I first encountered Amina Rizq on television

in the early 1990s. She was a supporting player in one of those engaging but forgettable soap operas, evening diversion for an entire nation on Egypt's Channel 1, in the era before satellite TV. Gamal Ratib played one of his countless villainous roles – something to do with a stolen briefcase – and Rizq, clad in a white *abaya* and *hijab*, was his mother. I arrived in Egypt late in the series, so I never quite grasped the story, and I was never quite sure whether she was a real 'live' character or Ratib's ghostly conscience. When the producers forewarned of a surprise ending, I intimated to friends perhaps the Hajja would prove to be the culprit. They reacted with horror. Not Amina Rizq!

Amina Rizq died in 2003, aged 93, and Egyptians mourned her as if they had lost their collective mother. Rizq was not the matriarch of the film industry; that honour belongs to pioneer actor-producers Asya Dagher and Mary Queenie. Rather, she was for multiple generations of movie viewers, bolstered by television reruns and then a career in soap operas, the archetypical cinematic mom. She had been the playing the role, after all, since her youth. As critic Mustafa Darwish has written, "she did it so well that she became the standard for the role."

Her first love was the theatre. If Fatima Youssef was the East's Sarah Bernhardt, Rizq was its Helen Hayes. She far outlasted the legendary Rose, and her theatrical legacy was ultimately far more distinguished. She played virtually every great lead in the Western canon – Electra and Helen, Ophelia and Lady Macbeth, Bernarda Alba and Madam Renyevsky – and in pioneering works by Tawfik

al-Hakim and fellow Arab dramatists. She starred in one silent film, then in Egypt's first talkie, *Awlad al-Zawat* (1932). She went on to make nearly 100 more movies. She never married and produced no children. For years she doted on Youssef Wahby, her early stage director and co-star. Twice she contemplated matrimony, then, as she confessed, caught herself. Her children were, instead, the artistic creations of dramatists and screenwriters. Following melodramatic conventions, her matriarchs were often widowed.

Her greatest maternal roles on film, inspired by social reformers, were neither heroic nor endearing. But in her persona they displayed a depth of character that engendered as much sympathy as scorn. In the adaptation of Ihsan Abd al-Quddus's *Ayna Umri* (1956) she played a middle-aged widow who believes, fancifully, that she has drawn the romantic attentions of a wealthy family friend. When she learns that he is eyeing her teenage daughter, she is devastated, but allows the engagement to proceed, with tragic results. In the screen adaptation of Taha Husayn's *Du`a al-Karawan* (1959) she is an accomplice to a more horrific crime, the honour killing of a wayward daughter by her dead husband's brother. Whether bound by social codes of class or tribe, she both suffers and perpetuates suffering. In the adaptation of Yahya Haqqi's *Qandil Umm Hashim* (1968) she plays another poor, tradition-bound woman scorned by her modern son who blames her superstitious folk remedies for the blindness that has afflicted his beloved.

Amina Rizq captured hearts because her mothers were not malicious. The ultimate malevolent matriarch, in both dramatic and comic turns, was Mimi Shakib. In true fairytale fashion Shakib often played the wicked stepmother or self-serving guardian aunt, always on the lookout to match a husband's son or daughter in order to secure financial reward. How could a real biological mother be so craven? Angelic mothers are less memorable in a dramatic context.

Who shed tears as movingly as Amal Zayid, the long-suffering matriarch of Naguib Mahfouz's *Bayn al-Qasrayn* (1964) and *Qasr al-Shawq* (1967)? Who could match the mature grace of Tahiya Carioca, belly-dancer supreme and screen temptress of the 1940s and 1950s? In *Khalli Balik min Zouzou* (1972), the last great musical of Egyptian cinema's 'golden age', she plays an over-the-hill dancer still working in order to put her upwardly-mobile but socially-ashamed daughter through university. Then there was Fatin

Hamama, child star turned romantic lead, seemingly ageless, playing university co-eds well into her thirties. Suddenly, at age 40, she turned in a star performance in the classic social comedy *Imperaturat Mim* (1972). Leading motherhood into battle with careerism and the new generation gap, Fatin played a single mother – a widow of course – struggling to balance professional responsibilities with raising six rebellious children, and pursuing a budding romance with an impatient suitor.

But Amina Rizq will remain the quintessential screen mother, even if her roles are rooted in a bygone era. She capped her career with some memorable supporting parts in the early to mid-1990s, especially in the blockbuster biopic *Nasser 56* (1996). In her only scene she plays an aged – ageless – *fallaha*, clad in the black *abaya* she so often wore on screen. Recounting the story of her grandfather who died digging the Suez Canal – a history lesson for the film audience – she presents Egypt's president with her ancestor's cloak. Now that it is in your hands, I can rest in peace, she tells the hero of nationalisation, then leaves, having stolen the scene from Ahmad Zaki, the film's star, who looks on – all the while in character – with open-eyed respect.

Amina Rizq embodied Egypt – Umm al-Dunia, Mother of the Earth – as no one else ever will.

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