



Essay

Threads of Resistance: The Emancipatory and Performative Potential of Weaving in Postcolonial Egypt

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Abstract

This paper examines the emancipatory and performative potential of weaving in postcolonial Egypt through an intersectional feminist perspective. It situates weaving within the tensions between traditional Masr (Arabic term for Egypt) and Egypt's industrialized reality. Drawing on Karen Barad's concept of New Materialism, weaving is understood as a relational practice that produces meaning through embodied processes. The analysis is grounded in Copula, an ongoing artistic performance series that explores weaving as a temporal, archival, and performative act. Through this case study, alongside references to contexts such as the Ramses Wissa Wassef Art Center in Egypt, the paper examines how weaving operates as a form of resistance and feminist activism. It argues that weaving enables alternative modes of knowledge production and contributes to the articulation of decolonial and feminist futures.

Keywords

Weaving, Postcolonial Egypt, New Materialism, Feminist Futures, Performative Resistance

Introduction

Weaving is an ancient craft with a long and global history. In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, particularly in contemporary Egypt, weaving and textile production, and arts and crafts more broadly, have long served as vital means of livelihood. As Anne-Marie Willis notes in her essay in *Craft Is Political* (D. Wood, Ed., 2021), the economic relevance of arts and crafts in Egypt is reflected in their institutional recognition as one of the nineteen chambers of the Federation of Egyptian Industries. Under President Sadat's "open-door" policies in the 1980s, craft production became an increasingly significant sector of the national economy. This period saw a growing emphasis on regionally specific practices, such as woven textiles from the village of Nagada or rugs and basketry from Aswan, largely produced for and marketed to tourists. Concurrently, contemporary Egypt appears to exist in a persistent tension between two competing imaginaries: the industrialized, Western-oriented Egypt and the traditional Masr (the Arabic term for Egypt). These cultural spheres often function as parallel societies with limited points of meaningful intersection, producing a duality in which tradition and modernity coexist but remain largely separate.

Willis further notes that within this class division, manual work is typically not associated with the former; rather, it is assigned to members of the lower classes of the latter. Consequently, craft labor functions as a material marker of both economic marginalization and cultural difference. This resonates with decolonial feminist theory. Milojević (2024, as cited in Nassiri-Ansari et al., 2025) argues that "the future has already been colonized by patriarchal imaginings," calling for both critique and the imaginative construction of alternative futures. Building on this, this essay examines weaving within a dual framework as both a form of resistance to patriarchal structures and a decolonial, future-oriented practice that engages with questions of agency, temporality, and relationality. The central research question is therefore: To what extent can weaving be understood as an emancipatory and performative

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practice in the Egyptian context, situated between industrialized Egypt and traditional Masr?

Gidley (2015, as cited in Al Noaimi, 2025) argues that “neoliberal futures are always anti-feminist,” particularly in postcolonial settings where market logics and individualism impose human and ecological costs. Within this context, weaving is positioned as a site of relational, embodied, and culturally grounded resistance, offering both aesthetic and sociopolitical possibilities.

The inquiry is grounded in my experience as an Associate Lecturer in Conceptual Design (Fashion Design) and Design Theory at the German International University in Cairo, as well as in my artistic practice investigating the relations between textiles, space, and performativity. Through my long-term performance and installation series *Copula* (Latin for “connection,” initiated in 2021), weaving is approached as a multi-sensory and temporal practice grounded in embodied knowledge.

Historical and contemporary contexts of weaving in egypt

In ancient Egypt, textiles, predominantly linen, were imbued with meanings of purity, social hierarchy, and ritual significance. Weaving was closely intertwined with religious practices, serving to clothe priests and temple servants as well as to provide textiles for bedding and funerary contexts (Vogelsang-Eastwood, 2001, as cited in Soliman et al., 2023), and functioned as a material marker of social stratification. Barber (1991, as cited in Soliman et al., 2023) emphasizes that in ancient Egypt “the vast majority of women were the backbone of textile production. The main reason seems to be that the easily interruptible work of spinning and weaving could be done at home.” During the Islamic period, Egypt became a major textile center, producing fine Damask fabrics and intricate tapestries. Textiles functioned as political objects, articulating authority and shaping the visual culture of religious and royal elites.

With the onset of Western industrialization, traditional weaving practices in Egypt experienced decline. Mechanization introduced economic pressures that, while distinct from the European experience, similarly disrupted artisanal livelihoods and local economies. Today, weaving serves both as a marker of cultural identity and as a socioeconomic strategy, particularly through revival movements aimed at sustaining craft knowledge, artistic skills, and community resilience.

One of the most influential examples is the Ramses Wissa Wassef Art Center, founded in 1952 in Harraniya. Based on the belief that every human possesses innate artistic potential, the center created a non-academic, non-industrial environment in which young people, many from financially disadvantaged backgrounds, could develop weaving as an autonomous artistic practice. Here, weaving resists industrial homogenization and fosters creativity and experimentation. Although the center is not exclusively for women, approximately 90% of its weavers are women who achieve financial independence through their craft. Within patriarchal family structures and rural economies, weaving thus becomes not only an income-generating activity but also an emancipatory practice embedded in cultural and communal bonds. The tapestries created at the center are based entirely on the imagination of the weavers, produced without preliminary sketches, drawings, or predetermined concepts. The guiding principle is to weave directly from their inner vision. As a result, the tapestries often contain personal stories, memories, or lived experiences that the weavers thread into the textile surface. In this way, the works become far more than aesthetic objects; they function as textile narrations, carefully woven together and depicting the everyday realities and emotional worlds of the women in Harraneyya.

During my one-month Artist Residency at the Ramses Wissa Wassef Art Center, I had the opportunity to learn vertical-loom weaving from the weavers Basima Mohamed, Taheya Ibrahim and the daughter of the founder, Suzanne Wissa Wassef. Throughout this period, I was introduced to their artistic practices and spent many hours watching and observing them engaged in the steady, slow, and meditative process of weaving. This remarkable experience profoundly shaped my understanding of weaving as a relational and temporal practice. It also informed a new direction within my performance series *Copula*, which will be discussed later in the text, through which the act of weaving as performance was incorporated as an artistic medium and placed into dialogue with Karen Barad’s theory of agential realism.

Weaving as material and embodied practice

Karen Barad's (2007) theory of *agential realism* provides a critical lens for understanding weaving as a materially entangled practice. Weaving involves intra-actions among bodies, tools, threads, and environments; the loom is not merely an instrument but a relational partner that shapes rhythm, gesture, and decision-making. In this sense, weaving constitutes a materially grounded epistemology, revealing knowledge through the act of making itself

Woodward (2020) emphasizes the relational nature of material practices:

“Running through much of the discussion so far is the importance of thinking about relations between things, people, materials and environments in understanding the material world. Thinking about how things relate to other things, to people or how materials relate to each other is important in thinking about how you orientate yourselves to things [...]” (pp. 30–31).

Understanding weaving as an embodied practice requires attention to multisensory engagement, repetitive gestures, and temporality. Weaving is both physical and cognitive. It is a process in which thought unfolds through the body. In contemporary Egypt, which is marked by industrial acceleration and mechanized production, craft-based weaving represents a deliberate practice of slowness, persistence, and resistance, aligning far more closely with the cultural vision of Masr than with that of a Westernized Egypt. The act of weaving is performative: artisans do not merely execute a craft; they embody it. The loom and the maker exist in an entangled, co-constitutive relationship, aligning with Barad's and Woodward's theoretical frameworks. This perspective and my experiences at the Ramses Wissa Wassef Art Center directly inform my artistic practice in *Copula*, a performance series that explores weaving as temporal, relational, and sensory experience, demonstrating how craft can function as both artistic and epistemic intervention.

Weaving as performative and emancipatory practice

I initiated *Copula* in 2021 as part of my master's thesis. The project began as a multisensory installation combining a woven sculpture, sound, and light. Conceptually, it draws on ancient Egyptian notions of temporal duality: *Neheh* (cyclical time) and *Djet* (linear time) as described in the article *Die zwei Gesichter der Zeit: Neheh und Djet* (Assmann, 2010). The familiar triad of past, present, and future was not experienced in a linear frame; instead, time was understood as both cyclical and linear, interweaving recurrent processes with linear progression. *Neheh* (cyclical time) would be understood through the rising and falling of the Nile, the growth and decay of all plants, and the waxing and waning of the moon. *Djet* (linear time) represents continuity and stability, a time in which what has become and been completed remains at rest. This temporal philosophy is explored in *Copula*, where woven sculpture, light, sound, and language converge to performatively reinterpret time, inviting audiences into an immersive, multisensory experience. Over time, *Copula* expanded into a live performance practice. Collaborations with sound artists introduced voice, movement, and spatial sound as integral components, interpreted from multiple artistic perspectives. Temporality is presented through layered experiences, enabling viewers to engage visually, audibly, and cognitively. This performative layer positions weaving as an affective and temporal medium.

The 2025 edition, *Copula* “Interwoven Identities,” produced during an artist residency at Kultur.Konvent.Öhningen at Lake Constance, Germany, explores weaving as both embodied practice and symbolic gesture. Based on my experiences at the Ramses Wissa Wassef Art Center, I explored the act of weaving as performative tool and interpreted weaving as an act of performance. The artwork was therefore created in front of the audience. During the performance, I wove fragments from my family archive (documents and photographs) found in my grandparents' apartment in Mansourah, Egypt, into a textile in real time. During the artist residency, I constructed a vertical loom measuring 2 meters by 1.5 meters, positioned centrally within the room as the focal point of the space. Surrounding the loom, I arranged documents and photographs throughout the environment, creating a landscape of archival fragments. From two windows situated behind the loom, I suspended two textile installations, each 6 meters in length, onto which additional photographs and documents had been printed, extending the visual narrative outward into the room. The 90-minute performance was accompanied by Morton Feldman's *Crippled Symmetry*, a composition structurally informed by the asymmetrical logic of Anatolian carpets. I staged myself in relation to the loom as if participating in a kind of weaving concert. The loom became almost musical in

its presence, functioning simultaneously as an instrument and a collaborator. As the sound unfolded, I wove in rhythm with it, creating the textile live and interlacing fragments of memory and the past into a material articulation that reaches toward a new future, as shown in Figure 1 and 2.



Fig. 1: Copula „Interwoven Identities“ Performance



Fig. 2: Woven textile at the Copula „Interwoven Identities“ Performance

Through this interweaving of sound, memory, movement, and material, the performance enacted weaving as an archival, relational, and temporal process. The gestures, tensions, and durations of weaving became central dramaturgical elements. Within this framework, weaving emerges as both performative and emancipatory, offering new temporalities and narrative capacities while challenging industrialized modes of production. Therefore, the project also emphasizes the potential of weaving as a medium for storytelling and archiving as well as cultural memory.

“Feminism gave me ‘another pair of spectacles’ to put on, in order to both analyze the current (patriarchal) reality and to envision alternative futures” (Milojević, 2024, as cited in Keils, 2024, p.67). This dual optic of critique and imagination is essential for understanding weaving in Egypt as an emancipatory practice.

In contrast to the speed and efficiency valorized in neoliberal and industrial systems, weaving operates through slowness, relationality, and embodied knowledge. It resists the devaluation of tactile skills and the fragmentation of labor characteristic of industrial economies. Through its temporality, weaving proposes alternative value systems

of care, patience, connection, and repetition that counter industrialized norms in Egypt.

In rural Egyptian contexts, weaving enables women to achieve financial independence and exercise agency. At the Ramses Wissa Wassef Center, women produce textiles that offer both cultural continuity and economic empowerment. Women's weaving circles, workshops, and intergenerational teaching create networks of solidarity. The act of weaving becomes an intersubjective dialogue among women, materials, histories, and imagined futures, bridging the cultural duality of Egypt and Masr.

This practice also informs my teaching at the German International University in Cairo. In courses on Conceptual Design and Design Theory, I contextualize weaving as a tool for alternative futures, emphasizing its role in feminist and decolonial frameworks. Through field trips, workshops, and discussions, students explore weaving as a means of cultural preservation, feminist intervention, and socio-economic empowerment, highlighting its potential to contribute to a decolonized vision of Egypt's future.

Conclusion

Weaving in the Egyptian context is a layered, embodied, and political practice. Situated at the intersection of patriarchy, postcoloniality, and industrialization, weaving offers women pathways toward economic autonomy, cultural preservation, and creative agency. Both the Ramses Wissa Wassef Center and the Copula performance series demonstrate weaving's function as resistance and as a method for envisioning alternative futures within the performative act of the artistic labor.

In a world increasingly shaped by digital acceleration and mechanized production, weaving reintroduces slowness and relationality. It links past and present, body and environment, and perhaps even, as the ancient Egyptians already suggested, cyclical and linear processes as expressed in the concepts of *Neheh* and *Djet*. Whether one accepts this understanding of time or not, it becomes especially clear how significant the natural flow of time and the processes of growth and decay truly are, and above all, how the physical act of weaving confronts us with time, demanding slowness, endurance, and persistence. Ultimately, weaving becomes not merely a craft but an emancipatory, performative, and decolonial practice capable of shaping feminist futures in Egypt and beyond.

As Nassiri-Ansari et al. (2024) argue:

"Adopting a decolonial feminist approach demands epistemic pluralism in our praxis. It informs our selection, adaptation, and application of futures methodologies such that the process not only accommodates but requires a diversity of knowledges, not just a diversity of stakeholders. In practical terms, this means building in facilitation prompts that guide us, as a collective group of visioners, through processes of unlearning and relearning, of challenging internalized biases towards "objective" truths, and of embracing more expansive ways of knowing - instinctively, tacitly, and experientially. This does not call for us to discard conventional evidence such as quantitative data, but to critically interrogate their limitations and how we weave them into a bigger picture of lived realities and potential futures." (p.31)

And with this final quote, I would like to emphasize an approach toward envisioning an alternative feminist future: one in which weaving, this ancient craft, is no longer understood merely as decorative labor but is recognized and reinterpreted as a performative and emancipatory tool of feminist existence. This perspective underscores the necessity of protecting and conserving alternative methods of textile production, not only for their historical significance but, more importantly, for their socio-cultural value. Such preservation and its reinterpretation opens new pathways for expressing narratives through artistic labor and affirms weaving as a vital medium for generating embodied knowledge and feminist agency.

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