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**The American University in Cairo**  
**School of Global Affairs and Public Policy**

**Middle Class Imaginaries of Cairo's Waste:  
The Zabaleen's Story Retold**

A Thesis Submitted to  
The Cynthia Nelson Institute for Gender and Women's Studies

by Manar A. Zaki Hussein

In partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of  
Master of Arts (M.A.) in Gender and Women's Studies  
in the Middle East and North Africa  
Specialization in Gendered Political Economies

under the supervision of

**Dr. Martina Rieker**

September 2017

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## **Abstract**

Cairo's informal garbage collectors known as the zabaleen, have been the subject of a plethora of research. Their communities in Cairo have been acknowledged for producing a high rate of garbage recycling. Nevertheless, the relation of the zabaleen with their surrounding spaces has endured much friction. The cumbersome job of collecting and carrying the trash is situated within the spheres of neoliberal policies adopted by the government, the supporting organizations that have praised and endorsed their existence, and most importantly, the middle class households that have been the source of garbage for the zabaleen. Ironically, the zabaleen's job and presence have been met with much support as well as criticism. The zabaleen's reaction to the neoliberal policies has been illustrated in research and the media as a steadfast stance which has helped them survive several challenges and continue with their daily work of collecting the enormous amount of garbage generated in Cairo.

The present study attempts to delineate the zabaleen's existence in Cairo from the viewpoints of the entities that are in contact with the garbage collectors: the government, the nongovernmental organizations and the middle classes of Cairo. The research situates the zabaleen within the neoliberal spatial and temporal trajectory of the urban and through the lens of the middle class.

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## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

#### **I. Overview:**

The neoliberal ethics, which have spread since the late nineties (Harvey, 2012), invaded the social, political and economic spaces and produced the neoliberal city with features of consumerism, privatization and segregated living spaces (ibid.). It is the hegemony of the neoliberal world order that dictates a system that is sometimes incompatible with the lives of people in some parts of the globe; nevertheless, opting out is not an option. The story of Cairo's informal garbage collectors, the zabaleen, is an example of the incompatibility of the neoliberal privatization policies with the garbage collection system in Cairo's middle class neighborhoods. The zabaleen have maintained their informal system for several decades and in the early 2000s when the government called for a privatized garbage collection system, they were totally sidelined. Their rebellious reactions forced their coming back into the scene and reenacting their seminal roles in collecting Cairo's enormous amounts of garbage.

Growing populations, rising incomes and increased urbanization contribute to the increase of waste generation. According to statistics approximately 15,000 tons of waste is generated by Cairenes on a daily basis (Bakry, 2015). The surge in the amounts of garbage on Cairo's streets has been a result of the overpopulated areas. Marking the start of the open door policy and embracing the free market economy migration from the rural to the urban had been an ongoing process during the eighties and nineties. Slums and informal housing spread on the fringes of Cairo, and the government's role in providing public services declined (Winegar, 2011). Moreover, the new economic policies and the liberalization of the economy have introduced an enormous growth of consumer goods, which resulted in greater amounts of trash. The companies



profited when the people's consumption increased. Consequently, waste augmented, and dumpsites became a common scene in many of the lower class suburbs, slums and outskirts of Cairo. According to Harvey (2003), urbanization and capitalism are intertwined; urbanization absorbs excess capital, but at the same time it produces slums.

The continuous urbanization of the city has fed into the production of the increasing amounts of municipal waste, and also the production of spaces that handle and work on these amounts of waste. The zabaleen settlements have managed to grow alongside the modern spaces of the city of Cairo, with its gated communities or upper middle class neighborhoods. The mutual relations arising between these two entities, the zabaleen and the middle classes, revolve around the presence of waste generated by the latter and collected by the former. Household waste is discarded by the middle classes, and collected by the zabaleen because it is their means of livelihood. The research at hand retells the zabaleen's story in relation to the middle classes who discharge their wasted matter and who also support the zabaleen through organizations and philanthropic actions. Both the waste and the organizations help the zabaleen survive.

The research method bears upon analyzing textual documents, journals, secondary sources, research articles and visuals as well as conducting interviews with few of the Cairo upper middle class households on their relation to the zabaleen and garbage collection practices. The study at hand tries to link the waste collectors' life and everyday practices to the waste producers' ideas of cleanliness and modern life within the neoliberal spaces of the capital city. In addition, it provides a lens through which the zabaleen are viewed; that of marginality and invisibility, though their services are indispensable.

The zabaleen community has managed for decades to deal with Cairo's garbage and use it as a resource for their economic benefit. The zabaleen collect the garbage, sort it, and sell some of

the items to be used for the recycling industry. The garbage collected by zabaleen amounts to almost one-third of the total garbage generated by Cairenes every day (Fahmi, 2005). However, these informal efforts go unrecognized by the state (Fahmi & Sutton, 2010). The zabaleen's invisibility has led the local authorities into implementing privatization plans at the end of the nineties, with no consideration of the zabaleen and their livelihoods that depended on the garbage collected (ibid). Though the zabaleen's informal system of garbage reuse and recycling is considered by researchers as efficient, the local government does not offer support to sustain this system; on the contrary, they opt for technologically advanced alternatives with high expenses, which leave the zabaleen at a disadvantage. That said, the story of Cairo's informal garbage collectors provides both the challenges faced by the zabaleen and the support given to them.

The thesis questions how the zabaleen are viewed by the middle class; the households who deal with the zabaleen, the NGOs that support them, and their work supervisors in one of the recycling plants. It also presents the history of the zabaleen depicting their emergence in the urban spaces of the city where waste – their livelihood – is produced.

The objective of the proposed research is to map the middle class relationships with the zabaleen's spaces and settlements within the formed neoliberal identities and ethics of the city (Harvey, 2012).

## **II. Research Problem:**

Our daily and unavoidable experience with waste disposal has shaped our ideas and concepts around waste and waste collectors, and our aspirations for clean and modern spaces. The visibility of garbage on the streets of megacities and the thoughts of cleaning the urban spaces have spurred previous research on waste collection and management (Campos & Hall, 2013;

Colon and Fawcett, 2006; Didero, 2012; Fahmi and Sutton, 2010; Hawkins, 2006; Kuppinger, 2013, Furniss, 2010 in Gomez et al eds.). Cities are the urbanized spaces where consumerist culture and lifestyles are practiced (Harvey, 2012) and where middle class city dwellers aspire and search for cleaner living spaces. The problem arises when the waste collection capacity of a city as large as Cairo falls short of keeping the city clean, sometimes because of top-down neoliberal policies that fail to consider the history and nature of the waste collectors and their informal strategies, and denigrates their presence (Kuppinger, 2013).

Apparently, the middle class households are disposing of their waste and getting rid of their garbage without noticing the possible implications or effects – whether good or bad – of this disposal on the “invisible” zabaleen, who are collecting garbage and working within an informal network and under precarious conditions to make use of part of the garbage while dumping the rest that cannot be reused. Waste generated from a middle class area in Cairo would contain items different than those discarded by lower classes or slums in the same city. The middle class trash bin would contain valuable recyclables used by the zabaleen for income generation, a fact upon which the relationship between the middle classes and the zabaleen is built.

The zabaleen are a marginalized and stigmatized community that has been in service for decades, but the governmental authorities have been unappreciative of their services. The zabaleen’s role in garbage collection and reuse has not been considered in any formal plan for the city’s sustainable development (Fahmi, 2010). Mapping the interrelations between households and zabaleen can be attributed to everyday disposal and collection activities, which attempt to gather the overflowing garbage of an increasing urban population. The zabaleen carry the garbage in their trucks to their settlements, where they sort out recyclable or reusable materials and dump the rest of the garbage. The daily trip has fed the landfills around Cairo with

excessive piles of organic and nonorganic waste, which have detrimental effects on the soil, underground water, cleanliness of the city: incubating flies, rodents, mosquitoes, etc. are but a few examples, not to mention the odors and filth. The environmental consequences are reflected in heightened pollution rates, which affect the city of Cairo's health, heritage and sustainability concerns (Hopkins et al, 2001).

Though the city has undergone massive urbanization, garbage has been a landmark of Cairo's streets for the past decade, only to unleash an utterly deficient system in collecting and disposing of this waste. The garbage dilemma has haunted the residents of Cairo, with no real solution to the problem. This thesis is an endeavor to observe the inherent relationships between middle classes and the zabaleen, and to situate the marginalized zabaleen within the neoliberal urbanized space of Cairo.

### **III. Literature Review:**

Cairo's waste generation pattern bears resemblance to that of megacities in other developing countries, like India, Pakistan, Bhutan, Mexico, Nigeria. The amount of waste is rather huge in these cities due to the expanding urbanization and increasing population. In Mexico City, the estimated amount of trash is 12,000 tons per day (Munoz-Cadena et. al., 2009); the burning of this trash is considered a life hazard, however, public facilities are not in control, or nonexistent, so they cannot stop the daily burning of the dumped garbage. Along the years, the consumption habits of Mexicans have changed leading to an increase in waste generation. The composition of this waste has also changed: with more inorganic than organic waste, and more plastics and aluminum in the trash. Moreover, the collection patterns are similar to those in Cairo: garbage men with cars and bins collect from households for a fee, a truck that collects garbage bags left by residents in fixed places, or residents throw the garbage bags directly in the truck which

collects garbage (ibid.). Rural Mexican areas – Coxcatlan, Puebla – struggle with similar garbage problems which range from garbage burning, dumping in populated areas, littering on streets, and contaminating water by organic and inorganic waste (Hilburn, 2015). The research looks at public cleanliness as a responsibility of the Mexican citizens as well as the municipality; garbage or waste is positioned as a risk or danger factor to the population and the space in which people lived. There is a dire need to reduce the amounts of waste produced; the composition of garbage in these areas is studied to investigate the possibilities of recycling techniques as a means of inorganic waste reduction. The research has referred to females' higher responsibility towards the environment (ibid.); it has also attributed the management of garbage to women.

In Bhutan, waste has increased with augmenting urbanization, leading to littering and piling of garbage (Allison, 2014). It has been the usual problem of failing to manage the waste issues and accommodating the growing needs of the urbanized cities. Allison (2014) highlights the role of enforcing religious beliefs and principles into the waste management process; building on the citizens' faiths and connecting to their environmental ethics. She points to case studies in Malaysia showing that different faiths regard waste recycling as "good religious conduct." (ibid, p.408) It is people's behavior that has affected the means of discarding waste; throwing waste from windows onto the streets, burning garbage, or overlooking the hazards associated with some waste materials, e.g. chemicals in used batteries.

The four largest cities in India: Mumbai, Chennai, Delhi and Kolkata, have undergone massive urbanization and expansion in surface area. Hence, the current environmental status has induced a change in the quality of life with increased deterioration of land, air and water quality (Shaw, 2005). The means of solid waste management SWM in India suffers problems and poses hazards to the people and the environment; it is a "pathetic situation" as described in one of the

reports published by the Indian government (Colon & Fawcett, 2006). The Indian local government has shown significant deficiencies in managing the waste produced, due to the lack of resources and space on one hand, and the ongoing increase in municipal solid waste on the other. Shaw (2005) pointed out that one of the residents of a middle class area in Chennai initiated a civil society organization to deal with the problems of waste disposal in the neighborhood. The organization members were volunteering women who launched campaigns and worked on involving the households in garbage segregation and advising them not to throw garbage on the streets. As claimed by the author (ibid), the efforts of this society were quite successful because support was given by the political governing body of the city. This could provide a working example for middle class neighborhoods in developing countries, provided that political bodies complement voluntary efforts exerted by the middle classes.

In one of the articles (Srinivasan, 2006), the city of Chennai – one of the largest cities in India – shows how private sector contractors were introduced to handle household waste in order to offset the deficiency in public sector services; another example of privatizing a waste collection service in the nineties of the twentieth century. The same article commended the efforts of community based organizations in waste management, highlighting that CBOs were usually initiated and run by the middle classes who had the time and resources to work towards cleaning the streets (ibid). However, the volunteer work of the CBOs is confined to awareness campaigns and would not take on management roles to work with solid waste processes or with waste collectors' problems.

Moreover, there have been initiatives by Indian civic societies and NGOs to handle projects of collecting household waste and cleaning streets, however, Colon and Fawcett (2006) claim that a combination of community involvement, integration and responsibility as well as political

support are important in maintaining long-term momentum to manage waste within communities. Their study aimed to measure the extent to which a community could participate and take responsibility for managing their own generated waste. The research presented two middle class initiatives for managing waste in two Indian cities: Chennai and Hyderabad; highlighting that motivation can spur sound initiatives, yet community integration and political support were requisites for sustaining these projects. The aforementioned points signal the role that middle class plays in initiating movements and launching cleanliness campaigns for the sake of cleaner images of public spaces. Cairo's middle classes, though educated and quite informed, can be reluctant to change their waste disposal habits or show environmental concerns (El Ramly 2000). It is quite difficult to convince people to participate and pay a fee for garbage collection and handling of waste, especially if they are taxpayers and regard waste collection as a municipal responsibility (Colon & Fawcett, 2006).

Wright (2000) asserts that class is not a static set of categories, but a dynamic and multilayered process. However, when identifying class structure a simple set of categories is used, so maybe some grey areas are squished into more defined lines between classes. I am using this reference to define and situate Cairo's middle class, which would range from the upper middle class, to the lower middle class. All those are middle classes varying in levels of education, income, housing, ability to sustain a living. According to Saif (2011), the middle classes carry the banner of change and are considered the society's backbone and hope for development. Despite the middle class's suffering from economic pressures, which may affect their status and ability to aspire for change or induce it (ibid), they are still recognized as catalysts for seeking better services, opportunities and means of living. Accordingly, the middle classes were selected as research informants for the household interviews.

The visibility of garbage on Cairo's streets bears a lot of resemblance to Indian cities' streets; Venkateswaran (1994) asserts that garbage is thrown anywhere on the streets, and even if people throw their garbage in street bins they tend to miss the bin and garbage is scattered all around the bins. We are thus reminded of a scene that is replicated on Cairo's streets and in many of its residential areas. Venkateswaran (1994) and Gill (2007) refer to the marginalized status of garbage workers; the latter asserts that "cultural values attached to waste are deep-rooted, and ... those involved in waste work are discriminated against in most societies, regardless of culture, religion or ethnic affiliation." (Gill 2007, p.1451) Beall (2006) points out that Pakistani garbage collectors and street sweepers come from the Christian or Hindu minorities, claiming that "all over the world waste workers are stigmatized and are likely to be from marginalized groups such as ethnic or religious minorities or rural migrants" (Beall, 2006, p.83); in this research the author draws our attention to the contrast between the garbage people's vulnerability and precariousness as opposed to the rigidly laid waste management plans of policymakers and officials. Beall's article highlights the discourse on waste collection and how its undertones revolved around Pakistan's lack of hygienic means to waste disposal which are aggravated by its climate and landscapes. This article provided underpinnings to the widely spread notions of managing waste via civic societies and community involvement to take responsibility for the waste produced. The author theorizes 'caste' in Pakistani and Indian contexts and how it has been entrenched to further exacerbate social differences in both societies and serve the needs of waste collection. She also delineates the gender roles within social hierarchies in Pakistan explaining that middle-class women are the ones enduring class segregation. Pakistani women, like others, are the ones responsible for handling household waste; differences lie in the class level. Within high-income classes, the majority employ domestic workers, whereas most women in middle-income areas



carry the burden of household cleaning and dealing with garbage. Garbage on streets was mainly managed by street sweepers who are mostly men, and also supervised by men from households.

Another interesting article (de Beer, 2014) draws a comparison between garbage sites and their inhabitants in three cities: Cairo, Manila and Maputo. It gives an estimated number of 70,000 garbage collectors living in seven areas in the Greater Cairo area, where the most populated is Mokattam Hill. A religious perspective is introduced to give the thriving garbage collectors a role which clears their stigmatization and reinstates their mission to clean up the city, that of evangelists. In the three cities, garbage collectors worked in the dumpsites regardless of the odor and the filth, they selected material that could be sold for reuse or recycle. Dumpsites provided a shelter where they worked and resided; they had no other place to go. It is noteworthy that, though marginalized and stigmatized, the zabaleen's recycling and collection activities have been much acknowledged in research as being one of the oldest and most efficient systems of informal waste management in Africa (Nzeadibe, 2013). However, their efforts go unappreciated by both the authorities and city residents. The previously mentioned research clearly indicates that the municipal waste problems are of a universal nature and proliferate through the world's metropolitan cities; they have become a permanent feature of the urbanized spaces.

Illustrating the zabaleen's story and background has been the subject of research in various disciplinary fields: e.g. urban studies, political science, public policy, sociology, development, environmental and health studies, municipal waste management (Didero, 2012; Eisenschenk, 2015; Fahmi, 2010; Gaillard and Cadag, 2009; Iskandar, 2000; Kuppinger, 2013; Milik, 2010; Knopp 2005; El Mahdy 2016). Hence, substantial information on the lives and daily activities of the zabaleen can be used as textual reference in this thesis. Also, the famous Manshiet Nasser settlement has been the subject of several television documentaries which can also provide visual

reference for the zabaleen's life, challenges and accomplishments. Their efforts are exerted towards an aim, be that generating an income, raising their kids, cleaning the city, etc.

A closer look at the zabaleen shows how the familial relations among the zabaleen families, and how they perform their jobs within the social networks of relatives, have helped in maintaining their work for the past decades (El-Hakim, 1977). The skills of performing the tedious job is taught by the parents to the children (Hassanin, 2009), which further entrenches the marginality of the zabaleen community and gives little space for their development. The girls and boys are forced to work in garbage separation, which is an income-generating task, and deprived from attending school (ibid). Additionally, the health of the zabaleen women has been described by Knopp's study (2010 and 2015) and has underscored their religious beliefs as part of their acceptance of their chronic diseases, which resulted from living and working in the zabaleen areas. The aforementioned studies depict the marginalization of the zabaleen and their continuous need for development through research and the work of nongovernmental organizations.

Scholarship on the zabaleen has underscored the support of NGOs in the zabaleen settlements (Myllyla, 2001): fundraising efforts to build recycling plants, establishing schools for the zabaleen's children; building weaving factories for girls and women, teaching girls and women computer skills (Hassanin, 2009). The support granted through the NGOs depicts the positive relationship between the zabaleen and the NGOs, which were initiated as a result of the zabaleen's existence and present an example of the middle class involvement within the spaces of zabaleen.

Privatization of the waste collection processes has been a subject of research on zabaleen (Kuppinger, 2013; Fahmi & Sutton, 2010; Eisenschenk, 2015); highlighting the negative

relationship between the zabaleen and the government or governmental policies. Privatization, an example of the neoliberal policies, has mandated the invisibility of the zabaleen communities and subtly demanded their eradication.

The research thus reviewed has provided underpinnings for the marginalized waste collectors who resemble their counterparts in large metropolitan cities of developing countries, the stigma attached to those who work in waste collection, the constant efforts and needs to develop the status of waste collectors instead of ignoring their presence. The context of waste collection in Cairo lacks the interaction between garbage collectors and the middle classes. Placing the zabaleen at the center, this thesis visualizes the relationships between the zabaleen and other social/political entities: the zabaleen and the authorities; the support the zabaleen have from the NGOs; and the subtle relationships between the middle class households and the zabaleen.

#### **IV. Conceptual Framework:**

Building on the previously cited literature, I attempt to conceptualize the main elements of this research. The concepts examined are the marginalization of the zabaleen community, neoliberal privatization policies and their effect on the zabaleen, and the middle classes' patterns in waste generation and interacting with the zabaleen.

Using textual references, I attempt to present the zabaleen's marginality and how they are illustrated at the lower levels of the city's social classes, though they might have large monetary earnings due to their work in recycling activities. However, their job and working with garbage has dubbed them as *zabaleen* in Arabic, which carries with it connotations that are denigrating enough to attach to the jobholder the filth and dirt associated with the garbage they handle. The job can be tedious, hazardous, and filthy. Though another synonym can be used like "cleanliness worker" or '*amel nazafa*, however, the *zabal* is the common name dubbed to those marginalized

people. Fahmi (2005, p.155) asserts that “the traditional waste collectors of Cairo, have created what is arguably one of the world’s most efficient resource-recovery and waste-recycling systems.” It is quite ironic, however, that the informal system of garbage collection and recycling has been acknowledged in several pieces of research as being an efficient system, while the zabaleen’s status is that of a marginal minority who are stigmatized (Fahmi, 2005; Fahmi & Sutton, 2006; Fahmi & Sutton, 2010; Nzeadibe, 2013). Marginalization is thus an imminent concept within this framework. The zabaleen are marginalized and hence stigmatized; their job is one that nobody would have on their wish list, a job they had inherited or found nothing better to do. Nevertheless, their job is indispensable, I contend.

In addition, privatization as a form of the neoliberal dictated policies, was declared in the early 2000s by the government, who has contracted multinational companies for the service of garbage collection from Cairo’s overcrowded streets; overflowing with people and garbage (Milik, 2010; Eisenscheck, 2015). The government wanted the zabaleen and the garbage wiped out and conjured up images of an urbanized clean city that could reinforce its status as a touristic attraction; an initiative that serves the capital accumulation and contributes to the sustenance of capitalist features. Privatization had its dire and negative effects on the zabaleen community and deprived them of their livelihood: the garbage.

Focusing on the middle classes, they are characterized by having the monetary and purchasing power, thus consuming goods and products of different types, and producing waste of different types as well. They also demand committed governance and better public services in return for the taxes they pay (African Development Bank Market Brief, 2011). The middle class is not only defined by income level, but by other aspects as well, such as education, ambitions and modern lifestyle. They possess the skills needed for managing nongovernmental

organizations, which are regarded as vehicles for development. Middle classes mostly reside in and around urban centers, demanding constant development and better standards of public services (ibid). These features situate the middle class as consumers with varied consumption patterns of relatively expensive goods, which produce the type of waste much demanded by the garbage collectors, e.g. plastic water bottles, soda cans, shampoo bottles, cardboard boxes, etc. Consumption patterns can give a clear mapping of the social hierarchies in a city like Cairo and how waste and waste collectors are imagined within the urban Egyptian middle class mindset. The patterns can be indicative of places where waste is collected regularly and cleaned efficiently, not only because of the social space privilege it has, but also because the waste generated is considered a treasure for the zabaleen.

From the above, the zabaleen are main actors who are situated among the middle class stakeholders: the middle class households, the NGOs and the workshop owners in the zabaleen settlements.

## **V. Methodology:**

To fulfill the objective of this research, I conducted semi-structured interviews with selected middle class households in Cairo using convenience sampling technique. I also visited the largest zabaleen site in Mokattam, the Manshiet Nasser settlement, and spoke with one of the board members in the Game'ya, also a middle class gentleman, who provided essential information on how work is carried out in the settlement.

The convenience sampling allowed for establishing rapport with members of the households to be interviewed, in order to allow for an easy flow of information. People would disperse information for those who are trustworthy; bearing in mind that there is a kind of shame attached to waste disposal (Hawkins, 2006). Anonymity is guaranteed in all cases.

Based on the proposed conceptual framework, my research was supplemented reviewing various research articles on the zabaleen informal garbage collectors, waste management in Cairo and other megacities in developing countries, middle class households and waste, urban studies, environmental issues, NGOs working with the zabaleen. The research relied on analyzing textual references from secondary sources such as published journal articles, conference proceedings, master's and doctoral dissertations, newspaper articles, videos; and primary sources of relevant book chapters on the mentioned topics.

This research shows the vulnerability of the zabaleen towards the neoliberal policies as well as their resilience in encountering the challenges of these policies. It also highlights how the zabaleen are depicted in research as possessing a significant role (Bakry, 2015), and how the middle class households interact with the zabaleen; multiple reactions have been cited. Some households were sympathetic, while others non-appreciative. Several complaints were pointed out and acknowledgement was nil. I argue that this and previous research is a means of voicing the zabaleen's current situation and challenges. The thesis introduces the middle class households' viewpoints which could provide a platform to readily reflect on the desired image of the city and of the zabaleen.

## **VI. Chapter Outline:**

The first chapter provides an overview of the zabaleen situated within the following concepts: their challenges, the support they receive from NGOs and acknowledgement from research, and the subtle relation with the middle class households. The chapter frames the zabaleen at the center and paves the way to the second chapter, which focuses on the history of the zabaleen and their strife along the past years. The research done on the zabaleen provides the main background for the chapter which examines the zabaleen's stance and dissects their

marginal status, despite being acknowledged by researchers as one of the most efficient yet informal garbage collection systems. The third chapter unfolds the support and recognition provided to the zabaleen through the NGOs, art, and philanthropy. The zabaleen's spaces have created nuances that have ranged from stigma and stench to philanthropy and art. The fourth chapter presents the interviews with the middle classes; the households and the supervisor in Manshiet Nasser, providing another layer of relation to the zabaleen. Finally, the fifth and last chapter summarizes the research on Cairo's informal garbage collectors and reflects on their relationships with the urban spaces and the middle classes. Additionally, it recommends ideas for further research about bottom-up approaches to investigate into the zabaleen's life and see what works for them. For instance, Bakry (2015) mentioned the new proposed policy of integrating the zabaleen into a formalized garbage collection framework; however, he asserted that "it is equally important to investigate the informal waste worker's perspective" and questioned if the zabaleen are "even aware of a new policy that specifically addresses them? Do they welcome the idea? If so, what incentives do they need for them to formalize voluntarily?" (p. 10)

## Chapter II

### The Zabaleen of Cairo: Their Life and Strife

#### I. Background

The zabaleen communities in Cairo have been exerting effort and time in all the processes following the production of waste at the household level. Are the zabaleen doing this work for the sake of the environment and to rid the Cairo spaces from the ugly waste? Actually, they are performing the different garbage-related tasks in pursuit of an income. In the world of waste collection, the zabaleen are not alone. As Berthier (2003) puts it, the people working in the garbage are similarly doing the same job in various countries: the packs and teugs of Dakar; the wahis and zabaleen of Cairo; the gallinazos of Colombia; the chamberos of Ecuador; the buzos of Costa Rica; the cirujas of Argentina; the catadores of Brazil; the pepenadores of Mexico. Berthier's (ibid.) simple equation explains that waste or garbage, plus labor, result in merchandize to be sold for an income, which makes the garbage business such a lucrative source of money.

The second chapter talks about the zabaleen, Cairo's famous garbage collectors; it delves into the zabaleen both as a group of workers and as a system of managing waste which has been significant for lasting more than one hundred years and also for being a private family-run business that is rather detached from the city's formal veins of garbage collection (Iskandar 2000; Berthier 2003). The zabaleen have been reusing and recycling around eighty percent of the collected garbage. It is quite notable that "[t]his socially excluded group has learned – and has taught us – to radically alter our perceptions of garbage and perceive it as a tremendous resource." (Iskandar, 2000; p. 24). The chapter outlines the emergence of the zabaleen, their



historical background, and how they have settled in Cairo and preserved the job of their predecessors. It also looks into the privatization and neoliberal policies that have struck the livelihoods of the zabaleen community at the start of the new millennium, in 2000-2004 (Eisenschenk, 2015); elaborating on the effects of these policies on the zabaleen and the status of cleanliness in Cairo. The chapter also shows the negative relations the authorities had with the zabaleen, which were mainly due to their invisibility and their exclusion as unclean and unhygienic individuals who have no voices and have to abide by the dictated governmental decisions.

The January 2011 revolution is another benchmark that cannot be overlooked; the uprising had roots in the growing oppression towards the underprivileged and the zabaleen's voices were one of the subaltern voices to be united with those of the angry activists. The revolt of the January 2011 masses was because of the growing disparities amongst the upper classes and the marginalized (ibid.) and part of it was due to the government's fiasco in managing municipal waste and their harsh decisions towards the zabaleen. As pinpointed in Eisenschenk's words (ibid., p. 2): "This revolution gave a voice to not only the frustrated youth in Egypt but also a marginalized group known as the Zabaleen, who had suffered at the hands of neoliberal politics imposed upon them by the urban and national authorities. This revolution united the outspoken youth voices with the often-ignored voices of the Zabaleen to stand up to those who had oppressed them for too long." Hence, the chapter sheds light on the concept of marginalization, and its interrelation with the zabaleen's case and how their precarious job has led to their marginalization. The zabaleen "are marginalized geographically because they live in hazardous places, socially because they are members of minority groups, economically because

they are poor, and marginalized politically because their voices are disregarded by those with political power.” (Gaillard and Cadag, 2009; p. 197)

The chapter starts with a historical background of the zabaleen’s story, how they started in Cairo, and their whereabouts; their division of labor which is part of their identity as garbage people. Their work is underscored in terms of collection, segregation and separation of the nonorganic items in the collected waste, and recycling the waste to generate income. The organic waste, on the other hand, is fed to the animals they raise to sell the meat also for revenue. Despite their appraised economic model of reusing/recycling the organic and nonorganic waste, they have encountered several challenges from the governmental authorities and tolerated economic hardships. The last part of the chapter highlights the zabaleen’s marginalization in spite of their renowned reference in the literature of solid waste management as an efficient informal means of waste recycle and/or reuse (Fahmi & Sutton, 2010). The chapter culminates with the visit to Manshiet Nasser and the setting of the zabaleen premises is visualized to finally present an interpretation of the zabaleen’s work within the capitalist framework.

Textual and visual references are used to demarcate the zabaleen’s communities, and their life. Though seemingly tough and unbearable from the outward appearance, their secluded settlements give them a sense of freedom to live by their own rules within their own ethnic spaces which produces a feeling of belonging. For instance, a teacher residing in the Manshiet Nasser settlement, Ezzat Naiem, stated that the zabaleen have their own rules when it comes to conflict resolution. “Here we respect the old people. Once there is a problem, the old people have a roundtable,” he added. “Never go to the police station, never invite the police. We don’t like them by the way because they make problems bigger.”<sup>1</sup>

## II. History of the zabaleen: Their emergence

### 1. *The early years*

The historical overview traces back the collection of waste ever since the start of the twentieth century, when the Upper Egyptians tried to search for better opportunities in the capital city Cairo, which grew in size and population only to need more services for waste collection. Collecting the waste has been the job of the zabaleen, who have been marginalized because of their profession; however, they have been apt enough to overcome the challenges encountered along the years. The history of the zabaleen is documented into the literature (Fahmi and Sutton, 2010; Kuppinger, 2013; Milik, 2010) and most of the newspaper articles that refer to their activities, their daily challenges and their crises with the government's decisions made along the years.

The garbage collectors trace back to the beginnings of the twentieth century, more than a hundred years ago, when the *wahiya* people migrated from Dakhla Oasis to stay in Cairo's center and collected garbage from the residents for a monthly fee. The *wahiya* paid monthly fees to the buildings' owners in order to collect the garbage from the residents for a fee collected from households. The collected paper and garbage were used back then as fuel for the traditional cooking of fava beans in large public stoves and also to heat the public baths around Cairo. In the thirties of the twentieth century, the zabaleen joined the *wahiya* after relocating from Upper Egypt's Assiut governorate, a town called El Badary. Living in the western and northern outskirts of Cairo, the zabaleen started collecting the metal and plastics from the trash since the fifties, and used the organic waste to feed the pigs they raised (Fahmi, 2005); they were mostly Christians "as Muslims avoid breeding pigs due to religious beliefs and to negative perceptions of the cleanliness of pigs." (Milik, 2010; p. 38)

## ***2. Labor division in the zabaleen communities***

The zabaleen have been working in close knit families and community settings and have maintained their sense of belonging to their origins (El-Hakim, 1977). The collection of garbage is done by male members of the family and then the collected waste is dumped onto their living spaces to be separated by the women in the family. They also work at the composting plants. Some of the zabaleen may own workshops and trade the recyclable material, while others work for a daily wage.

The men and boys collect the garbage, carry the heavy garbage bags and dump them into the ground floors of their houses to be sorted afterwards. It is hence the job of female family members to sort out the recyclables and to use organic waste to feed the pigs, goats or poultry raised for economic benefits. Raising pigs is one of the most important economic activities for the zabaleen community, since the pigs' meat is sold to touristic places or hotels that serve pork. Thus, the income provided through selling pork constitutes a major part of their financial resources. The paper, carton, plastic, metal, glass and/or cloth are sold as raw materials to intermediaries who in turn sell them to factories. The workshops of Mokattam settlement hire the zabaleen to work in the processes of crushing the plastic using huge machine crushers; they may also work in workshops that cut up the rags into threads. Both crushed plastic and threads are used as raw material in the industry. Composting plants as well use the zabaleen's labor in the formation of compost from the manure of the animals bred at the zabaleen's living quarters. I would argue here that women's work inside the house is comprised of several duties: raising the kids and doing the household chores, collecting the animal manure from the *zeriba* or barn, sorting the garbage into reusable and non-reusable items. Also, some girls and women might work in the weaving shops that spread among some of the zabaleen sites.

### ***3. The zabaleen settlements***

Estimated to be more than 100,000 collectors, the zabaleen provide seminal services to the Cairene community: collecting, transporting, recycling and reusing the waste (Degreif et. al., 2014; Milik, 2010). They collect 15,000 tons of garbage daily, and recycle 80% of this waste (Bakry, 2015). To perform this job, the zabaleen have established connections with the agents and traders of the recyclables. They have also built strong family relationships, upon which their profession is primarily based. Men and boys of the family collect the garbage; then the girls and women are involved in the sorting activities to separate organic waste from nonorganic trash. The areas where the zabaleen live are mostly around the outskirts of Cairo, in communities separated from the rest of the population, which entrench their segregation and allows them the liberty to live by their own rules.

#### **Mokattam or Manshiet Nasser:**

This is the largest and most populous settlement, with an estimated 80,000 living in informal houses at the foothill of the Mokattam. The area has received funding since 1980 from Oxfam, Ford Foundation Catholic Relief Services and the Coptic Church. Waste dealers and recyclers run a large number of workshops in Manshiet Nasser, which receives at least 3,000 tons of garbage per day from nearby households in Mokattam, downtown and Nasr City. The Association for Protection of the Environment APE has its main headquarters in Manshiet Nasser, and has worked on developing the area and providing services and schools for the inhabitants.

#### **Ezbet El Nakhl Settlement:**

It is near Shoubra El Khema, and collects waste from the east of Cairo (Heliopolis, Zeitoun and Saray el Kobba, Mataria, Shoubra). There are around 6,000 inhabitants in the settlement. Around

2,000 tons per day are collected by the Ezbet El Nakhl collectors. The area has dealers and recyclers who work in the garbage business.

**Kattamia Settlement:**

It is the smallest area which has about 5,000 inhabitants who have moved from Tora. There are workshops and recycling activities but on a smaller scale, and there is a branch of the APE.

**AlMoatamadia Settlement:**

It is located in Ard Al Lewa, Giza, has around 30,000 inhabitants; it serves Mohandessin and Giza, and receives around 500 tons of waste per day. It is an agricultural area, undeveloped in terms of electric supply, so there are no recycling activities.

**Al Baragil Settlement:**

Located near AlMoatamadia and joined to it by a road, Al Baragil shares same living conditions.

The area has 500 inhabitants and receives around 30 tons of waste per day. They serve the areas of Zamalek, Dokki, Agouza, Imbaba and parts of Mohandessin

The Maadi residents complained from the proximity of the collection activities in Tora and the stench of such activities. So the settlements of Batn ElBakara (close to Tora) and Helwan (at the end of Helwan district) were evicted and the zabaleen have either relocated or sought another job.

The previous account of the zabaleen's settlements and places on Cairo's map gives an idea about the zabaleen routes treaded around Cairo to perform their tedious everyday collection tasks. Moreover, it allows us to visualize their informal locations and adds to our memory of Cairo's spatial imaginaries which encompass the zabaleen spaces, with all their seemingly unclean borders on one side and those of the affluent neighborhoods on the other side. The latter

spaces are cleaned and garnered because of the daily exerted efforts of the inhabitants of the former informal spaces.

### **III. Challenges of the past thirty years**

This section documents the challenges encountered by the zabaleen during the past three decades: switching to automated vehicles instead of the cheaper donkey carts; the privatization mandated by the government; and the swine flu dilemma.

#### ***1. Moving on vehicles***

The late eighties and early nineties exposed the zabaleen to several economic and financial challenges; in 1989 they contracted the *wahiya* for household garbage collection through the use of automated machines (ibid.). In the past, they drove carts pulled by donkeys, but in 1990, the government decided to prohibit the unpleasant sight of the donkey-pulled carts from Cairo's streets and to relieve the heavy Cairo traffic of their unwanted presence. Accordingly, the zabaleen shifted to using trucks by purchasing the automobiles out of their own savings with no help from the authorities. The zabaleen had to buy trucks to transport the garbage. To do so, the zabaleen had to sell their pieces of owned land in their hometowns or borrow money as personal loans. Afterwards in the early 2000s the privatization plans were declared by the government, who has contracted multinational companies for the service of garbage collection from Cairo's overcrowded streets; overflowing with people and garbage. The zabaleen were thus deprived of their sole means of livelihood: the garbage. The situation was exacerbated further by moving the zabaleen from their locations to places away from Cairo's center, which made life even more difficult for the zabaleen. This was not the first relocation. In the thirties, the zabaleen had lived in Shoubra, which was located at the outskirts of Cairo (El-

Hakim 1977); then, in 1954 part of the garbage people were moved to Imbaba and eventually to the Baragil in the early seventies (ibid). Eventually, they settled in five areas around Cairo, mentioned in the following section.

## ***2. Privatization***

Complexities lay around with the privatization of the waste collection services in 2000 and the introduction of the foreign garbage collection companies. The augmenting trash spaces was not the only reason that resulted in the governmental decision aiming at using private companies to clean up the city's dirty streets. The privatization process had its deeper roots as a direct reflection and implementation of the policies of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) dictated in the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP). Certainly, the dictated policies and mandatory "recommendations" for Egypt to follow the globalization trends and import western standards did not fit a frail economy. This was an action to replace the informal zabaleen with a more formal private system that was working well in the West. The government proposed a cleaner more updated system that could rid Cairo of its overflowing waste. According to Milik (2010, p. 8) "the government changed its approach in the field of SWM [solid waste management] to play the role of the organizer who provides the appropriate environment for economic activities, in addition to its main role in formulating policies." However, the attempt to replace the zabaleen's informal garbage collection services resulted in more garbage on Cairo's streets (Winegar, 2011) due to the failure of the private companies who had to deal with the bureaucracy and inefficiencies of the government as well as the uneven and narrow alleys of Cairo.



The companies collected trash from the bins located on the city's streets, but dumped them near inhabited areas around Cairo. Unfenced and unwatched areas, where old buildings have been dismantled, were used as dumpsites. Cairenes were unhappy with the burden of having to take the trash out to the bin on the street, unsatisfied with the service provided by the private companies, and frustrated with the added garbage fees to their electricity bills (ibid). They also complained because of the limited numbers of public garbage bins that could not carry the amounts of trash generated in their homes; trash bags were left on the streets for the stray cats and dogs to squish and squash them; thus producing a very unfavorable sight.

In 2002, when the foreign garbage collection companies began their work in Cairo, the zabaleen consequently lost a large portion of their daily work which had a dire effect on them. The zabaleen had to adapt to the new conditions; they moved to Kattameya and started working for the foreign companies, which recycled only 20% of the garbage as opposed to 80% recycled by the zabaleen (Fahmi & Sutton, 2010). Moreover, the companies cannot serve Cairo's narrow streets and alleys, and residents are supposed to dispose of their garbage in large bins located in a central area. The zabaleen, however, provided door-to-door services for the dwellers of large and small streets alike. The new privatized waste collection system forced the zabaleen to subcontract for the foreign companies to ensure their access to the garbage, though with a much lesser income. They had to work with the foreign companies so as not to lose their access to garbage. On the other hand, the companies had to use the services of the zabaleen to ensure that garbage is collected. The zabaleen were indispensable for the companies, and trash has always been the zabaleen's indispensable source of income. This interrelationship has created its own complex web of problems and the result was apparent in the worsening of the garbage problem. Garbage piled up on the streets because the companies were not able to deal with the randomness

and irregularity of the system, the narrow streets, and the people, who have been dealing effortlessly with the informal zabaleen for more than a hundred years, and were unaccustomed to throwing their garbage in the bins. The government was trying to formalize the garbage collection system, thus the zabaleen were overlooked and officially excluded from the system, and they could no longer pursue the job of collecting the waste, which remained uncollected. The reason was, ElMahdy (2016) asserts that the government could not locate enough licensed wahiya or zabaleen to be accountable for garbage collection in the greater Cairo area. Besides, the government was aiming for a high-tech modern means of garbage collection; a magic wand that would wipe the city clean. In pursuit of the image of an urbanized clean modern city, the government attempted to regulate an informal privately-run domain – the garbage collection system – to please the public and acquire political gains, I contend

After eight years, in 2010, the new privatized garbage collection system has been proven to have failed, as declared by the Minister of Environmental Affairs in a report issued by the ministry (Milik, 2010). The densely populated city has increased its generation of garbage which was not accommodated for due to the deficient systems of collection, transportation and recycling (ibid.). The private companies' collection of waste did not cover all areas in Cairo (range of coverage was 35-95% of the urban areas); also, the efficiency of collecting the garbage ranged from 15-65% (ibid.), which explains the sight of overflowing garbage on Cairo's streets. Dumping increased and garbage was burnt in dumpsites, thus increasing air pollution levels.

Privatization and foreign companies were thought to be the magic wand that would relieve the city from the heaps of accumulating garbage and rid the city from the zabaleen and their backward sight on the streets. However, this cannot be attained because the companies failed to pursue the garbage collection, and eventually had to use the zabaleen's effort for a fee lesser than

what they had earned before, which pushed them further into marginality. However, their access to garbage was more important than their paid wage; garbage was their main source of income.

In his research article, El-Hakim (1977) had predicted the aforementioned problems due to inducing technology into the labor intensive work of the zabaleen. He cautioned that importing western technology would “disrupt an entire social system and arrest the great number of workshops and industries that have become dependent on the recycling of refuse. Widespread unemployment would result. Furthermore, the public sector would have to manage the phenomenal task of domestic waste collection — a task that would prove too difficult and expensive to carry out reliably and efficiently.” (ibid; p. 122)

Notably, the idea of implementing a system for waste management in Cairo was not materialized due to overlooking the existence of the zabaleen, who are poor and stigmatized. The government underestimated their value, and fell into the trap of the foreign private ventures, without calculating the consequences of the decisions made. ElMahdy (2016) claims that after the contracts with the multinationals expire, the government will be ready to work with the zabaleen who own garbage collection companies; the coming days would unfold the reality of this claim.

### ***3. Swine flu***

There was still more to come for the zabaleen, who represent a part of society that keeps receiving blows simply because they are marginalized. The zabaleen’s marginality reached its peak in 2009, when the government ordered slaughtering of their pigs. The H1N1 virus had its toll on the profession of the zabaleen; the government mandated that pigs be slaughtered in response to the virus. In June 2009, around 300,000 pigs were killed, affecting the livelihood of 70,000 families of the zabaleen community who raised pigs for economic reasons. Their

immediate silent reaction was that they abstained from collecting the organic waste from the streets; there were no pigs to feed on leftover food waste. The organic waste was left uncollected on Cairo's streets, which added to the disastrous garbage situation. The pigs fed on the organic waste collected from the households: the fruit and vegetable peels and the food leftovers. These animals were a source of income, as the zabaleen sold them to hotels and restaurants that served pork for tourists. The pigs also provided food for the children of the zabaleen community.

The reason of culling the pigs because of the swine flu was unsupported scientifically, so the government suggested another reason: cleaning up the dirty living quarters of the zabaleen (Fahmi & Sutton, 2010). The Garbage City in Mokattam was cleared off the pigs, which paved the way to relocate the zabaleen to another place. Relocating was the zabaleen's destiny owing to their marginal status and deprivation from their right to the city.

In an interview that Milik (2010) conducted with one of the garbage collectors, which she considered as the principal stakeholders of the solid waste management process in the Greater Cairo area, the zabal explained how the zabaleen's income and work has been affected by the foreign companies and the slaughtering of pigs. The zabal said that he used to serve 5000 apartments, and collect two pounds from each apartment per month; he had to pay Cairo's cleaning and beautification authority CCBA 15% of the collected money based on a contract between them. Moreover, the zabal has the garbage to sort the recyclables and sell them. Then, working for the foreign company, this zabal was allowed only 1000 apartments to collect their garbage; he did not collect money from the apartments and had to pay 600 pounds to the company in return for the garbage and recyclables. After pig slaughtering, the company did not request the zabaleen to pay money to encourage them to collect the garbage, which was left on the streets, when most of them quit after losing their pigs. The doormen were also involved in

collecting the recyclable plastic and cans, which they sold for an amount of money. This affected the zabaleen and decreased the amount of recyclables they found in the collected garbage. It seemed that garbage has become a source of cash and a reason for some classes to contest upon.

The composition of waste is mostly organic around 56% and 30% is paper, plastic, glass and metal. So when the government ordered the slaughtering of the zabaleen's pigs in 2009, after the swine flu pandemic, more waste rotted on the streets because the collectors abstained from collecting the organic waste after losing their pigs. The waste produced thus surmounted the collection efforts and the scene of overflowing garbage on the streets has been quite common regardless of the socioeconomic standard of the residential areas. However, the affluent and high-income areas enjoyed relatively better cleanliness services than those of the lower classes.

#### ***4. Relocation***

Threats of eviction were also looming; the zabaleen's housing is regarded as illegal and with no documented support put them in a perilous situation. The reason given by the government was beautifying Cairo and getting rid of the slums and garbage area. In addition, the government's justification was to preserve old Cairo, its monuments and old streets. However, Sutton and Fahmi (2006) suggest an intention for the government involved in relocating the zabaleen in the early nineties. A stance for the government that is rather unexplained and ambiguous; instead of supporting an internationally acknowledged garbage recycling system, the government would want to abolish it, dismantle the socioeconomic structure and look for material short-term gains. Thus overlooking the larger societal benefits for which governments strive to bondage. Money talks have manipulated the fates of the zabaleen families, who have fallen victim to political decisions, because they are poor, marginalized and stigmatized (Fahmi & Sutton, 2010).

#### **IV. The January 25<sup>th</sup> Uprising**

The previously mentioned challenges culminated as one of the reasons for the January 2011 social movement. The zabaleen cannot be detached from the sociopolitical changes taking place in Cairo and Egypt at large (Kandil, 2012). They have tolerated much economic deterioration in their living conditions, as highlighted earlier. Likewise, the Cairo middle classes have endured much denial of their rights to the city among other rights; their suburbs were not as clean as those of the elite's. Anger built up towards the Mubarak regime, and waste on the streets was one of the reasons for the revolt against him and his incapable government. The garbage problem was but one of the visible outcomes of the application of neoliberal policies during the Mubarak era, which has fired back against the political system and was one of the reasons of its collapse in January 2011 (Eisenscheck, 2015).

In Mubarak's era, the performance of the waste collection companies was vastly criticized and protested against by the youth who saw the garbage as a live proof of a failing government (ibid). As Winegar (2011; p. 34) states in her account of youth cleaning Tahrir square after the revolution: "As Egyptians cleaned, they were also reclaiming their public space from decades of neglect by the Mubarak regime." During the post January 25<sup>th</sup> revolution period of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), garbage was politicized as an issue that needed immediate action and sound relief from the governmental actors as the promise of a 'clean homeland' was campaigned via the political heads of state, rather than the citizens (Hussein, 2014). Again zabaleen were overlooked and help was sought from Turkish companies to clean the homeland. The zabaleen's representative warned the MB government of suing them to court for depriving the zabaleen of their means of livelihood: the garbage (ibid). The newly formed government post June 30, 2013 has adopted a supportive role towards the zabaleen, especially that Laila Iskandar was appointed

the minister of Environmental Affairs. Iskandar has been working with the zabaleen and defending their rights since the eighties. With the current regime accepted by the zabaleen community, who feared the previous exclusionary politics of the MB towards the Copts in general, they are expected to take on a role in the modernization plans of the government. Though waste is regarded by the government as a public opinion issue (ElMahdy, 2016), the military are expected to invest in waste management projects since they have been involved in economic development projects (Hussein, 2014). Apparently, one can locate an absence of a citizen-oriented initiative to clean or take care of the environment. Garbage is largely politicized; it is viewed as the responsibility of the government not the citizens.

#### **V. Renowned or marginalized?**

The zabaleen have been doing their work over the years, collecting the garbage, sorting and segregating the items of the garbage and using the organic waste and food remains in feeding the animals they raise, while selecting the plastic, paper, glass and metal to be sold to recycling plants. Being the most regular system of garbage collection, as claimed by Laila Iskandar (2000), the zabaleen have been relentless in coming up with creative solutions to the challenges they face from the authorities. Nevertheless, the Cairenes have an embedded image of the zabaleen as dirty people (Iskandar, 2000). The educated upper and middle classes of Cairo refrain from the unclean appearance of the traditional garbage collectors, and reject their presence in the outskirts of Cairo, wishing the zabaleen could proceed with their job of ridding the streets of the garbage while being invisible. The irony is apparent in the treatment, or rather the ill-treatment, of the government towards the zabaleen; while research has recognized the zabaleen as one of the most efficient, though informal, recycling systems in the developing world, the government has made detrimental decisions towards them. Sutton and Fahmi (2006) argue that the Rio 1992 Summit

has acknowledged the zabaleen's waste collection and recycling approaches. Despite the support received by the external entities as well the acknowledgment of the zabaleen's recycling rates, the research at hand underscores the status of the zabaleen, marginalized and stigmatized because of the job they perform. Their job is to collect the garbage and relieve the streets of the dirt, messy sights and unpleasant odors. Though the intention and the action taken may be benevolent, the reaction reciprocated by the society is one that carries marginalization explicitly and implicitly. In her research on the zabaleen, Eisenschek (2015) has stated that perpetual stigmatizing of those marginalized can eventually render them invisible enough for "those in top positions in society and government to ignore or even exclude these populations when policies are made." (Eisenschek, 2015; p. 18)

Pushed to the periphery of the social and urban space, the zabaleen are isolated in a way that they have their own customs and habits (Berthier, 2013), not quite familiar to the rest of the population. They are "economically exploited, politically repressed, socially stigmatized and culturally excluded." (Bayat, 2012; p. 18) Their marginality stems from their type of work which intersects with their religious background as Coptic Christians, their informal living spaces and unrecognized positions. The words of Bayat (2012, p. 19) stating that "subaltern groups had been excluded from the provisions of normal life chances by the very capitalist system in which they were operating" definitively describe the zabaleen, who are marginalized by the system that uses their labor in supplying the recycling plants with the raw materials which they sort, to spin the wheel of capital industries.

The name dubbed to the garbage collector *zabal* is one that carries filth and disgust; a language construct that demonstrates the social and cultural connotations of the language. Though the written discourse, represented in the research on the zabaleen, has been positive, the



verbal discourse on the zabaleen has mirrored the society's maltreatment and stigmatized image. The gap between written and oral discourse cannot be overlooked; there is a lack of trust on part of the households that needs to be bridged, which is not an easy task. Working with trash may well be rewarding in monetary terms; however, abjection is apparent in the society's denigration of this job.

In terms of abjection, the zabaleen fall under abject groups who are marginalized and outcast because of their dirty and smelly appearance and dwelling places (Arefin, 2017). Abjection in this context refers to the zabaleen's unacknowledged status although they are removing a large amount of Cairo's dirt. It also explains their silent voices when their pigs were killed and thrown away.

I would argue here that further compounding their marginality is the zabaleen's shaggy attire and the smelly odors of their living spaces; Henshaw (2014) has viewed the informal garbage collectors of Cairo from a different angle, that of smell within their urban space. The smell is part and parcel of the garbage which is their livelihood and means of making money; thus it cannot be avoided or alleviated.

The attire and smell would be only trivial when it comes to issues touching upon the zabaleen women's health status. In an ethnographical study by Knopp (2010, 2015), she exposed the women's marginalized health status resulting from their work and being in the zabaleen community. She asserts that women's low educational levels add up to their disadvantaged healthcare status. According to Knopp's observation of the Mokattam zabaleen settlement, the odors emerging from the place deter any interaction between people inside and those outside the community (ibid). Moreover, there other intersecting issues that multiply the zabaleen women's marginality: their gender, poverty, illiteracy, ethnicity, and culture (ibid). The activity of

segregating the garbage into its components exposes the women to risks of getting wounded from broken glass or needles, and respiratory illnesses due to the emerging gases from the garbage fermentation. The research highlighted women's layered subjectivity due to their gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic and educational levels, and ultimately their being part of the zabaleen community. The zabaleen women with chronic diseases, e.g. Hepatitis C virus, were rendered even more marginalized.

#### **VI. Visit to Manshiet Nasser:**

To understand the relation between the zabaleen and the garbage collected, I visited Manshiet Nasser at the foot of Mokattam Hill, one of the largest zabaleen settlements. This was an opportunity to see how garbage is a source of livelihood and to learn about the needed labor and capital to make money out of garbage. It was also a chance to see the zabaleen through the eyes of a middle class entrepreneur who tells his experience with zabaleen and the recycling process.

#### ***Interview with a Middle Class Entrepreneur***

I was introduced to the secretary of the Game'ya, a ninety-year-old middle class gentleman who manages and owns a recycling plant, and has been working there since 1980. He started his talk by saying that complete truth cannot be reached and that each one can tell the same story from their own viewpoint. I listened closely to his narrative about how he got to work with the zabaleen; he felt his mission was heaven-sent and that he was there for a purpose. He thrives to complete the daily tasks with those who work at his plant and is always there for the zabaleen. His stories are innumerable as well as his connections which he uses for the benefit of the livelihood of the people at Manshiet Nasser rather than for his own glory in the media.

The *ma'lab* or the dump area is rather hilly, situated at the bottom of the Mokattam hill and the roads are full of the garbage trucks of all sizes, loaded with the packs of Cairo's solid waste.

The garbage is brought to the area to be sorted and grouped into plastic, glass, paper, cardboard, tin, metal, and aluminum foil, to be recycled or sold as raw materials to factories to be reused.

The work is around the clock, 24 hours per day; seven days a week. Operating the mega machines used for crushing the plastic has to go on, only to stop during holidays. Starting up the machines uses a lot of energy which makes it feasible only with long hours of operation. The noise from the machines and the stench from the area have annoyed several officials who live near the Mokattam, according to my interviewee. The people in the area have gotten used to both, the noise and the smell. But government officials are still threatening to evict the zabaleen of Manshiet Nasser, where almost 20% of Cairo's garbage is left to be handled by the sorters. Eviction would pose an environmental hazard to Cairo, as cautioned by my speaker.

Manshiet Nasser's dump area receives three thousand tons of garbage every day, out of the thirteen to fifteen thousand tons produced daily in the Cairo region. The garbage is sorted and arranged according to its material, which uses a considerable amount of labor. For an economically feasible collection and sorting of household waste, the location of the dumpsite has to be within fifteen kilometers of the households, remote dump areas would be a waste of time, effort and money, as explained by my interlocutor. One day in 2010, he received a message from an official at the ministry of Environmental Affairs, warning that the Mokattam settlement is planned to be evicted to Badr city, on the Suez-Cairo road. He had to act swiftly by preparing a report to the government officials declaring that the equipment in the area is worth billions of Egyptian pounds and cannot be removed easily. Moreover, there is the risk of environmental pollution which would pose health hazards to the city if collection of garbage halts. The settlement was saved from eviction.

He listed the manufacturing activities taking place in the Mokattam settlement. Plastic clothes hangers are made from recycled plastic, medicine plastic strips are also used for the vinyl industry; tinfoil is packed to be sold for reuse by companies. Some types of the collected waste are exported to other countries, like China, to be reused as raw materials for other industries. I asked whether old computer parts and discarded or outdated mobile phones are part of the recycled waste, but the gentleman said that there are no e-waste dealers in Manshiet Nasser.

My interlocutor spoke of the zabaleen's suffering during the 2000s when privatization was implemented by the government; also in 2009 when the pigs were slaughtered and how pigs are an asset for the *zarrab* (man raising pigs), who have to be Christians. Zabaleen on the other hand, can be either Christians or Moslems. The area is home for both faiths. The pigs are now being raised in the area, though in lesser numbers; the government has admitted their mistake and now allows retaining them for the benefit of the environment. They are the main vacuum cleaners of organic waste, and their manure is used in land composting. The gentleman emphasized that pigs are slain only by an official government veterinarian and with an approval for slaughter.

When I inquired whether the zabaleen are aware of their importance as garbage recyclers and how they are acknowledged in research, the speaker stated that they are indifferent to this piece of information and they are doing their job to earn their living unaware and not caring what goes on in the circles of research or social action. Their main concern is that the government gives them ownership of the land. The zabaleen used to live in tin shacks; now brick and mortar houses are built for the dwellers, but the land is still not the zabaleen's property, which poses a threat to the zabaleen. The government is providing electricity and sanitary sewage to the area, which are servicing the workshops that use heavy equipment in crushing the plastic. However, they are not given the right to own the lands on which they live.

My question whether there are means of communicating with other zabaleen areas around Cairo my speaker replied that Manshiet Nasser or Mokattam settlement is the largest and most advanced in terms of recycling plants and sorting activities, so if the other settlements need help, advice or technical knowledge, they would try to reach those in Mokattam. There is currently cooperation between the area and the Maadi zabaleen in terms of garbage separation; the Maadi collectors dump their garbage at the Mokattam settlement and use their expertise in selection and recycling.

### ***The Cave Church***

At the end of the interview, my host offered to escort us as we drove up the hill to see the Cave church carved inside the limestone of Mokattam. Headed by Abuna (St.) Samaan, who has made spiritual progress in terms of preaching and advising people in the area to abide by the Christ's teachings and principles, the role of the church was pivotal in changing people's attitudes and reducing the crime rate. The church serves as a spiritual, educational and economic support for the zabaleen living in Mokattam. The speaker said that gold or precious valuables are sometimes found thrown in the garbage and they have to be returned to the owners; it is part of the zabaleen's credibility. The church's preaching enlightens the zabaleen and adds to the acceptance of their fates as the cleaners of their city. The gentleman affirmed that the Cave Church receives tourists and researchers from all parts of the world, eager to see the zabaleen and their living conditions, and the monastery's and church's place carved within the Mokattam Hill.

My speaker proclaimed that the area no longer receives donations from outside sources and that it is quite self-sufficient with all the recycling and trading activities taking place. All school levels, as well as vocational schools, are found in the area. People who live around Manshiet

Nasser are like the ones who live in any low level area around Cairo. The apartments have electricity and sanitary water and facilities; they have satellite dishes atop their roofs. There are shops, groceries and fava bean restaurants.

When I wondered why are the streets dirty and whether Cairo will be clean, my speaker said if all the streets are completely cleaned one day, they will become dirty with garbage again in less than a week. He explained that some people would throw their garbage on the street in any empty area because they would not pay the monthly fee for the zabal, maybe owing to their financial condition. “Some people would want to keep the streets unclean with loads of garbage to tarnish the government’s image and show how incapable they are,” claimed the old gentleman.

I told my speaker that the history of the zabaleen is well illustrated in the literature. The articles and books have mentioned the zabaleen’s relationship with the wahiya who are managing the process in terms of dealing with the government and dividing the areas into houses and apartments for garbage collection. He stressed that the contract between the wahiya and the zabaleen is a binding one by the word of mouth. It is a strict commitment that has to be followed by both parties.

My last question was about the population of the zabaleen in Manshiet Nasser, and my interviewee replied that there were several attempts by the government and the census to survey the numbers of people there, however, no accurate number was reached. The estimate was about 50,000 workers and their families.

The interview with the APE secretary was loaded with information and the talk was interesting and humorous. The visit was an unforgettable one to the largest dump in Cairo, also the most populous and advanced in terms of work processes and housing for the inhabitants. It represents an industry, a businesslike venture, only the smell and the filth make it quite repulsive.

### ***Reflecting on the Visit***

The zabaleen's work resembles that of capitalist ventures. The cheap labor of the zabaleen is used to perform the everyday tasks of collecting, dumping and separating the waste into the recyclables, which incur large amounts of money into the area's controlling businessmen. The industry of recycling is quite alluring; the cash from trash applies here. The marginality of the zabaleen is maintained to keep the cycle of their labor and that of the profits of the controlling heads monopolizing the trash business. The financial, medical or educational help offered by the NGOs, the companies (like Procter & Gamble) or the philanthropists is mainly to sustain the business by the people who accept living in the dirt, enduring the smell, the health hazards and the hardships associated with their profession. The cycle of poverty and marginalization is not to be broken, rather prolonged to feed the capitalist driving force; exchanging the recyclables for money, while using the cheap labor cooperating to produce the recyclables (Marx, 1976). The division of labor within the zabaleen relies on the men's work of collecting, carrying and dumping the waste in the ground floor of their houses; then, women and children take part in sorting, selecting and dividing the garbage into the different useable parts. Then there is the process of crushing the plastics to produce the needed raw material for the recycling industry. The zabaleen are doing the selection job at their homes. The men can also work in the workshops to crush the plastic and other material to produce the raw material for other industries. The produced or transformed "raw material" is then sold by the vendor, who is the manager or businessperson who owns the workshop and uses the zabaleen's labor and eventually gives them their wages. They do not and cannot directly handle the selling of the recyclable material and they do not own the workshops. The capitalist is in charge of communicating with the different factories and companies who use the products ready for recycling.

Another form of labor is that of using the collected organic waste in raising the animals that feed on this kind of waste. The *zeriba* (barn) located in the houses, is the place where the animals, mainly pigs, are grown. The meat is either used for the families' consumption or for selling it by the different shops in the area. Pork is a source of income for the zabaleen. Depending on animals as well is the production of manure for the composting plants in the zabaleen area, which is a third form of using the zabaleen's labor in capital formation and making money.

Looking at the relationship between the wahiya and the zabaleen also presents another form of using the zabaleen's labor for the benefit of the wahiya, who contract the zabaleen to pick the waste from a group of apartments within a specific area in town. The wahiya are the agents who deal with the government because they have the legitimate framework to handle the garbage from Cairo's residents (El-Hakim, 1977). They hire the zabaleen to carry the waste; however, it is the zabaleen who pay them money in return for the garbage, which is considered here as a commodity bought by the zabaleen. The collected waste is then carried to the zabaleen's homes and segregated, as explained earlier to perform another kind of labor.

For the zabaleen to maintain the dual relationship with the wahiya and businesspersons of the recycling workshops, they perform the aforementioned tasks and endure the hardships of the job for the sake of accumulating profits within the capitalist framework. I wondered whether taxes apply in this part of the city, however, I declined the thought for the sake of political correctness.

The above analysis is meant as an attempt to situate the zabaleen and their forms of labor division within the theories of capital formation, as the workshops of Manshiet Nasser bear resemblance to the capitalist ventures that use the labor of the disadvantaged population to serve the accumulation of capital. The attempt to analyze the economic relationships within the



zabaleen's labor is not intended to draw any sociopolitical connotations upon the zabaleen's marginalization. The analysis serves the research purpose of dissecting the current status of the zabaleen area, and how it represents the economics of garbage.

## **VII. Conclusion**

Retelling the zabaleen's story is a reminder that they remain Cairo's tolerant garbage collectors who have survived the past one hundred years. The people living in the zabaleen settlements are making part of Cairo's contemporary history; their work in recycling happens to relieve the city's streets from a substantial amount of unwanted trash. In the words of Ezzat Naiem, a teacher living in the zabaleen settlement of Manshiet Nasser, emphasizing the importance of the zabaleen: "If the president is out of the system or prime minister, his deputy or vice can replace him. But if the garbage collector is away from Cairo, no one can replace him. Cairo will be dying,"<sup>1</sup> which holds quite true. The man did not exaggerate when he highlighted the value of the zabaleen whose job has been a hallmark in serving the middle income areas of Cairo.

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<sup>1</sup> Video: Zabbaleen Trash Town – A Whole Community in Egypt that lives on Rubbish  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D0s7WsoC528>

## **Chapter III**

### **Zabaleen Spaces: Imaginaries around Waste**

#### **I. Background**

In this chapter I aim to present how zabaleen spaces – which are the areas of the zabaleen around the fringes of Cairo – have induced the marginality of the zabaleen and in turn have attracted the support of different entities towards the zabaleen. Hence, the chapter delineates the several nuances produced around the existence of the zabaleen, as well as the support the zabaleen have been given from the different associations and nongovernmental organizations, which are mostly run by the middle class and have helped in the sustenance of the zabaleen.

First, marginality of the zabaleen, both spatially and socially, is briefly touched upon, since it has been presented earlier in the second chapter on the zabaleen's life. Then, I present the support from NGOs, the Orthodox Church and the philanthropic initiatives by selected Christian individuals towards the zabaleen areas and people. Finally, the abstract notion of art and film is depicted to add another dimension to the zabaleen: their visual and media representation.

#### **II. Marginality of the Zabaleen Spaces**

The existing zabaleen settlements have created a range of precarious jobs that deal with the collection process and the segregation of waste to be reused or recycled for an income. Therefore, the result of labor and waste is goods that can be sold (Berthier, 2013). However, the jobs are for those who are marginalized and strive to keep the only means of earning a living and the only job they know in a world that deems them invisible yet indispensable (ibid). Consequently, waste produces an attached type of marginalization and stigma to the job of zabaleen, which is informal, precarious and primitive.

Gaillard and Cadag (2009) have further analyzed marginality into geographical, economic, and social; the zabaleen's geographical marginality imposes their habitat in certain areas of land that are away from the city center, not to mention the number of times they had been relocated and their everyday trips to and from the collection sites; their economic marginality shows in their reliance on waste collection as their only source of income; their vulnerability and social marginality were apparent at times of crisis when the zabaleen faced the challenge of privatization, for instance. The zabaleen are Coptic Christians, a minority in Egypt – an overarching fact which adds to their marginalization within the Egyptian society. Their physical presence was pushed to the peripherals of the city for environmental reasons; they have no choice to make in terms of their living areas. They have chosen to stay marginalized by keeping the only job they know, that of their forefathers, rather than returning to the village where work conditions are most likely worse. Subsequently, their dependence on waste has rendered them marginalized because it is their sole source of income and collecting waste is their only asset.

A number of the zabaleen might be well-off owing to the money made from the business of recycling and selling raw materials to the industry; however, their financial status does not place them within the middle classes, which are characterized by their “white-collar education and modern outlook.” (Kandil, 2012; p. 199)

### **III. Waste Imaginaries**

#### ***1. Nongovernmental organizations***

The zabaleen's marginal status and the service they offer have induced calls for help from different constituents. Support came from the local nongovernmental agencies to endorse the zabaleen's work in solid waste management. The first was the Association of Garbage Collectors, which was official in 1976 (Iskandar, 2000). The association was responsible for

microfinancing small and medium projects, started a health program and initiated a veterinary clinic in the area. The board was comprised of Christian leaders, senior garbage collectors, and businessmen in the recycling profession.

Void of facilities, the areas where the zabaleen lived attracted the attention and action of external agencies, such as the Association for the Protection of the Environment (APE) and Environmental Quality International (EQI), which provided funding for proper housing and sanitary facilities (Eisenscheck, 2015). The APE started as a nongovernmental organization in 1984 as a top-down establishment by the city governorate with the dual objective of improving the living conditions of the zabaleen, especially women and girls; as well as manage and integrate the waste recycling in the zabaleen area with the wider network of waste management in the Greater Cairo area (Myllyla, 2001). APE was established after the Mokattam zabaleen settlement was selected by Cairo's governorate in the 1980s to receive development funds from the World Bank; hence the consultants of EQI worked on a developmental project for the zabaleen, and how to improve the environmental performance of their settlement. The APE was the consultants' suggestion to manage the recycling and composting plant proposed by EQI to develop the area. Whether the APE reached its objective is not my question or concern. Rather my concern here is how the zabaleen accepted the help from APE or other organizations, which were supposedly created for their benefit and for the sake of following the rhetoric of development initiatives. I quote here Assaad and Garas (1994, p. 42, cited in Myllyla, 2001, p. 208):

Due to harsh conditions under which the people live and the tendency to believe in the survival of the fittest, they do not easily trust each other or outsiders. And if they trust, they trust individuals with whom they have had long contact. Workers must first prove worthy of their trust. Moreover, because of the complex family and working relations and the various charity endeavours in the settlement, people enjoy receiving but do not know the meaning of giving. If they

are not sure of deserving immediate benefit from the activity, they exercise passive resistance.

The reaction here presents another feature of marginality exercised by the zabaleen; the lack of trust and obliviousness to the meaning of giving or sharing. Their engendered perception of the outside world further isolates and denigrates their marginal status.

The APE has lent several helping hands to the zabaleen community, such as the weaving factory which provided work for women and girls, making rugs from the rags of clothes in the garbage. Also, two composting plants were built, and used the manure from the pigsties and produce natural fertilizers to be sold for profit. The aim was alleviating the hazards of accumulating organic waste from animals within the living location of the zabaleen, and promoting the health condition of women and girls. Recycling factories were also founded within the zabaleen site to ensure a source of income and ownership of the collected recyclables. In addition to environmental and health objectives, APE works to promote the image of the zabaleen within the society; an attempt to reduce their marginal status which I see as quite doubtful.

Notably, APE is part of a network of other associations which have been working around the zabaleen settlement or have emerged because of them: el Game'ya, el Mahabba Clinic, el Gabarty Services, el Salam Hospital and Anglo American Hospital. Some are philanthropic services which are discussed later in this chapter.

Community and Institutional Development (CID) was another NGO working with the zabaleen (Bell 2006), cofounded by Laila Iskandar, who helped in initiating the recycling school of Mokattam settlement. CID consulting is a for-profit established in 1995 and has worked with the APE on pilot projects for urging separation of waste at source, in the households, to relieve the collectors from the cumbersome task of waste separation. In the year 2000, CID has a

significant role in starting up the school for zabaleen young boys who do not have access to education because of their workload with their fathers. The informal schooling setup was devised by CID to cater for the zabaleen boys' work schedule as well as provide them with knowledge and special skills useful for their practical working conditions. The zabaleen kids were equipped with basic knowledge of reading, writing and counting, in addition to extracurricular activities such as singing, acting, and health teachings. Iskandar had previously started a girls' school in 1988, to teach the zabaleen girls literacy skills as well as weaving rugs and mats from rags of cloth and threads, to be sold.

The CID cofounder Laila Iskandar has been working with the zabaleen since 1982; she has joined the church's mission to teach the kids. A prominent figure and a passionate social worker, Dr. Iskandar has exerted substantial efforts to resolve various problems at the zabaleen settlements. The CID has handed over the supervision and responsibility of the Mokattam recycling school to the NGO the Spirit of Youth, which was established in 2004.

The Spirit of Youth foundation (SOY) is based in the zabaleen settlement of Manshiet Nasser, and depends on volunteer work of the area's residents, mostly young people, who aim to deal with the amounts of garbage on the streets and help the zabaleen with their work (Egypt Independent, 2010). The volunteers have ambitious hopes for developing the zabaleen area. They work on several paths: approach neighborhoods to persuade them to segregate garbage at source; help the zabaleen issue work permits and driving license; teach adult literacy classes; support young girls' education; establish links between the zabaleen and factories using the recycled materials; upgrade the living conditions of the zabaleen communities. These projects have acquired generous funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (ibid); they are an indication of hope within the zabaleen spaces and are expected to make a difference.

## ***2. The Orthodox Coptic Church***

The church was founded in 1975 in the zabaleen settlement in Mokattam (Bell 2006). The zabaleen space with its Coptic inhabitants induced the reaction of the church in support of the fellow Christians who chose to rid the city of its refuse as a means of living. In the seventies, one of the Orthodox Church's bishops initiated the Waste Collectors' Association or Al Gam'eya, which was a community-based organization (Milik 2010), and resembled the charitable role of the church and was the first private organization in the zabaleen area. The Game'eya, however, was criticized because of favoring the stronger zabaleen families who took over the benefits and profits of selling the recyclables. I argue that this is an example of inequality within the underprivileged marginalized zabaleen community, which further compounds the marginal status of the less powerful zabaleen, and bears much resemblance to the power structures outside of the area. The head of the association is a Catholic priest who has notable efforts in fundraising and providing health and education services to the zabaleen community. The church also provides a unique type of religious and spiritual support to the zabaleen, which acknowledges their role within the community, and also helps their monopolization of the waste recycling moneymaking activities, I contend.

## ***3. Philanthropy***

The zabaleen spaces have provided a forum for Christian religious figures to carry out charity and philanthropic work in areas where underprivileged need care and support. The following account describes two exemplary females who have relieved part of the calamities of the zabaleen.

Soeur Emmanuelle, a famous Catholic nun, came to live among the zabaleen of Ezbet ElNakhl in 1971; she spent 22 years there. The French nun helped the area and initiated the

building of schools, clinic and play areas. She travelled the western world, and was successful in raising hundreds of thousands of dollars that were used in building a complex of clinics, a pre-school and a center for providing vocational training. She lived among the zabaleen within their poor premises, raised money for them and educated their children and women. She was proactive with the oppressed. In 1980, she founded the Sister Emmanuelle Association, which still works with the underprivileged in some third world countries.

Mama Maggie Gobran is another “angel among the garbage-pickers”, as suggested by an article in Catholic Herald online newspaper (Vaughn, 2015). Maggie is an upper middle-class woman who used to visit the zabaleen settlements since the 1980s, when she and her husband established a children’s ministry called “Stephen’s Children” dedicated to the support of poor girls and boys of the zabaleen areas, applying her Christian teachings in doing volunteer work. Thousands of children have been supported spiritually and physically; “Stephen’s Children has helped more than 30,000 children and families” (ibid) by providing food, shelter, education, training and health services.

#### ***4. Art and film***

The zabaleen have inspired artwork and filmmaking, which are untraditional ways of their representation as a marginal society. The Tunisian-French artist eL Seed has designed and painted murals of calligraphy in one of the zabaleen settlements: Manshiet Nasser. According to the New York Times article (Fahim, 2016) titled: “Sprawling Mural Pays Homage to Cairo’s Garbage Collectors,” the mural painting was presented by the artist as a tribute to the community who has been collecting and recycling tons of Cairo’s waste for years and has been taken for granted. The priest Rev. Samaan Ibrahim, the Coptic leader, provided assistance with the project. Here I quote the article’s statement describing the murals and how they looked, within the



context of the zabaleen area: “From the streets of the neighborhood, the painting appears in fragments: above a courtyard where members of one family carefully search for recycling in bags of trash, or looming over a rooftop occupied by a handful of sheep. The bracing scale of the mural is fully visible only from the Mokattam Hill on the edge of the district, near a famous cathedral carved inside a cave.”



A mural, painted in a part of Cairo inhabited by garbage collectors, quotes a third-century Coptic bishop: “If one wants to see the light of the sun, he must wipe his eyes.”

NYTimes March 2016

Another example of representing the zabaleen in documentary filmmaking is two films reviewed by Rowe (2012): *Garbage Dreams* by Mai Iskander and *Marina of the Zabbaleen* by Engi Wassef. Again the Mokattam hill provides the setting for the documentaries; a place to send

an artistic message to the world via the media. Produced by Mai Iskander, *Garbage Dreams* tells the story of three young men from the zabaleen village, who grow up to realize their dreams each in his own way. The film won the Al Gore Reel Current Award for portraying a current global issue.

The film *Marina of the Zabbaleen* shows how kids can find happiness and play into any space, even that of the garbage and waste. The grimmest of spaces can still produce life amidst all the refuse and the stench. Marina is a young daughter of one of the garbage collectors in Manshiet Nasser; she smiles, plays and goes to school. Life can come out of waste, as the film suggests.

A documentary “The Zabaleen” was filmed in the zabaleen area showing the daily work practices of the zabaleen. Other documentaries were filmed as well to depict the daily experiences of the zabaleen, e.g. the Russian television production of “Zabbaleen Trash Town – A Whole Community in Egypt that lives on Rubbish.” Also the Danish production of “Cairo Garbage - Cities on Speed” is a one-hour documentary that illustrates the Cairo megacity through the lens of its accumulating garbage.

The zabaleen spaces have provoked thoughts and subtle reactions and were a primary cursor for initiating the entities and discourse previously mentioned and in creating the nuances around philanthropy, art, film, etc. The zabaleen’s marginalized status and spaces acted as factors used to study, analyze, problematize and contextualize the zabaleen.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Cairo's Middle Class Households: How they relate to the zabaleen**

#### **I. Background**

Cairo is a megacity that has grown significantly during the past one hundred years; the population has currently reached twenty million people, who produce from thirteen thousand to fifteen thousand tons of waste per day (Bakry, 2015). The rapid rate of urbanization and the surge in population growth have further compounded the garbage collection problem. The deficient systems of waste disposal and poor garbage collection facilities affect the quality of street cleanliness and consequently public health and the environment (Hopkins et al. 2001). Owing to the significance of households and their tangible contribution to the municipal waste accumulation in Cairo, this chapter provides a description of how the interviewed middle class households dispose of the garbage and whether they deal with the door-to-door service of the zabaleen. Based on the interviewees' feedback a larger picture emerges of the middle class's images of cleanliness and garbage on Cairo's streets.

The chapter starts by defining the middle class in theory with respect to their aspirations, expectations, education and income, all of which shape their demand for goods and services. In addition to their role in the expanding urbanization of the city by opting to decentralize and live in "new, exclusive, amenity-rich suburban and exurban developments" that eventually result in "socio-spatial segregation." (Stewart et al, 2004; p. 114) The middle classes are a governing factor in the garbage dilemma since the waste produced in their households is of value to the collectors; thus, adequate service by the zabaleen is directed towards the middle and high income areas of Cairo "where waste generated [is] of much higher economic value." (Bakry, 2015; p. 46)

Then, the households' interviews are situated within the neoliberal temporal and spatial category of their middle class-ness; providing an opportunity to delineate the interviewees' perceptions, interactions and imaginations around garbage. The interviews offer a platform for discussing the garbage problem on Cairo's street and within the realms of their households. An analysis of the interviews' output follows.

## **II. The Middle Class Defined**

The discourse on middle class has generally defined its affiliates as educated, intellectual, and aspiring for upward mobility. Middle class as a category can be shaped by its cultural tendency, preference and economic ability to select their food, clothing, housing, education, and even jargon, I contend (Saif, 2011). Though there has been difficulty in locating a precise definition for the middle class, some attributed middle class to cultural backgrounds, while others placed it within the income and occupation continuum (Fernandes & Heller, 2006). It can be argued, however, that "the middle class derives its power from cultural and educational capital;" it reproduces itself through its own practices (ibid; p. 496, 497).

Looking specifically at Cairo's middle class, one can spot the neoliberal influences of globalization on the consumption patterns of Cairenes which is apparent in the increasing magnitude of municipal waste, ranging from the leftover of processed foods and beverages, remains of fast foods, sanitary towels and diapers to plastic water bottles and products, cartons, electronic devices, etc. The middle class viewpoint is used in this research to demarcate their relation to the zabaleen and to voice their concerns as one of the stakeholders in the garbage problem; they are producers of garbage that has high economic value as indicated earlier. The middle class imaginaries are clearly put in Pandian and Mariappan's (2014) account:

"being middle class is not just a matter of things and the money to buy them. Narrative and imagination are also crucial—the stories that people tell about

their own progress through a world of material prosperity” (p. 193)

### **III. The Middle Class “Forum”**

The meetings with the middle class were, in some instances, one-on-one interviews and in other times were group discussions that initiated shared ideas and interactive talks. Therefore, I prefer using the term “forum” to describe the exchange in views/ideas that took place. It is worth noting that this forum was an opportunity to learn about new and innovative ways of how the middle class disposed of their garbage, and the emergence of new partners in the collection process besides the zabaleen.

I relied on convenience sampling, which suited the qualitative method underwent for the main purpose of describing how the middle class related to the informal garbage collectors and how they handled their garbage disposal in general. The people I interviewed were the most accessible within my circle of friends, colleagues and learners in the English classes I taught.

#### ***The Informants***

Twenty-four participants were interviewed in this research; seventeen females and seven males. Their age range was from 22 till 75 years of age. The individual interviews were carried out mostly with residents of middle class areas in areas of Cairo such as Nasr City, Heliopolis, New Cairo, Mokattam, Dar el Salam, and 6<sup>th</sup> of October city. The participants, whether males or females, were interested in answering the questions and tried to give suggestions that they wished could be implemented. Some of them blamed the citizens’ behavior as a reason for the piling of waste on the streets, while others directed their comments towards the authorities and the government. All of them were dedicated to cleaning and removing waste from their private spaces, while the public realms nearby were suffering from excess garbage.

### *The Interviews*

The questions discussed in the interviews were in both Arabic and English, and the discussions were mostly in Arabic, except during the English classes where I had a whole class discussion with the students and tried to teach vocabulary within the context of the household waste issues, after explaining the point of my research and getting their informed consent. The questions revolved around the type of waste (organic or nonorganic), method of waste storage and disposal; queries were used to initiate discussions and give a chance for participants to vent their thoughts, problems and complaints from the current garbage problem. In addition to providing a forum for participants to voice their ideas to resolve the problem through published research. Consent of participants was granted based on anonymity and confidentiality of their interview transcripts.

### *The Narratives*

The narratives construct the social dimensions of waste (Campos and Hall 2013) within the households and resonate with most of the middle class everyday struggles with the garbage bin. The households' members interviewed in this research are generally unhappy about the garbage piled on the streets of Cairo; however, they do not link this sight to environmental degradation or pollution. Rather, they see this as a failure of the authorities to manage waste within the megacity. In addition, their main concern is about removing waste from their apartments, whether on the streets, in dumpsites or any open area, regardless of the smells, odors, flies, or rodents this may bring. There are no means for them to track where the garbage is dumped by the zabaleen or the garbage collection companies. Most of them are oblivious of the zabaleen and their activities in segregating the garbage items to be reused or recycled. News about the zabaleen is of little importance among the daily challenges encountered by Cairo's inhabitants.

The following account of discussions is categorized according to the informants' everyday relations with the zabaleen.

I started my interviews by talking to one of my mother's friends, a seventy-five year-old university professor, who lives in Ard El Golf, Heliopolis. She has the time to separate organic waste from the non-organic paper, plastic, etc. She also managed to convince her neighbors to keep their ties with the zabal at the start of 2000, when the authorities decided to depend on foreign companies to collect garbage from the centralized garbage bin on the streets. The apartments collected the monthly fees for the zabal who has kept serving them until the present. They have been concerned with the cleanliness of their building. The residents continued with the method of garbage collection which they had trusted for years, though they lived in an affluent area. Consequently, they do not mind paying the zabal a monthly fee as well as paying the extra garbage fees added to their electricity bills. The woman had agreed with her neighbors that they keep dealing with the traditional zabal, and not with the foreign companies. Her justification was that keeping ties with the zabal, and paying him the monthly fees, would secure that they get rid of their garbage on a regular basis, and the zabal would also secure his livelihood.

A thirty-year-old single Heliopolis pharmacist states that her household tries to separate organic waste – which makes up most of the trash – from plastic, paper, glass, electronics, etc. The trash is left outside the apartment for the zabal to collect it. She claimed that the zabal refuses to carry heavy bags and would take extra money to carry them away.

Also from Heliopolis a twenty-four year old young lady who criticized the sights of garbage piling up on the streets of Korba and Midan El Gamea' where shops and vegetable merchants are abundant. She pinpointed that shops clean the areas just in front of their boutiques, and shove the

trash away onto the street corners or near lampposts. However, she acknowledged the initiative to sell the trashed plastic, glass, cans and glass to kiosks in Heliopolis and was hopeful that garbage on the streets can thus be reduced. Her apartment building deals with the doorman “*bawab*” who collects the garbage from the separate flats and takes it to a dustbin located at the nearby street. The large dustbins serve several streets, and are overflowing with garbage most of the time until the cleaning trucks come for a pickup.

I also interviewed a forty year-old working mother who admitted that she has no time to separate the garbage components, and the garbage is collected by the garbage man who provides door-to-door service. She faced no particular problems with getting rid of the garbage except when the garbage man does not show up for any reason, then, they have to get rid of the garbage themselves. Usually the doorman is involved in throwing away the garbage on an empty street site. She suggested that a big waste bin be placed in the neighborhood and the garbage men can collect the trash from there.

A thirty-five year old single working mother who resides with her parents – showed little interest in waste separation; she claimed that she had no time to separate the waste components and her mom was an elderly lady who had no interest in separating the waste and was not used to this idea. She added that a huge collective effort is necessary to reach a significant effect in waste segregation at source and that her household alone cannot have a recognizable effect. An idea which is widespread: what will my effort do within all that messed up waste; a drop within the sea? Her account of the waste components was that organic leftovers comprise around half of the garbage; for instance vegetable peels, teabags, leftover cooked food. The non-organic part was mostly cans of preserved food or beverages, glass jars, tissues, aluminum foil and plastic water bottles. The trash from each family member’s room is collected into the main garbage in the



kitchen, and left outside the door for the garbage man to collect it on a daily basis. In case the garbage man does not show up, and the smell is unbearable, then the garbage is taken by one of the household members to the nearby street garbage bin which is overflowing with garbage most of the weekdays; a formidable sight. “The garbage collection company needs to do a better job,” said the lady. “We pay the garbage collection fees that are added to the electricity bill and pay the garbage man as well, so we expect a better service and cleaner streets. Heliopolis is not the clean upscale area it used to be,” she added sadly.

One of the participants, a wife and working mother, in Nasr City, suggested that contents of a garbage bin vary according to the number of the household members’ and their age group, also their gender. For instance, households that have babies or toddlers would dispose of diapers and baby food containers, while those with school children would throw away the papers used in covering school copybooks or textbooks, pencil sharpening scraps, empty chipсы bags and soda cans. My interviewee also had stories of her neighbors throwing their garbage onto other neighbors’ bins, which ignites some verbal harsh arguments between residents of apartments. Also, a common sight is when cats overthrow and mess up the garbage bins on the stairs and the zabal fails to show up for days. Some of her neighbors throw the garbage into the bin directly without disposing it into a plastic bag, which creates unfavorable odors and leaves the bin quite unclean.

A friend of mine, who has lived in Mokattam for twenty years, has noticed that in the past few years main streets have stacked garbage bags on the middle pavement, which resonated with the rebellious reactions of the zabaleen due to the previously mentioned governmental decisions towards them.

Another Mokattam resident pinpointed that she separates waste at the source within her household and mentioned that she participates in the “Green Pan” initiative. She explained that households dispose of the used cooking oil in a safe and environmentally friendly way. She gives away the oil and does not throw it in the kitchen basin. One of the informants, studying petroleum engineering, commented by saying that the oil is used in drilling. The woman also confirmed that she wraps broken glass or light bulbs in newspapers so it does not hurt the zabaleen.

A 28-year-old young lady, who lives in Mariouteya, has vented some of the daily problems encountered with the garbage. She indicated that her neighbors have agreed to pay the doorman “bawab” from twenty to fifty pounds per month, so that he collects the garbage from each household and throws it into the street bin. She added that there are only two street bins for an overly crowded residential area, which produces a very disappointing sight of garbage thrown around the bin and on the street. The garbage truck collects the waste from the street bins and sometimes the garbage is left for more than three days until the truck arrives. Then, the garbage is dumped in an area under the flyover of the Cairo ring road, where it is burned; an act which adds to the air pollution of the city and the formidable lung diseases. She also complained that a fruit merchant on the street refuses to throw the waste into the bin and burns it himself. She referred to the GIZ project (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit) and mentioned that it was not successful because people did not separate garbage and were reluctant or lazy to do so. When I asked her if she separates the trash into organic and nonorganic, she said “we do not separate garbage, but I put the leftover food or bread in separate containers or bags because there are underprivileged people who scavenge through the trash for food.” She would

also keep the broken glass or opened cans wrapped in newspaper to prevent collectors from getting wounded because of sharp edges.

One of the male participants who lived in Nasr city explained that garbage is thrown on the streets and alleys because there is no garbage collector like the old days, the garbage fees are now added to the electricity bills, which results in garbage on public areas. Another male participant mentioned that there is a computer application called “Bekia” which can be used to locate the places where waste can be collected in its sorted form: paper/carton, plastic, glass, cans/metal, wood, cloth. The application was devised by an architecture engineering student, as part of a thesis graduation project. It can be activated, advertised and used as a means of recyclable waste collection.

One problem for a Heliopolis resident was that the *zabal* refuses to carry the trash bag if it is heavy, when the garbage has heavy waste. The trash is left out until someone pays more money for the *zabal* to collect it. Another problem for a Nasr city resident was that the *zabal* might not be punctual with the schedule of picking up the garbage. Some of them can come every other day and others collect the garbage daily. A man from Dar el Salam complained from the lack of garbage cars and collectors, which left an unpleasant sight of garbage bags on the street corners and in empty sites between houses.

A resident of Nasr City did not have the door-to-door service of the garbage collector *zabal*. She affirmed that at her home the garbage cannot be stored more than two days at the most; the *zabal* does not show up where she lives, and one of the family members has to take the garbage bag to the nearest street bin. She claimed that paper waste is given away to the charity organization *Resala* which collects paper for recycling. Her main complaint is that garbage bins are left flooding with garbage for days, without proper collection times. She also went on to

describe the filth of the garbage on the street: “One of the main problems is having one garbage box (bin) for one area. Anything can be seen in the garbage, anything you can imagine; dead animals, old car tires, bricks and debris from construction works. A horrific sight, and very bad odors, which is certainly unhealthy and might be the cause of diseases,” she commented. Then she suggested that bins should be increased; at least five bins should be installed in one street with ten or more apartment buildings. She also added that having a separate bin for the solid waste, like plastic or glass can be beneficial for recycling. She bluntly stated that the zabal or garbage man should deal with the garbage in the street bin and should not go to the apartments to collect the garbage; the door-to-door service can be the source of problems; garbage exposes the inside life of households. She elaborated that each household garbage bin reveals the status of this household, a fact that one can be oblivious to. The direct contact with the garbage collectors is absolutely not preferable, “with all due respect, I do not deal with this class of society, and would never like to. Incentives or monetary rewards can be given to them, but never a direct contact or collection of household waste from the apartments,” she asserted. My interviewee’s main concern was that street garbage bins be increased in number to serve the high-rise apartment buildings on the street. One of her interesting comments was that she put the leftover food on her window sill for birds to eat from.

A 44-year old woman, who lived in Rehab city, commented that her son did not like to get the trash out. He felt it was a disgrace for him to walk with it to throw it in the street bin. The gated city has its own company for garbage collection and zabaleen do not go there, though they work in other gated compounds in New Cairo. One of the respondents, who lives in New Cairo, recalled that he shoved off a scavenger on the street who selects only plastic bottles from the garbage bin. He asked him to take the whole garbage with all the contents and not pick and

choose. The scavenger eventually left and was seen nowhere around, probably went to another place in *tagamoa* (New Cairo).

When I asked a group of participants, who lived in New Cairo, on their relation to the garbage collectors, their answers were that they discard their garbage on street bins, because the collectors do not pass by their apartments. They claimed that New Cairo is cleaner than other districts in Cairo and the streets are being cleaned daily. The group did not know that *zabaleen* are recognized as an efficient informal garbage collection and recycling system.

A Rehab city resident mentioned that the city has its own system of garbage collection and separation; the garbage is collected and separated. She added that in “Madinaty”, the gated city in Sherouk, the garbage is already separated in the homes and collected by the city collection workers and trucks.

A fifty-year-old lady engineer who lives in New Cairo participated in the interview and pointed out that the domestic help is the one who takes care of collecting the garbage and throwing it out daily in the garbage bin installed for the neighborhood. In case the servant is not there, so it is either the lady or her husband who would throw away the trash in the bin. The problem is that the street bin is usually overflowing with garbage, which creates a very unfavorable scene. The stray dogs and cats gather around the bin, also crows and other birds. Some collectors can come to pick plastic and paper and leave the rest of the garbage on the street. The lady had suggestions for the government officials, whom she held accountable for the cleanliness of the city. She wanted to see separate bins for each kind of waste: paper, plastic, cans, glass, organic waste. She had travelled and lived abroad and wanted to see similar ideas implemented in Cairo. She used to separate waste at source, but she felt that her exerted efforts go in vain since she thinks that 90% of the people do not care to separate waste at source. “There

are no awareness campaigns on the importance of waste separation, this is the responsibility of the government officials,” she stated. She saw that the two main problems were: absence of the collection truck for days, and presence of scavengers *sariha*, who pick and choose plastic or other recyclable materials from the street bins, leaving the rest of the organic waste to rot.

Another New Cairo resident, a homemaker in her late thirties, has indicated that waste is collectively compiled in her household, by her children, her husband or herself. Any household member can take out the trash and throw it into the street bin. She complained of the stray dogs that gather around the garbage can. She indicated that with garbage fees added to the electricity bill, there are no longer relations with the *zabaleen* or garbage collectors.

My thirty-year old friend who lives further to the west in 6<sup>th</sup> of October city has told her garbage stories in clear and very succinct words. She asserted that she was the one responsible for collecting the garbage in a big black garbage bag, get it down to the guard or *bawab* to throw it in the large bin on the street. In her case, there were no relations with garbage collectors; she has no problem related to garbage in her area, except when the doorman is on vacation and she has to get rid of the garbage herself or look for someone to carry it to the street bin. She finds it a huge problem when the garbage becomes smelly after two or three days, and her concern becomes how to get rid of the odors. She suggested that promptness in collecting the garbage is crucial, also separation at source is equally important. “I noticed that a group of doormen *bawabeen* and scavengers open the garbage bags in the street bin, and pick the cardboard, plastic, cans, glass, which created a total mess. I try to separate at source, but in all cases the scavengers open the bags,” she explained.

I wanted her to elaborate on how she dealt with garbage before she moved to 6<sup>th</sup> of October city. She said that she had resided in two places: Maadi and Garden City. “In Garden city the

zabal was a very respectable man, who collected the garbage from each apartment every day. It was a good experience and I never heard anything about it,” she said. In Maadi, the zabal was always late in picking up the garbage from the stairs, and the smell was obnoxious. “We had to ask the *bawab* to get rid of the garbage because of the horrible smell,” she recounted.

In these discussions, few suggestions were made; one was to increase the labor, the number of collectors, to take the garbage more frequently from the street bins, and to motivate the garbage collectors to work relentlessly to keep the streets clean. The authorities should provide equipment for collecting garbage to allow for safe removal of garbage, e.g. special garments, gloves and shovels, as well as providing monetary incentives to reward the collectors. One woman said that patrols are necessary to censor the garbage collection work. Simply, proper management is the solution. One of the men suggested that incentives be offered for households that separate waste at the source into the components: organic and non-organic (plastic, glass, paper and metal); the incentives could be in the form of increasing their package of monthly groceries *tamween*.

### ***Reflections on the discussions***

The previous discussions have unfolded the middle class’s concern for cleanliness and hygienic practices when handling garbage. The middle class tendency to flee the city center is the search for clean, well-served environments. There are well-established collection systems in compounds like Rehab and Madinaty. However, there is no consistent system for all middle class suburbs, due to the difference in locations, demographics and nature of each of the numerous Cairo residential areas.

A few of the participants in the research suggested that waste be separated at source and reused or recycled. In case of organic waste that could not be used, then it can be transformed

into compost. One of the women participants suggested that zabaleen should wear gloves when picking up the garbage and dress in an overall garment that prevents them from any infection from the garbage they collect. Helping the zabaleen by giving them bags to collect the waste that is left uncollected could be an idea to keep the streets clean. Also, providing a regular health checkup could show our care for the zabaleen. The mentioned suggestions are in line with Robin Nagle's explanation that middle class look for the appearance of healthy clean places – the focus is on hygiene and public cleanliness (Carp, 2010). Similarly, the comment on imposing garments or gloves on the workers explicates an imposed image of cleanliness by the middle class. The garbage collectors may not choose to wear this uniform.

In conclusion, this thesis aims at looking into the private realms of the middle class households with respect to their relations to the garbage collectors, and their role in the collection process. The interviewed participants distinctively protected the private space of their homes by cleaning and ridding it of waste, while regarding the public spaces of the streets as uncensored, uncontrolled by the government. The blame and the responsibility were thrown upon another entity (be that the government or the municipality), not their own generated waste. Moreover, they thought of themselves within their own streets displaying a sense of individuality typical of city dwellers and their urbanized self. Further, the interviews provide further evidence to the idea of the absence of grassroots environmental action stemming from the people (ElRamly 2000)



## Chapter V

### Conclusion and Recommendations

#### I. Background

The main focus of this thesis is the zabaleen and their informal garbage collection initiatives, efforts and challenges. The research was a chance to locate the intricate relations the zabaleen had with the government, the nongovernmental organizations and the middle class households, and to contextualize these relationships within the neoliberal moment which inscribes the different variables at play.

On one hand, neoliberalism dictated the privatization policies which excluded the zabaleen and was oblivious to their presence. Moreover, their marginalized status added to their affliction (Eisenscheck, 2015). Myllyla (2001) bluntly points out that the municipality of Cairo has unwillingly regarded the informal zabaleen as an environmental service provider only temporarily, until western technology is used for managing waste in the city.

On the other hand, paradoxically, external support for the zabaleen has been quite remarkable; the zabaleen settlement of Manshiet Nasser has been receiving funds and grants from several organizations, such as the World Bank, Ford Foundation and Oxfam, which have proven their willingness to invest in the recycling business by establishing recycling workshops in places like the Mokattam settlement. Consequently, these organizations have participated in offering job opportunities for youth who were employed in these workshops. As acknowledged by Iskandar (2000), the zabaleen have “improved the city’s knowledge of how to handle man-made municipal solid waste.” She added that the zabaleen had the expertise to recover and reprocess solid waste to ultimately “create wealth, employment and economic opportunity, while at the same time protecting the environment from incineration and landfilling, and the need to

extract new materials from its non-renewable resources.” (ibid, p. 28). It is noteworthy that Eisenschenk (2015) has reported a drawback in the research on the zabaleen; the research was mostly positive with no critical overview of their activities or way of sorting the garbage. Eisenschenk claims that “authors tended to take a more positive tone when describing” the zabaleen (ibid. p. 6). The much acclaimed appraisal given by Iskandar contradicts with the metaphors of visualizing the poor as a source of all evil, based on their lack of education and lack of hygiene and environmental awareness (Hopkins et al, 2001). There are also assumptions built around the zabaleen or garbage collectors, all kinds of negative connotations attached to them: dirty, smelly, stupid, disrespectable, etc. (Carp, 2010).

From the aforementioned, it could be rational to look into the zabaleen’s situation with a more objective eye; to upgrade their ways of sorting and recycling and to invest more time and effort into solving their problems, especially those related to their health, hygiene, education, employment, etc.

## **II. Reflections on the Research**

The piling up of garbage bags on the streets of the Greater Cairo area is the main intriguing issue that has spurred on the idea of my research on garbage and the zabaleen. The perpetuity of garbage does not only impact the environment and the people’s health and wellbeing but also affects Cairo’s urbanized image among the capital cities of the Middle East and North Africa. The streets of Cairo have been plagued with garbage which has tarnished the old city’s reputation among the touristic attractions. Within the globalization context and the urbanized neoliberal moments of the current world order, Cairo does not qualify as a world city, which is defined using a western standard of categorization (Robinson, 2002). The increased urbanization

and population figures have outpaced the capacity for garbage collection services, which rendered the city unclean.

The middle class provided a category for investigating the variables affecting the garbage dilemma. The middle class lens is used to look at the garbage and zabaleen. The contents of the middle class garbage is economically viable to the zabaleen and the middle class want to get rid of their garbage; creating a subtle relationship between the middle class and the zabaleen.

The convenience sample interviewed suited my research purposes; I wanted to interact with the informants and look for problems that affect their daily practices of waste generation. Anonymous questionnaires or surveys would have been too abstract (O'Connell 2012) and afar from direct feedback elicited from the face-to-face interviews/discussions. The households interviewed in this research were a group of acquaintances from my surrounding circle of friends and work colleagues. In some instances, the interviews and discussions were a means by which the participants vented their frustration and helplessness with the current situation of garbage thrown in almost all suburbs and streets of the capital city. Though quite a few were unhappy, there was no mention of the effect of garbage on the environment or its impact on environmental degradation. They also did not try knowing more about the problem or searching for viable solutions; an outside force was expected to deal with the garbage problem and resolve it – be that the zabaleen, the government or responsible ministries, the waste collection companies, etc. Respondents seemed unaware that their collective action towards proper management of their household waste would lead to waste reduction and/or better reuse of the produced waste. For instance, waste separation at source can enhance the quality of composted soil by reducing the heavy metals in the animals' manure, according to a pilot study done by the Association for

Protection of the Environment (APE) encouraging waste separation in households (Myllala, 2001).

Based on the interviewed participants' output, few separated waste at source is on a daily basis; most participants did not have the time to separate their garbage. Female participants were more interested in discussing the issue and provided detailed information about their daily contact with the garbage at their households. Some of the interviewees had knowledge about newly advertised trends for recycling waste; e.g. *Green Pan* for recycling cooking oil, and *Bekia* for recycling plastic bottles, tin cans, cardboard, etc.

Looking into how gender works in the private space of the household and how it affects the garbage collection process, we find that women hold themselves accountable for their families' cleanliness affairs, and are perceived by others as such (El Ramly, 2000). Women are the caretakers of the households who manage the collected garbage and make the decision of segregation at source or simply collecting all wasted items into one bag. Most of the time, it is women's and children's responsibility to take out the garbage and throw it in the street dustbin (ibid). After their journey from the dumpsite to the zabaleen settlements, the garbage bags are emptied and separated and divided into components by women and children. Hence, I contend that women and children are doing opposite jobs at different social spaces; the space of the household and that of the zabaleen settlement.

The zabaleen have their own division of labor, such that men collect garbage from Cairo's neighborhoods in their trucks; then bring it to women to sort out into the different types of recyclables. Children help in collecting and recycling the waste, boys with their fathers and girls with their mothers. The income produced is mainly from recycling almost 80% of the collected waste. The door-to-door service was done by zabaleen on a daily basis. However, in 2003 foreign

companies were hired by the government in an attempt to privatize waste management in Cairo, which eventually did not prove successful (Iskandar, 2000).

Neglect and marginalization overshadowed the zabaleen; they faced several traumas. In 1984, they were required to have licenses to work on Cairo's streets; so they had to pay the government in addition to the wahiya intermediaries. In 2003, when services of foreign companies were used to collect Cairo's ever-growing garbage, the privatized garbage collection companies hit the zabaleen's main breadwinning activities by becoming the only eligible entities for waste collection. The authorities never ceased to tighten their grip on the zabaleen and in 2009 they ordered the slaughtering of the pigs that provided a pillar of their economic activity (Kuppinger 2013). Ironically, the zabaleen were recognized in international research conventions as an efficient model of waste recycling, while facing oppressive measures from the government and denigrating status from the people. Kuppinger (ibid) argues that surviving through traumas is an art that the zabaleen have mastered owing to their thorough knowledge of the city; they create innovative ways to handle problematic situations. It is worth noting here that investment in developing the zabaleen sites was never an option. The zabaleen's patience and diligence over the years have helped in regaining their status as Cairo's main garbage collectors in 2008, when foreign companies proved to be a fiasco (ibid).

My contact to the zabaleen referred me to the zabaleen association representative who is a board member of the Game'ya in the Mokattam settlement of Manshiet Nasser. The man was quite knowledgeable of the recycling processes; he also relayed important information and statistics of the daily generated garbage as well as its path in the zabaleen sites. Interviewing a figure who works with the zabaleen offered ample opportunity to oversee how waste is treated within an informal setting, which is still unrecognized by the government. It also revealed the

amount of labor manifested in one of the largest zabaleen sites, that of Manshiet Nasser.

Arguably, my interview with the Game'ya board member offered a middle class view of the zabaleen's onsite labor.

Zabaleen's presence on Cairo's streets is certainly indispensable; with around 15,000 tons of generated waste per day, the zabaleen gather around 9000 tons and move it to the Mokattam hill, as well as other dumpsites, where the women and youngsters segregate the trash. The output is several items that are reused or sold for recycling purposes: plastic, metal, glass, paper/cardboard, organic leftovers for feeding the livestock, and compost. The reuse and recycle rate is around 85% of the collected waste, which has proved to be one of the most efficient means of waste reuse. The main drive for the zabaleen is to gain income for the 50,000 inhabitants of the dumpsite areas in Cairo. The familial connections among the zabaleen have acted as the bond that keeps the garbage collection business going on through the generations.

Research offered recommendations for integrating the zabaleen of Cairo within the city's framework of solid waste management (Milik 2010; ElMahdy 2016; Bakry, 2015). However, the city's authorities have followed exclusion politics for keeping the zabaleen out of the way, with no clue of providing another more economically feasible replacement.

### **III. Recommendations for Future Research**

In Egypt, the discourses surrounding pollution in our homes, workplaces, schools, universities are quite far from the concepts of 'environmental awareness', 'sustainable environment' or 'nature conservation'. According to a study on cultural constructions of pollution, Egyptians rated garbage and sewage as the two largest threats to their environment (Hopkins et al. 2001). Pollution is the more significant problem for us than preserving the natural environment. Subsequently, "the Egyptian metaphor to the environment [is] health and

cleanliness,” as opposed to the western metaphor for the environment: preserving nature (Rice, 2006).

The garbage questions expressed by Cairo’s middle class are quite superficial; lacking profoundness and addressing the larger environmental picture, the global environmental concern. Still, this global environmental image was imposed by the neoliberal ethic only to integrate the local into an already formulated western set of environmental globalized standards. For instance, the Rio Summit’s sustainable development goals or SDGs are the benchmarks enforced by the global

Therefore, a future study can stem from the local conceptions about the environment, household waste management and doable steps to waste reduction. Introducing a bottom-up educational hands-on approach can serve in addressing possible ways and viable methods to develop the zabaleen, and to involve the households in founding relations and communication channels with the zabaleen.

Finally, I quote Robin Nagle’s when embarking on a future research: “As a scholar, you can start anywhere. And that’s the beauty and the challenge, the frustration and the terror and the lifetime obsession of a scholarly bent. I start with this set of questions because I just can’t figure it out.” (Carp, 2010)

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