal traditions, without naming them as such. They reproduce and perpetuate patriarchal violence – as did my Swiss grandmother, who colluded with the scheme that broke up the household of her own daughter, my mother.

You asked about Nawal's legacy. My film, shot by the woman of the in-between generation that I am, serves this very purpose: to

help transmit feminist culture and to encourage the militant young cyclists to meet Nawal and learn the lessons culled from her decades of struggle.

You speak of the attachment of women from modest backgrounds to patriarchal traditions. This is something that you have also observed in your own Egyptian family.

NF : Yes, in my family living in the south of the country. Conversations with my cousins quickly reveal that young women there, while asserting their right to obtain a master's degree and thus to study, and insisting on their right to choose their own husband, nevertheless regard female genital mutilation as a compulsory rite of passage for village girls. "It's a tradition, that's just the way it is. I don't want my uncut daughter to be rejected by others." Social pressure thus remains very strong and stands in the way of any reflection on the meaning and consequences of female genital mutilation. What is so terrible is that women themselves most often commit this act of repression of female sexuality. By perpetuating a violent patriarchal tradition, they become active accomplices of this system.

Throughout the film, like a refrain, we follow the trail of young feminists riding their bicycles around Cairo with determination. These sequences, and the recurrent appearance of the bicycles, must have a meaning for you, no ?

NF : Yes, the bicycles symbolize many things within the context of feminist struggles. In itself, riding a bicycle is already an act of transgression both in Middle-Eastern societies and in other patriarchal societies. To sit on a bicycle and pedal is first of all to endanger the integrity of the hymen and thus to risk a tragic devaluation on the matrimonial market. Who will want a spouse

whose virginity is cast in doubt? A bicycle is also a metaphor: it forces the rider to pedal and thus to always move forward. Lastly, bicycles stand for a direct, buoyant and pragmatic feminism – bicycles are an efficient and all-purpose means of navigating the chaotic streets of Cairo.

The film ends on images that will no doubt surprise many viewers in Egypt, but also in the West. Shortly before and during the credits, a sequence of pole dancing accompanies a song about freedom. One of the cyclists, who is very beautiful, performs her moves against the backdrop of a sunset. This is a rather unexpected finale to a feminist film, isn't it ?

NF : Yes, pole dancing is sometimes viewed as a cliché of the woman-object flaunting her sexuality around a rigid stake. My southern cousins may well disapprove of my choice to display so generously the gyrating body of one of Cairo's feminist cyclists. In the West, some viewers may also be surprised that a film dealing with a serious and even tragic topic should fade out on these images of proud and shameless femininity. But we rebellious women will continue to dance with courage, over and over again, and to assert our femininity in any way we choose in order to impose respect for equality.

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