The lion was enraged by the disrespectful behavior of his wife who dared to leave him the leftovers of her hunt... He reminded her of the inequality of their status... The lioness laughed at this reminding him: “this was when you were you and I was me. Now, Our roles are reversed: you are me and I am you.”

—*Mir‘at al-Tāmūl fī al-Umūr*

The year 1892 witnessed the publication of ‘A‘īsha Taymur’s *Mir‘at al-Tāmūl fī al-Umūr* (a reflective mirror on Some Matters), a 16-page booklet and *Hilyat al-Tiraz* (the finest of its class), her collected Arabic poems. In this chapter I will examine the first of these two publications where Taymur turned her attention to social criticism—that is, the changing gender relations between men and women in the family and its effects on the representation of the national community. In the process, she offered a novel interpretation (*ijtihād*) of the contingent nature of the religious and social bases of male leadership over women in the family. Taymur’s work elicited critical responses from Shaykh Abdallah al-Fayumi, a member of the ulema and Abdallah al-Nadeem, the nationalist writer, who offered two perspectives of her work and views of gender as a marker of the community. This early debate underlined the contested character of gender relations and roles as features of the community in the early 1890s long before the work of Qasim Amin’s *Tahrīr al-Ma‘rāt* (The Liberation of the Woman) in 1899.

The publication of *Mir‘at al-Tāmūl fī al-Umūr* in 1892 was important because that year witnessed the confluence of political and social developments...
that established its importance in Egyptian national history. The unpopular Khedive Tewfik died in January 1892 and was succeeded by his young son, Abbas II, who quickly clashed with Lord Cromer, the British consul general, transforming himself into a unifying national figure around which the divided nation was finally able to rally. In an early demonstration of his desire to heal the national divisions unleashed by the ‘Urabi national revolution, the new khedive pardoned Abdallah al-Nadeem, the orator of the revolution on February 3, 1892, paving the way for his return to Egypt on May 9 of the same year and the publication of his new magazine, al-Ustaz (the teacher), which became a forum for his nationalist social and political views. For the next two years, al-Ustaz inspired young Egyptian nationalists, represented by the graduates of the modern schools including Mustafa Kamel, who demonstrated against al-Muqattam newspaper, owned and run by Syrian journalists, for serving as the voice of the British occupation.

Also in 1892, British colonial government marked the anniversary of its first decade in Egypt with the publication of England in Egypt by Alfred Milner, the director-general of Egyptian accounts, which celebrated British accomplishments justifying its continued occupation. When that book was translated into Arabic, it had the opposite effect demonstrating the extent to which the occupation usurped khedival economic and political powers fueling greater support for a khedive led nationalist opposition. The anniversary motivated writers, like Taymur and al-Nadeem, to discuss the negative consequences of colonial modernization.

Along with the publication of ‘A’isha Taymur’s Mir’at al-Tàmul fi al-Umur and Hilyat al-Tiraz in 1892, the first women’s journal titled, al-Fatat (The Young Woman) also appeared. It was edited by Hind Noufal, a young Syrian Christian woman. The three publications established 1892 as an important marker of the active efforts by Egyptian and Syrian women to influence public debate. It is probable that the publication of Taymur’s Mir’at preceded the publication of al-Fatat, whose first issue appeared on November 30, 1892. While the journal sought to encourage women’s participation in public debates, it also emphasized the modernist ideals that emphasized women’s domestic concerns as part of a sexual division of labor, which it does not question. In contrast, Taymur’s Mir’at sought to initiate public debate on the significant changes in the roles that men and women played in the family. With Taymur sending a poem to celebrate the publication of al-Fatat, which the journal published, the journal’s second issue included some of Taymur’s poems from Hilyat al-Tiraz. What this made clear was that women writers of this period took an active interest in each other’s work, offering support and building a loose sisterhood and/or community. The latter was loosely defined because it included women of different generations, ethnic groups, discourses, and social agendas.