

New Meanings of 'Heroism'? Types of Sporting 'Heroes' in Egyptian Cinema

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This article aims at exploring the image of the athlete in the Egyptian social imagination by following its representation in cinema over the last three decades. Egyptian cinema is the oldest and most widespread in the Arab region, and its influence over Arabic linguistic expression and popular culture has been profound (Gaffaney 1987: 53). Viola Shafik (2007) explains how the fact that Egypt was the first country in the Arab world to create films influenced its position as the first—and for a long time the only—producer of cinema and led to the popularization of the Egyptian dialect. Nowadays, Egyptian cinema is still popular in the region, and its movies continue to be screened in cinema theaters, especially in the Gulf area, where very few films are made nationally.

“The word sport is synonymous with football” (Zian, 2007) in the Egyptian imaginary, especially after winning the African Cup of Nations three times in a row (2006, 2008, and 2010), following which scenes encouraging different generations and genders became commonplace in a number of films. Although some effort has been directed at studying heroism in Arab cinema and action movies (see, for example, Saleh 2012; Schochat 1983; Gaffeny 1987; Shafik 2007), we hardly find

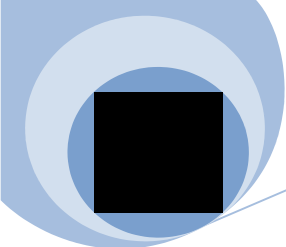
any research about sportsman as the² dramatic protagonist, and so this article is an

attempt to fill such a gap. The article answers the following questions: How are sportsmen represented through cinema in the modern Egyptian social imaginary? Do these sportsmen portrayed in film assimilate with folkloric heroes, or does sport give them new attributes?

I analyze the character of the athlete through a sample of films produced between 1974 and 2015, The selection criteria for the sampled films include a sportsperson appearing as the protagonist or a main character, and being presented in the Egyptian dialect, though selection is not limited solely to those produced by Egyptian nationals, because many black and white films were produced by non-Egyptians, mostly Syrians and Lebanese. Hence, sticking to Egyptian producers may limit the sample. The sample includes a variety of genres, such as comedy, action, romantic comedy, and social films, in which different sports are prevalent, such as football, Kung Fu, bodybuilding, boxing, and Karate.

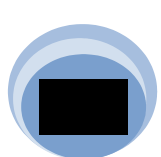
I examine the characteristics of the folkloric hero through epic tales taken from throughout Islamic history and right up to the 21st century. In addition, I juxtapose the hero in popular culture with the protagonist in the Egyptian films and the athlete hero in cinema in terms of the following: The conflict the sporting hero overcomes in the film, the role of sport in this conflict, and the overall significance of the conflict; the personal traits of the sporting protagonist; the social class of the sporting hero; and the gender of the hero.

The output of this article is a typology of four sportsperson stereotypes in Egyptian cinema, achieved through different strategies. I propose a typology of four types of Egyptian cinema sporting hero: The Regular Person, who encounters contradictions of good and evil, makes mistakes, and then returns to their senses; The National Hero, who brings victory to his nation; The Comedian; and The Marginalized.



The social imaginary can be defined as “ways in which [people] imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations” (Taylor 2004: 23). This concept was developed from the work of Benedict Anderson, Cornelius Castoriadis (social imaginary and significations) and Paul Ricoeur, but Taylor’s *Modern Social Imaginaries* (2004) popularized the idea. Bazurto (2017) explains Castoriadis’ notion that the imagination is “the place where images are formed, not in the sense of static graphic representation but of meaning, or something that contains a concept, a notion, for someone,” while the imaginary is “the exercise of conceiving reality from the human capacity,” and “the imaginary capacity is the construction of senses and not of images” (377).

Cinema is a representation of social imaginaries, as well as a provoker of the imaginary, as it “offers us the reflection not only of the world, but of the human spirit” (Morin 2001: 179). Furthermore, “A film is an act of representation that builds realities inspired by experience” (Bazurto 2017: 357). There are two processes in this regard: One is the translation of cinema into the image of a character in the social imaginary (such a process is carried out by filmmakers), and the other is the public understanding of such translation, which in itself is the organization of ideas and information: “the sociological theory suggests four different, though inter-related, ways of organizing this information: role, individual, type, and member” (Dyre 2006: 354).



The Hero in the Popular Culture and the Egyptian Cinema

The word *bṭl* 'hero' in Arabic denotes courage and extraordinary physical strength, and according to the *Lisān al-ʿarab* (the tongue of the Arabs) dictionary, the hero is a man who "vanishes the hardships with his sword" and "[whose] enemies lose against him." When the theater appeared in Arabic culture, *bṭl* (hero) became the word for the main character in a play or novel, as in English, but it applied also to the winner of a sports tournament.

The victories and conquests of popular heroes were made into *Sirahs* (epics), which are mostly poems about life and heroic battles, with the verses normally performed by a local singer who spends hours entertaining audiences in coffee houses by regaling them with tales of the hero.

We can see that the attributes of the popular hero were portrayed in films' protagonists, especially with the abundance of cinema production in the 70s. The main feature of a hero is extraordinary physical power. In fact, physical strength is more important than achievement in classic Arabic popular culture; there is a *Sirah* for the super-strong *al-Zāhir baybars*, the fourth Sultan of Egypt in the Mamluk Bahri dynasty who fought in the Crusades and against the Mongols. Although *Salahddin* achieved the victory, *al-Zāhir baybars* was the popular hero, thanks to his exceptional fitness (Nagm 2008). Typically, the hero faces injustice and uses his physical power to prevail; for instance, *abw zyd āhlālāy* left the Arabian Peninsula for Tunisia in the fourth century to escape the drought, and bravely fought *ālznāty ḥlyfh*, the governor of Tunisia. *āhlālāy* was also smart, though, as he could effectively disguise himself and speak any language. As summarized in the popular proverb, "*abw zyd āhlālāy* has a path to any destination."

In fact, the use of the athlete in the context of major conflicts originated in popular culture. *Al-Najjar* (1976) explains that in this regard the protagonist was engaged in issues of the Arab nation, as well as religious and humanitarian causes. For example, the story of *ibn Shaddad* deals with the idea of liberation, and in *The Arabian Hamza* the hero leads the transformation of a Bedouin population, whereas *Saif ibn Yazan* discusses issues of religious transformation through the conflict between religion and magic.

Another characteristic of the folkloric hero is being clever and quick-witted, such as ġmāl āldyn šyħh, a Mamluki hero who resisted the Mongols, and ‘ly ālzybq, the hero of the Mamluki era, who ridiculed state officials, leading the way for the public to do the same. This was his way of shaking off the people’s fear of the political system.

The hero in Egyptian popular culture loves his nation and dedicates himself to serving it. The nation of the folkloric hero is his tribe, the Arab or the Muslim nation, and though he may or may not appear as a conservative and religious Muslim, his motivation for his struggle is always declared to be the nation. However, in modern Egyptian oral Sirahs, the hero is fighting for the sake of poor people, not for the nation. For instance, in the early 1920s, an epic started dedicated to ādhm ālšrqāwy, a young man who steals from the rich to feed the poor. He is very bold and does not fear anyone, and he even kills a person while in the prison, namely the man who assassinated his uncle and who was also his cellmate in prison. ādhm ālšrqāwy remains one of the most popular Sirahs, although official documents tell a completely different story about him, in that the newspapers of 1917 published a picture and story of ālšrqāwy portraying him as a criminal (Hassan 2009). Similarly, yāsın, another Egyptian folkloric figure in the 20th century, who is an iconic hero and lover in popular culture, was documented officially as a criminal. This difference between the real story and the folkloric story reflects the concern of the spectator with class conflict.

Gradually, the attributes of the folkloric hero were dismantled and not gathered in one character, and so physical power appeared in action movies. The peak period for producing action movies in Egyptian cinema was the 1970s; for instance, in 1971, only 48 films were produced in total, but 19 of these were adventure and action types. However, almost all of them were of very poor quality, which led to the economic decline of the national cinema production sector and the subsequent entrance of individual producers who used film production as a source of profit (AlQluobi 2011). Yet, in the 80s and 90s, the Egyptian middle class started to own video recorders, usually brought back from Gulf countries that used Egyptian labor. The spread of video recorders promoted the film market, and high demand for Hollywood and Bollywood action movies lured local film producers to create

Egyptian counterparts to Claude Van Damme and Jacky Chan—not to compete with them, but just to have a share in the video films market. Thus, a wave of Egyptian films with athletes as the main characters, commonly martial arts practitioners in real life, started at the turn of the millennium. There were a number of athletes who starred action movies, the most well-known of which were Yusuf Mansour, a Kung Fu master, and ElShahhat Mabrouk, a world champion in bodybuilding.

Another attribute of the folkloric hero which dominated the cinematic hero was intelligence. In the 1990s, a new type of protagonist emerged, one that is referred to herein as the Smart Hero. An example of a Smart Hero is Khalaf Al-Dahshouri in *An Upper Egyptian in the American University* (1998). Here, the protagonist is a student from Upper Egypt who receives a scholarship for the American University in Cairo because of his distinction. Al-Dahshouri travels from a conservative village community and joins the American University in Cairo's westernized community, thereby initiating social and cultural conflict between him and his colleagues. Another example is Tariq Abdul Samad in *lylt sqwt bġdād, The Night of the Fall of Baghdad* (2005), in which the protagonist is a very adept student. The Headmaster at the student's school seeks someone to invent a weapon that will deter any attacker—in case American soldiers invade Cairo as they did Baghdad—and, naturally, he chooses Adul Samad.

The Smart Hero in these types of film would appear within a comedy framework and reflect society's desire to break free from the cultural backwardness of Egypt by portraying a personality that expresses the victory of society in confrontation with the First World (American culture represented by the American University or US military forces who may potentially invade Cairo). However, while Khalaf Al-Dahshouri excelled at the American University, Tariq Abdul Samad ended up in a mental hospital, because the Egyptian authorities abandoned him after he created a weapon to use against America. In neither film was the Smart Hero physically strong; in the first film, the hero is played by Mohamed Heneidy, a physically small actor, who, in several scenes, cracks jokes about his physical appearance, and in the second film, the role is played by the super-slim actor Ahmed Eid.

After 2000, the attributes of good manners and courage in the folkloric hero heralded the appearance of the Honest Hero in cinema, thereby turning toward the

representation of moral heroism. The Honest Hero appears initially to be an ordinary person but the discovers his heroism—and the audience discovers this also—as the drama escalates. An example of this is the film *ġā' nā ālbyān āltāly*, We Just Have Received the Following Statement (2001), in which the hero does his best to become a media reporter but then turns his efforts to uncovering the corruption of one of the advertisers on the television channel he works for, all at the risk of losing his job. Also, *fthh 'ynyk*, Keep Your Eyes Wide-Open (2005), in which the protagonist, a public relations agent for a corporate firm, transforms from an average young man into a warrior in the fight against corruption after the murder of his friend by corrupt officials. The emergence of the Honest Hero coincided with the formation of Kefaya, a movement calling for political and social change, which revealed corruption in different sectors to highlight the urgent need for political change. Therefore, at the time, heroism was linked to combating corruption.

The establishment of Kefaya was followed by a series of political uprisings inside syndicates, bars, and professional and working groups, sparking protest against this long-hidden problem not only on the public level, but also on the personal level. By the mid-2000s, the Egyptian blogosphere was full of writings that broke taboos, and at this time, the cinema gave prominence to the Falling Hero, the protagonist who is consumed by internal conflict. This type of character does may not achieve any goal but instead portrays the audience's everyday conflicts, within themselves and with others. The Falling hero was characterized by 'collective starring', the earliest example of which was the film, *sāhr āllyāly*, Sleepless Nights (2003), in which four couples argue with one another, leading to the men involved traveling together to Alexandria for a weekend. After they return, life continues as it was. This film opened the door to films where the conflict does not end with the victory of the hero, such as *Cabaret* (2008), *ālfrh*, The Wedding Party (2009), and *sā'h w nš*, An Hour and a Half (2012). Here, heroism is no longer the courage to fight evil but the representation of very common people in their everyday lives.

After the millennium, the witty hero of folkloric literature also made an appearance in cinema, similar to the adventures of the folkloric heroes *'ly ālzybq*, who disguise themselves behind different personalities as a means of solving their own personal

problems. An example of this is *yānā yā ḥāly*, *Me or My Aunt* (2005), and *tyr āntā*, *You Go Now* (2009).

The Sportsman ‘Hero’ in Egyptian Cinema

3.1 The Ordinary

The Ordinary Hero is the protagonist who does not winning sports tournaments; rather, his heroism is displayed through a desire to defeat evil. In many films, the protagonist is non-athletic, just an ordinary person who decides to take up a sport in order to acquire the necessary strength to defeat perceived evil. An old example of this type of hero can be found in the comedy *āwnkl zyzw ḥbyby*, *My Beloved Uncle Zizo* (1977), which focuses on Samir, a child raised by his uncle after the death of his father. Samir is shocked when he sees his uncle unable to defend himself in a quarrel, so much so that the incident paralyzes the child and takes away his ability to speak. The only way to resolve Samir’s predicament is for his beloved uncle Zizo to show strength and bravery, which he attempts by taking up football and boxing.

The Ordinary hero, dissatisfied with the authorities, thus reaps revenge by himself. He is not against the law, but he does give up thinking of the law as a source of justice. This is evident in the film *ālābtāl*, *The Heroes* (1974), in which a boy, Ahmed, plans to learn Karate after witnessing a theft and identifying the gang. When Ahmed grows up, he searches for the thieves and intends to punish them.

In some films, the protagonist may already be an athlete but intensifies his training for the purpose of executing revenge, such as in the film, *qbd̄t āhlāl̄y*, *The Grip of Al-Hilali* (1991), in which Saber Al-Hilali practices Kung Fu to enact revenge on those who attempted to rape his sister. Moreover, in ‘*ālmr’h ālḥdydyh*’, *The Iron Lady* (1987), the Karate coach, Magda, ramps up her practice to gain vengeance over her husband’s killers. In both films, we can see in many scenes the emphasis on sport as a powerful instrument to fight evil, especially when Saber spends time training in Kung Fu, and where Magda remains alone in the gym to train hard before she approaches her husband’s killers.

Sport has also been represented as a means of combating racism and discrimination. For example, ālnmr ālāsūd, *The Black Tiger* (1984), tells the story of Mohammad, a young, illiterate Egyptian man who travels to Germany in the 1960s to work in a factory. Because of his dark skin, Mohammad is harassed by some of his colleagues, who conspire to make him lose his job. He learns subsequently about a Greek boxing coach who spent his life in Egypt before immigrating to Germany, who teaches him boxing. Once again, the protagonist faces racism when the father of his German girlfriend refuses to allow them to marry: "I will not let my daughter become the wife of a negro, and I do not like to have negroes' grandchildren." The sport becomes the starting point for the protagonist on his journey towards heroism; he wins boxing championships and is given the name 'The Black Tiger', and he develops the machine he used in the factory to double its efficiency, which makes him rich. Eventually, Mohammad marries his German girlfriend and has a child, which symbolizes the defeat of racism.

3.2. The Marginalized

We can even say that the marginalized athlete is the popular sporting hero, in that he belongs to the working class and suffers associated problems. Here, sport has the function of solving the protagonist's social problems. For instance, Hassan Hudhud, the protagonist of kābwryā, *The Crab* (1996), lives in a poor neighborhood, loves boxing, and aspires to take part in the Olympics, but he uses sport to earn money by appearing at the parties of a wealthy couple, where attendees place bets on him. Like the Terzo Hero, Hudhud returns to the sport and the Olympic dream at the end of the film.

A similar path is followed in 'bdh mwāsm, *Abdou Seasons* (2006). Abdou is an amateur boxer who works seasonally; sometimes he sells Egyptian flags, while at other times he competes in boxing matches for money. Abdou meets Salma, a sports industry researcher, who proposes to sponsor him and make him a champion. At the end of the film, Abdou wins the national boxing championship, and eventually sport represents the means for this marginalized protagonist to change his life.

Some marginalized heroes do indeed indulge in sport for money, but this is as a way to empower themselves and survive their everyday battles with class conflict. We find Salah in mstr kārātyh, *Mr. Karate* (1993), a young

man who travels to Cairo from the countryside to work, but then faces ridicule and harassment from other workers in his neighborhood. At the same time, Salah becomes fascinated with action movies, prompting him to visit Captain Hassan, a middle-class boxing coach, and ask him for training so he can become capable of defending himself. Captain Hassan agrees and helps him to attend Karate classes at a prestigious sporting club. Here, Salah's journey with sport begins as a means of avoiding conflict within his social class, but his hopes for sporting success are dashed by a foot injury caused by an upper-class car owner. He grows even more frustrated after his coach leaves to earn more money as a bodyguard at a nightclub. Salah learnt Karate especially to feel empowered and to confront people within and outside his social class, if needed. We can see his vision in terms of sport through the song he performed happily after starting his Karate training:

‘Yes, cruel world
I am good and all is OK
I can react to any buller
Twist his arms and hang him by legs I
will be a boss
And I will keep dancing’.

Similar to Salah, Rahim, the main character in *mn dhr rāḡl*, Born to Man (2015), is a boxer, but for him sport is a way of protecting himself from bullying. Rahim works as a delivery man but becomes involved in illegal activity under the pressure of a corrupt police officer, albeit he too returns to the right path at the end of the film. In contrast to Rahim, who abandoned his sporting dreams under financial pressure, Hema in the film *kābtn hymā*, Captain Hema (2008), loves football and graduates from the Faculty of Physical Education to become a football coach. However, Hema gives up his dream of becoming a professional athlete to be a school bus driver.

These films did not return high revenues at the time they were screened, except for The Crab and Captain Hema, which were enormous successes, most likely due to their super-star cast members Ahmad Zaki (played Hudud) and the singer Tamer

Hosni (played Hema), while Asser Yassin (played Rahim) was known only among the younger generation. Mohammad Lotfi (played Abdou) is an old boxer and a second role actor in cinema, with Abdou Seasons his first starring role.

3.3. The National Icon

What is meant by nationalism in this context is the victory of Egypt, e.g. the success of the protagonist equates to the victory of the country. The idea of linking sports achievement to the nation emerged in 2006, immediately after Egypt won the Africa Cup of Nations football championship—and retained it until 2010. In fact, we can see the correlation between nationalism and football in naming the national team ‘The Pharaohs’ and giving its players titles that symbolise the country; for instance, Essam Al-Hadary, the team’s goalkeeper, is known as the ‘High Dam’, after the dam in Aswan.

“During the heyday of football hype, the last years of the Mubarak regime, there were half a dozen TV stations devoting most of their programming to football. Hosts like the former goalkeeper for the national team, Ahmed Shoubair, and former police officer Medhat Shalaby became national superstars. They had three- to four-hour-long primetime talk shows dedicated to football, mixed with entertainment and tittle-tattle to reach a wider audience.”

(Interview with Rommel, Henrik Alfredsson 2017)

In fact, the environment of glorifying sporting championships encouraged the filmmaker Wael Ehsan to re-boot *The Black Tiger* and dedicate the film to the great actor Ahmed Zaki, who starred as Mohammed. Therefore, Ahmed Mano, the protagonist of *The Life Dream*, is patient and resilient like Mohammad in *The Black Tiger*, and they both share the same traits and sporting focus, as Mano is a boxer also, whose ambition is to win the world championship. Mano becomes trapped in a class conflict when he falls in love with a girl and competes with a rich police officer for her favours.

At the end of *The Life Dream*, we see an attempt to portray the protagonist as a national icon; his coach encourages him to continue his training despite the depression he feels because of his love-life ordeals. The coach even punches Mano in the face and urges him to “[...] make the championship come true for the sake of

Egypt.” Furthermore, after he wins the boxing world championship, his mother approaches her neighbor and says, “My son is an Egyptian!” and the whole scene is repeated. Another Iconic Hero is Malek, or Luca, in *āl’ālmī*, ‘The International’ (2009), which tells the story of Malik Al-Khalili, or Luca, a footballer who insists on achieving his ambitions for international professionalism and who played for the Valencia football team. The filmmakers attempted to make Luca a national hero, so, in the film, he scores the goal that allows Egypt to take part in the World Cup, what was an achievement indeed, because, at the time the film was made, the country had not qualified for the championship since 1990. Like *The Life Dream*, *The International* did not generate high revenues, despite the popularity of the game of football, because Luca is similar to Mano, in that they are both prone to idealism. Nonetheless, neither Mano nor Luca became national icons to the audience, most likely because society was celebrating the heroism of a team (the national football squad) and not individuals. The national dimension of the hero’s success is highly visible in popular culture, e.g. “he is always concerned with the society and committed to achieving its goals, sometimes from the moment of his birth” (Al-Zahra, 1983), but this is not the case in sports films, where the heroes pursue their own goals for the good of themselves. For instance, Mohammad in *The Black Tiger* exercised hard to become a boxing champion, in order to end discrimination against himself, though he still remembered Egypt and dedicated his success to his country, which we see in the training scenes accompanied by the song:

‘Oh Egypt! I am keeping you in heart and mind
 Your voice is twisting my heart [of nostalgia]
 Hold my hand, and walk by my side
 We win victories one after one’.

3.4. The Comedian

Light comedy has been the second most popular genre in the Egyptian film canon since its foundation in the 1930s (Khouleif 2011). Some Egyptian films focus on the institution of sport in a humorous way, the best example of this being *4 2 4* (1981), a film about a young man whose father owns a factory and in his will instructs his son to look after the factory’s football team and lead it to success. However, because the son lacks experience in sport and administration, he sells the

team players to a retailer. Another comedy about the institution of sport is *ālzmhlāwyh* (2008), the merging of the words 'Ahlaweyya', the fans of Ahli, and 'Zamalkaweyya'—in this film, therefore, the fans of Zamalek. Ahli and Zamalek are the leading football clubs in Egypt, and the film focuses on football fans via a love story between a Zamalek footballer and a girl whose father is a big fan of the rival team, Ahli. Despite the fact that many of the clubs' players appear as themselves, the film did not achieve much public success.

A later instance of the use of sport in comedy took place in 2015, with the showing of *kābṭn mṣr*, *Captain Egypt*. This film is about a football player who causes an accident and is sent to prison, where the officials ask him to form a football team. It is worth mentioning here that there was a previous black and white film by the name of *Captain Egypt* (1955), starring the famous comedian Ismail Yassin, about a young man who loves football and seeks to excel in it. The modern *Captain Egypt* film made high revenues when it was screened in the cinema. The cast of *Captain Egypt* consisted of seven comedic actors, which contributed to its success as a film. Although the protagonist of this film was a footballer, the plot did not focus on his sporting life, as the story starts when he enters jail. Unlike other types of champion-protagonists, Kamal Naguib does not have a dream or an ambition, nor does he show-off his physical skills.

Conclusion: The Sportsman 'Hero' and the Meanings of Heroism in the Social Imaginary

After reviewing the image of the 'hero' in popular culture, the theme of sport in cinema, and analyzing athlete protagonists in the films in this study's sample, we should ask the following question: Do these sportsmen portrayed in film assimilate with folkloric heroes, or does sport give them new attributes?

Effectively, the typology of athlete heroes in modern Egyptian cinema reflects a collection of differences between the athlete hero and the folkloric hero. The first difference is found in one's social class, in that sportsmen in the cinema are often poor or middle class, unlike the heroes in epics, who often belonged to an elite tribe. Second, they have different motivations for getting into a conflict, since the folkloric hero fights to achieve victory for his Arab and Muslim nation, i.e. for abstract meanings of pride and honor. Conversely, most of the sporting heroes in the cinema

just want to improve their lives economically (as we see in *Abdou Seasons* and *The Crab*), for self-defense against evil (as in *Born to a Man* and *Mr. Karate*), or to avenge a crime perpetrated against themselves or their beloved ones (as illustrated in *The Iron Lady* and *The Grip of Al-Hilali*).

Whilst the hero in popular culture held strong to his own pride and refused to be defeated or even exploited by others, we find some sportsmen in cinema, namely the Marginalized type, who decide to do whatever may be required to fulfill their aspirations to overcome poverty. For instance, in *The Crab*, Hudhud becomes very submissive to the rich couple who use him for entrainment, singing:

“Crack open the crab

Crack open the crab

I am at loose ends

So, what is to cry about?”

(Armbrust 1996)

Nevertheless, Salah, in *Mr. Karate*, who is also a Marginalized Hero, is to some extent similar to Anatrah ibn Shaddad, a prominent hero in the pre-Islamic era, in that both of them consider strength and courage in their experiences with class conflict. Ibn Shaddad was dark-skinned, a color he inherited from his slave mother. His father was the prince of a big tribe, Bnu Abs. The father did not recognize the dark-skinned son until another tribe invaded the lands of Bnu Abs and was told him to fight the other tribe on the proviso that if he won, he would be liberated him from slavery.

The third key difference between the sporting heroes in cinema and in popular culture is that the later type tends to win conflicts and achieve miracles, while the sporting hero does not have this level of success. In fact, the four types of athlete heroes in cinema in the proposed typology do eventually win their internal and external conflicts, and yet they do not prove extraordinarily powerful; indeed, it is quite the opposite, as the hero struggles to win.

Moving to the similarities between the cinematic sporting hero and the popular hero, we find athletes in many films are presented as idealists, just like the folkloric heroes. One reason for this could be the keenness of some sportsmen who become actors to preserve a good image of themselves on the screen. For instance, the football goalkeeper Ekramy El-Shahat

(known as Ekramy) explains that he refused to perform certain scenes in a few films back in the 1980s, as he did not want the viewers to confuse the character he played with his real personality. Ekramy stated the following in a television interview:

"In the movie, *rġl fqd 'qlh* [The Man Who Lost His Mind], the father was supposed to get drunk and imagine his wife betraying him with her cousin, and his son—the character I do—betraying his brother with his fiancée. I refused to perform this scene, so that people do not think that is my real character."

(Interview with Ekramy El-Shahat, CBC Television, 2017)

Another reason for the idealism of some sporting heroes in cinema could be their involvement in fighting evil, which makes filmmakers present them as representatives of good, and therefore perfect, human beings. Either way, the ideal hero in sports movies enjoyed less presence after the millennium, as apparently the audience did not enjoy watching them but wished to see themselves on the screen, with all their problems. Social and political changes after the foundation of Kefaya in 2003 and other protest movements over the following years, plus the emergence of young directors who adopted a realist approach (such as Amr Salama and Muhammed Diab), led the people to welcome attempts at self-representation in cinema. We find more films about slums and marginalized people (for example, *ḥynā mysrh*, *When it Gets Better* (2007), *bltyh āl'āymh*, *The Floating Woman* (2008), and *ḥlṭt fwzyh*, *The Mix Made By Fawzeyya* (2009)). Therefore, the audience wanted to see the hero as a normal person, not an ideal. My argument could be supported through the example of the success of *Captain Hema*, in which the realistic personality of the protagonist contributed to the film's success; in essence, we find in *Hema* an ordinary person who abandoned his ambition when it clashed with his responsibilities. The audience welcomed the non-ideal hero in *Captain Hema*, which was the fourth most popular film in Egypt in 2008 and was released the same year as *The Life Dream*.

The domination of the male hero among sports protagonists in cinema is another common characteristic shared between the sporting hero and the folkloric hero in the social imaginary. Most heroes in popular culture and cinema are males, though female heroines are not completely absent in Arabic cultural heritage, such as Queen Saba or Sheba. The latter's story with prophet King Solomon was cited in the Holy Quran and her wisdom was praised, while Princess Zatul Hemma, who inherited the kingdom off her father, liberated herself from captivity and led an army against her enemies. Nevertheless, even though the women in these tales had mental power, sharp minds, and determination, no mention was made of sports except for equestrian and archery, the two most popular sporting pursuits in ancient Arab history.

In the film sample that I use in this article, there was only one sporting heroine, Magda, the protagonist of *The Iron lady*, who was a Karate coach. In fact, other movies did indeed portray sportswomen, but they were always as secondary characters and thus were not included in the sample. Here, we may assume that audiences preferred the male sportsman as the protagonist, because they preserve the image of the folkloric male hero, albeit such an assumption quickly vanishes when we look at the revenues of films starring Samah Anwar, an Egyptian actress who played in numerous action movies in the 1980s and 90s. For instance, Anwar's *ḥālt tlbaws*, *Caught in Action* (1988), screened in cinemas for almost 18 months, according to Anwar (Yehia 2016), who plays a police woman and appears in many scenes fighting various criminals. Although she appeared in action films until she had a severe accident in 1998, Anwar never performed in her films as a professional athlete. In real life, she is actually a sporty person who used to play tennis, swim, and ride on horseback. It is noteworthy to mention that most of Anwar's action films were produced by Anwar Abdullah, Samah's father, who was a writer and film producer.

In some way, Magda was an exception in the way she was presented to audiences, as the actress Naglaa Fathi, who starred as Magda, appeared as pretty and feminine while "the muscular or sportive woman is likely to be present as ridiculous and ugly in feature, dress, and body language, because she is quasi-masculine" (Shafik 2007:179). However, the precedent set in the form of Magda did not repeat itself, and so sporting women continued to appear as secondary characters in modern films and with the same quasi-masculine persona.

For instance, alma in ġš ālzwğyh, The Dishonest Marriage (2012), a footballer who is pressured to get married to a womanizer rich man, who eventually fall in love with her and learning to become self-disciplined. Lastly, based on the analysis of the sportsmen in the film sample, we can see that sport has been represented in the social imaginary as an instrument with which to overcome working-class inner conflict or an external conflict with evil. Therefore, there is no common sporting hero stereotype. The athlete protagonists in the studied sample were of different social and cultural backgrounds, in that some were displayed as ordinary, middle-class people in trouble, and therefore take up sport to seek revenge, or they were shown as struggling and marginalized and end up in sport for money or for self-protection. Correspondingly, we identified the comedian athlete and the national icon hero, with the latter competing in the name of his country and heaping victory and glory on the nation as a champion.

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