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The American University in Cairo

School of Humanities and Social Sciences (HUSS)

**Navigating the Cairene Table: Food and Family between  
What Is Ideal and What Is Real**

A Thesis Submitted to  
The Department of Sociology, Egyptology, Anthropology

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for  
The degree of Master of Arts in Sociology-Anthropology

By Iman Mohammed Hamdy Afify

Under the supervision of Dr. Gwyneth Talley  
September 2022

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## **Introduction**

## Abstract

Our daily encounters with food, especially during our childhood, play a crucial role in shaping and informing our identity and our habitus. In this research, by using multimodal and auto ethnography, I argue that due to the guiding path that our senses carve for us, we make sense and contextualise our surroundings through our senses, and not only the five senses of vision, smell, taste, hearing, and touch, but also through our inner senses of time and temporality, and how time and memory play an important role in the registration of our surroundings through our bodies and senses. I am dealing with the senses as a guide for us, starting from childhood and planting the seeds of sensorial ideologies and contextualisation through our exposure to different sensorial elements via food. The first time of smelling a breakfast item that later on became a favourite; tasting tea for the first time in a family gathering and having the memory stamped in mind by the strong earthy flavour of the beverage; the sound of food sizzling in a pan, signalling the preparation of a feast; the first touch of a bread loaf brushing against one's palm, tethering its warmth and its texture into one's hands, are all examples of first encounters of a life-long sensuous and ideological affair with food. How do the passing interactions with food during our childhood shape our future understandings of our surrounding world(s)? The senses not only played an important role in understanding the self as part of my autoethnography, but the senses also helped in understanding the other aspects of this research being gender, kinship, social representation, and class dynamics.

When discussing food and family, discussing gender and kinship is inevitable. How does food and family intertwine under the guises of gender and kinship? And why can food and family never be confined within the limitations offered by binaries? Although the Egyptian society is considered by Egyptians and non-Egyptians alike as patriarchal, I describe that this is not the case when it comes to what is being seen on the façade of a household vis-à-vis what

actually takes place within the confinements of the domestic sphere. The ideal image of a family might be known as a patriarch/breadwinner being the man of the house, but from fieldwork, I argue that this is not always the case, but far from it. The factuality of the matter is far more complex and multi-layered than to be deemed either purely patriarchal or radically matriarchal. There are aspects and details that go into each and every household that give it its own context and constitute how the household is run and maintained. Overlooking the influence of capitalism and how it goes hand in hand with patriarchy will also misbalance the scales of my argument; thus, rendering it essential to be pointed out.

Finally, how can the supermarket be looked at as a social simulacrum of class and class identity? What are the sensorial differences between the confined supermarket and the open souq? I showcase that the places that sell food (i.e., supermarkets and souqs) not only sell the product, but also sell a class identity informed by the brand bought by the consumer. The supermarket is not only a place of shopping, but it is also a systematic place of identity distribution. I argue that, unlike the haphazardness of the souq, the supermarket is hyper-organised to the point of sensorial sterility and is deprived of the social dramatisation of daily interactions.

### **Welcome to the Kitchen: An Introduction**

I went into fieldwork thinking I needed a certain setting for my interviews, a certain environment where I can channel my inner Malinowski and a certain unfamiliarity to fulfil what I understood fieldwork to be. However, the training I received during my first year in my MA also cautioned me that the context and logistics of the fieldwork pave the way to what I need to do, what I need to let go of, and what I need to get creative with. The theories I read during my pre-masters' courses, the way fieldwork is explained and mapped out on paper vis-à-vis the situations and circumstances encountered in the field, were reflected in this thesis as

an analogy of my own research of exploring and contextualising what is ideal and what is real in order to reflect and highlight the complexities and multilayers of the middle-class Egyptian society through food and family ideologies.

Doing ethnography means actively carrying out participant observation and engaging with the community members I am interested in exploring and understanding. However, this was not easy to bring together due to the Corona moment we have been living in since the beginning of 2020. This shifted my attention, along with my research orientation, inwards. Instead of searching for strangers to carry out fieldwork, I turned to my family and close friends to engage them with my fieldwork as my interlocutors. I entered the field thinking I needed to visit strangers and explore their lives to have an original and authentic ethnographic account of the different aspects of food ways within the Egyptian household. But what is the middle-class? The term middle class is ambiguous and can be a liminal trap for a researcher, especially if I look at it as a solid class of a socioeconomic being. The Egyptian middle-class is not singular and society does not engage with the spatial and positional diversity of this class. At the beginning of my fieldwork, I tried dealing with the middle class as a case study, but I fell into the trap of searching for the exotic vis-à-vis the familiar, trying to adapt a home vs. away approach (Birckhead 2004). I could not be more wrong. This is why I chose autoethnography as my core research methodology and the basis of building up on the different research modes and approaches that followed which I discuss later on in this section.

I came to realise that I was arrogant enough to look at my home lifeworld and that of the people around me as something ordinary, mundane, and not worthy of exploring. This only created an impasse. The uncertain times we were, and still are facing also meant that I needed to carry out traditional fieldwork in untraditional circumstances. Seeking advice from my



professors and colleagues, I came to understand that my topic is versatile enough to be explored through my own lifeworld, my own home. It was important to reach a certain level of humility to convince myself that having my friends and their parents be my interlocutors, and recording interviews with my uncles and aunt, is fieldwork.

To have a cohesive and sufficient material, I needed to mesh the methodologies I studied over a year and a half together in order to create a sort of blanket that covers all the aspects I needed to explore in my fieldwork. This is why methodologies such as autoethnography, sensory and virtual ethnography, and participant observation seemed like they are heavily complementing each other, and I could not have carried out one of them without the other. Doing participant observation, which is the heart of ethnography, meant I also needed to conduct interviews in all shapes, forms and sizes. I initially thought that the quick chats in the kitchen, the long conversations in the living room were not considered interviews when they were not being recorded, but as I read further into interviewing and when it became the core methodology of my research, I realised that interviewing is very encompassing and versatile (Koven 2014).

Instead of searching for interlocutors I knew nothing about. Looking at my variables, I come from a middle-classed Egyptian family, and I share the same stratum with my friends and colleagues, so I decided to start from myself and move outwards. I started with my family members, explaining my research, what fieldwork meant, and what I needed to collect enough data to start writing my thesis. My mother suggested I should seek out my friends and their families as well. Given that my social circle is small, and my friends were all self-isolating as well, she saw it as a good opportunity for a conversation starter.

I started with the closest to me back then, Shorouq, who was also self-isolating and seldom left the house, and she was more than welcoming to contribute with whatever she can to help me with my research. This was in Mid-August of 2020, and it was one of the first times I personally left my house since the imposed lockdown by the state in mid-March of the same year. I spent three weeks at Shorouq's, where I got to know her parents more, by participating in most of the house chores and moving through the familial hierarchy from being a guest to being a second daughter (something I extensively discuss through the core chapters of my thesis). Sensory ethnography started bubbling and thickening as my interactions with Shorouq's family intertwined and mingled. This caused more in-depth conversations about generational differences and old-school values (discussed in chapter 1), along with the different meanings of what it means to be a woman in a patriarchal society (discussed in chapter 2). I would be standing in the kitchen with Shorouq's mother while she is making a special stew or baking a treat for her husband and the smell would bring up memories from her past or from my own. The stories would go on for an hour or so and the relatability of both our stories add more to the intimacy of the process and showcase how sometimes we are motivated to cook a certain dish or carryout a certain act as a way of revisiting the past with all its familiarities that we longed for. Although no repetition is the same, and the only constant throughout time is change, it was always about memories and revisiting the past with my interlocutors during fieldwork, and as a nostalgic person myself, I loved sharing and revisiting childhood memories with my interlocutors through cooking, tasting and smelling the food, creating a shared intimate experience.

I then travelled to Saudi Arabia in the second week of September 2020 to visit my parents there. During the next three months I spent there, I focused on my own family's

dynamics and interrelations when it came to their understandings of gender, kinship, social representation, and nostalgia. This was the longest period of time I spent with my father since I was 16 years old, and this had its own culminations, revelations, and ramifications that I discuss in Chapter 3 of this research through the lens of gender and kinship and their shifting dynamics. I also conducted a couple of interviews with Shorouq to ask her several questions about the kinds of meals she preferred as a child and why she preferred them. The interviews were unstructured and felt more like a chatter with a friend; however, they lacked the sense of intimacy and human emotion that we both felt during our face-to-face encounters. This was virtual ethnography's way of emerging itself to me. I let it marinate until later on in my fieldwork, when I needed to expand my interlocutors list in order to have a more encompassing understanding of how food and family go hand in hand from different people's perspectives.

After returning in mid-December, I wanted to expand my horizon and try to move outside of conducting fieldwork from the comfort of my household. I reached out to Lamis and Lujain, who are my other two close friends. They were more than willing to contribute as my interlocutors, along with their mothers and close family members, but they did not know anybody from their social circles that was interested enough to contact me. Between Corona, financial crises, and adapting to the new world, I started viewing my research topic about food and its social and familial implications as irrelevant, or unimportant. This caused me to reach an impasse, and by the end of March of 2021, I was weighing my options of either dropping out of the programme or changing my thesis track to a comprehensive examination. I needed a change of perspective and to surrender more to the circumstances. Thus, I turned to the marinating virtual ethnography and decided to create a Google Form to share over my different

social media outlets, as an open call to whoever is interested to discuss food and family via Zoom, the phone or a distant face-to-face interview.

Throughout the next two months, ten people filled in the form. If anything, this shows that my social media connections are not my strongest point. However, I filtered down the participants by calling the phone numbers they left in the form. Two phone numbers were incorrect, with no email I could refer back to, one of them was out of the country, three were distant friends of mine, one was an Instagram food blogger and fellow gastronomic researcher, Salma, who became an acquaintance throughout the pandemic through our mutual interactions via Instagram, two kept on rescheduling so I understood their subtle yet polite disinterest, and one whom I proceeded to interviewing, yet the interview was not fruitful.

The entire time of my fieldwork, I was still conducting unstructured interviews with my family members, with Lamis and her mother, Lujain, Shorouq and their mothers, Dina, and Belal. From June, until the beginning of August, I revisited the data I have so far collected and started working on filling in the gaps. I conducted three more interviews with Lamis and one with her mother via Facebook Messenger video calls, because I was out of Cairo. The same procedure went with Lujain's mother at the end of July, because she was in Saudi Arabia, and one Zoom interview with Dina, because she was outside of Cairo at her beach house for her summer vacation.

### An Ethnographic Connoisseur: On Methodology

What takes place in the field is constituted upon the methodologies and methods chosen and navigated to actualise the research. Methodology, in my case, it is like the kitchen, where the ingredients are prepared and turned into meals to then be consumed. After receiving my Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval in the beginning of August of 2020, and like any researcher -or chef of that matter- I rolled up my sleeves and started scouting for my *brigade*

*de cuisine* (The kitchen staff hired in a restaurant to operate and prepare meals. In my case, my brigade is my interlocutors, because during my fieldwork, it felt like we were all cooking up a family meal together). I came to realise that it is not going to be an easy task given the current pandemic situation. Thus, like any smart cook, I checked the ingredients I already had in my kitchen. I reached out to family members and close friends as a start and moved my way outwards.

In the first part of this section, I discuss autoethnography, why it is important to my research, and how it helped in setting my tone and positionality in both the fieldwork and the writing processes. It also came as an important research approach due to the outbreak of the pandemic, which made it shift from a secondary mode of research to being my primary mode of research. Moving along, I will talk about sensory ethnography, why it is a crucial method when researching food, family, and nostalgia and how it helped my interlocutors and I open up paths of thought and memories that would have been otherwise difficult without the sensorial elements of food (i.e., smell, taste, sound, and texture).

Interviewing and how it was not part of the main methodologies I planned on using in my fieldwork due to a few presuppositions, which were mainly my initial understanding of what an interview is vis-à-vis what I came to learn throughout the research process, is something I reflect upon later on in this section. This further helped in highlighting how versatile the field of interviewing is. It included the casual conversations I had with my family over supper or in a warm summer night, and the small talk I had with Shorouq's mother (introduced in chapter 1) in the kitchen a couple of times, or the *Zoom* interviews I conducted that I am still unable to categorise as structured, semi-structured or unstructured. Interviewing is also a crucial approach when researching the self and looking towards actualising a collaborative ethnography, where interlocutors and researcher became active contributors to the research via a symbiotic relationship of both sides asking questions and simultaneously

answering them; where sensoria, visual culture, memory, and shared experiences came together to fill in the crevices of knowledge.

I consider visual ethnography as part of sensory ethnography. Having the visual stimulation of childhood photos of family gatherings, birthday parties and the likes, is an important factor in memory recollections and retrospective storytelling (Kuhn 1991). I demonstrate the important factors of visual material in the field in this section while also explaining how visual and autoethnography can go hand in hand, not only when I was revisiting memories, but also when during my autoethnographic research on my own family (ibid.). In the sections to come, I showcase some photographs I took during fieldwork to better elaborate and clarify some of the aspects I discuss, like the power dynamics and gendered spaces of the kitchen within my household.

In addition, participant observation, throughout fieldwork, took different shapes and I came to understand it through different aspects. This particular approach, although a core one to ethnographic research, needed to be heavily manoeuvred due to the global outbreak of the pandemic. In this part, I debate how carrying out fieldwork amid an international health crisis changes our understanding of many things, including the traditional research methods we are familiar with. This also added extra challenges-turned-opportunities which proved that the circumstances of the fieldwork outline and contextualise the research approach.

Finally, I showcase my experience with virtual ethnography, and how the experience was not just interacting with the cyberspace, but also using it as an alternative form of communication and interviewing. However, this final part is concerned with how much virtually interviewing people was not as fruitful as I planned it to be.

#### Participating Less, Observing More

As it is the core of any ethnographic study, participant observation is inevitable in any review of methodology. For my topic, dealing with food and family and what they both mean

in relation to one another, I had to find a way through using this approach even if my fieldwork was carried out amid a global health crisis. Participant observation includes the everyday tasks of buying the ingredients, preparing the items, and cooking the food to then be consumed with other people or alone (Crowther 2013). It was also crucial in order to enhance the sensorial and collaborative aspects in my fieldwork.

I carried out participant observation more or less. When I first started my fieldwork, it was in August 2020. I went to Shorouq's house and stayed with her and her family for three weeks. Although the safety and health precautions stressed on social distancing and self-isolation, her and I realised that we were already doing that for the past 6 months, so it was more fruitful to quarantine together rather than separately. She knew I needed to start my fieldwork and she wanted to help, and we both knew that there will be little to no health risks, especially that her parents spent half of the period I was there at their beach house.

In those three weeks, I interviewed Shorouq, and we had many conversations around food and family and what they mean to her, to her mother and to her father. I also had lengthy discussions surrounding familial values with her parents (Tante Nagda and Uncle Gamal), and what sharing a meal means to them. This, along with the daily interactions I had with them, which I discuss in chapter 1 and 2, enriched my experience and gave me a glimpse of what participant observation is like in the field. However, the experience was still infested with the distance keeping and the over-sanitisation of my hands after touching anything, which only increased my anxiety and made me feel alienated. I also did not have another stay-in experience like this one, so I needed to rely on my own household for participant observation for the following 6 months and carried out interviews for the next 3. There was always something missing, but I came to realise that the autoethnography, the interviews, the photographs I took, are all part of my participant observation experience (Rose 2003; Pink 2015).

Finally, I came to realise that observing the mundanity of the everyday act of food practices is in and of itself a form of participation. When I turned to myself, I realised that I am part of other bigger circles than my own. I am part of a nuclear family with its own understandings of food and eating. I am part of an extended family that has different meanings of kinship and commensality. I am also part of different social groups and circles that each has their own interpretations of class, gender, and food as an identity. Giving in to the field and its circumstances was an important act of serendipity I needed to practice in order to adapt to the new modes of doing fieldwork that Corona imposed.

### Exploring the Self and Discovering Others: On Autoethnography

When I first started scouting for methodologies, and what is the best fit for research mainly about food and family with many themes in between, I knew that autoethnography was important for my research. However, autoethnography became the foundation of my research after the pandemic outbreak in early 2020. Due to the uncertainty, we lived and continue to live in, and the crucial importance of self-isolation and social distancing, it turned from an option I can use to further deepen my research experience to the only option I have, at least for some time.

As I went deeper into autoethnography, I came to learn that the self is not in isolation to others (Bochner & Ellis 1992) and that, even if we were all isolated from each other for a given amount of time, we -myself and others- are still connected and very much interactive, which is exactly what I needed from my fieldwork. Doing autoethnography also meant carrying out a collaborative witnessing to the shared events that my interlocutors and I went through (Ellis 2016). This ranged from what memory means in times of uncertainty and how we all found solace in our pasts when the present and future trajectories of all our lives seemed blurry to sharing childhood stories about the food we used to eat and still enjoy and the mischiefs we



carried out as children that our parents considered devilish and *e'ib* (Shameful, disgraceful. Acts that are frowned upon by people and society in general).

Understanding concepts like familial hierarchies and the gender relations within my own family was part of the reason why I needed to use autoethnography. It helped me understand my parents' positions in relation to their siblings and my grandparents' positions in relation to their own and their children as well (Fa'avae 2018). This understanding of concepts made clearer my own positionality within the family and the family's hierarchy. It also helped me understand the politics of kinship in my own nuclear, as well as extended family, and why I was chosen to be the authoritative figure when my parents are not home. It goes beyond the fact that I am the older sibling, or I know better. The connotations of such a choice go beyond age and gender, and it is something I delve into extensively in chapter 2.

Delving into social dynamics such as family, I discovered and uncovered family stories and secrets. It felt like a coming together to honour the pieces of our lives that I feel were no longer there. Autoethnography has also helped flavouring my fieldwork, because through it I revisited traditions and dishes I thought, due to my lack of practicing or making them, were wiped clean from my memory. It also helped me in collaborating with my fellow interlocutors to flesh out their own pasts and favourite, flavourful memories. Everything came to a full circle, from memory we began, because it was a process of creating meaning for others' as well as myself witnessing; we enacted remembering, memorialising stories not to be forgotten; with intimacy we finished. As the building blocks of autoethnography, memory provides coherence between past and present, self and others, and self and culture (Giorgio 2016).

#### Can You Smell that? I Think the Past is on Fire

My fieldwork would have never been complete without incorporating the the body and its senses. Sensory ethnography was important since my research is about food and what it signifies in everyday practices (Pink 2015), so it was important to explore how far taste, sight,

touch, and smell can take us, especially in discussions concerning familial traditions, memories and gender roles and identity when preparing and consuming food (Seremetakis 1996).

Ethnographies from the anthropology of food and the senses have shown that mundane moments in which people taste foods are anything but benign: they are negotiated and discussed about in cooking and food production process (Janeja 2010), used in meals in everyday life to reproduce gender and age distinctions within a group of people (Holtzman 2009), mobilised to create a sense of place in the production and consumption of foods (Trubek 2008; Meneley 2014), and cherished as they are tied up with memories from the past (Seremetakis 1996; Sutton 2001).

#### To Record or Not to Record? That Is the Question!

My initial understanding of interviewing was influenced by my undergraduate background, where we would be asked by our professors in the media department to carry out strictly structured interviews as a simulation of a formal TV talk show. However, this is not the case in ethnographic fieldwork. Interviews are a representation of the realities and experiences of myself and others (Pink 2015). After the fourth recorded interview, I came to learn that the conversations I go through are the connective tissue of all other methods used to actualise my research topic. I also learnt more and more about the impromptu interviews that come in the heap of the moment, so I had to be prepared to take mental notes and jot them right away when I got home or to record if it will not interfere with the continuity of the story (Boellstroff et. al 2012). With the total of 17 recorded interviews, I finally understood that interviews, as any aspect of my fieldwork, take the shape of the context in which they are conducted.

Setting a recorder, carrying out a minute or two of small talk (i.e. how the person's day was, what they had for lunch, how are they feeling about being recorded, and if they are okay with being recorded) to make sure that all voices and sounds are clear, then continuing the conversation that an interlocutor and I started half an hour ago adds an organic dimension and

a sense of serendipity to the fieldwork journey (Boellstroff et. al 2012). This is another thing I came to learn through interviews; they can be autoethnographic (Bochner & Ellis 1992; Boylorn 2017; Fa'avae 2018) and sensorial (Pink 2015) as much as they are mundane and ordinary. By sharing experiences of both my interlocutors and I, I set the tone of the interview as collaborative, trying to remove the power hierarchies of interviewee and interviewer, and showing vulnerability to build trust (Hesse-Biber 2008). I carried out interviews within the kitchen space, be it with a friend as we cook a meal to revisit the warmth of having a family gathering, or with a one of my friends' mothers, in the form of small talk that then morphed into a detailed account of a certain event. Small talk was an active ingredient in my fieldwork in lieu of interviewing that took and required both me and my interlocutors to exchange and extract questions and information.

There is a fine and fluid line between unstructured interviews and small talk; among many reasons, small talk is important because it makes the information accessible and maintains the grounds for building up rapport and trust (Drissen & Jansen 2013), especially within the Egyptian society that has small talk as a big part of its local culture. Be it brief encounters with neighbours on staircases, having a final catch up with visiting relatives on the threshold of the house's door before leaving, or the small talk between a vendor and a buyer, Egyptians are known for their affinity of casual small conversations. This cultural norm helped me with my social interactions and turned out to be an important sociolinguistic tool of communication in my fieldwork (ibid.). Small talk became a pivotal approach in my fieldwork due to its smoother nature as a conversation starter instead of formally labelling the conversation "an interview," emphasising the intimate and friendly nature of the topic discussed being food regardless of the aspect tackled.

I discuss the virtual aspect of an interview in depth in a later part of this section, since these interviews were recorded, and they simply lacked the other important sensorial and immersive elements. For now, I want to dedicate the final bit of this part to the nostalgic tone that always governed the storytelling bits of my fieldwork. The interviews did not always contain the visual aspect to them, but they certainly contained the other methodologies. However, when there were pictures of a family gathering here or a birthday there, the memories were more vivid, and the emotions were more intense.

Whenever I start smelling the ethnographic material in whatever is being told, my hands itch trying to reach for my phone to record what is being said. Of course, the person I am with always knows when I am recording. However, it is always me who is torn between immortalising the exact words of the teller or keeping the flow of the story intact without the interruption of asking the person to hold the thought till I open my phone and press record. The visual material come in handy, especially in these situations. If I see a picture or a video, I will remember what is being said better and I will not need it recorded. The pictures also help in the telling of the story and emphasises the nostalgic theme of the conversations.

#### I Spy with My Little Eye a Photograph of Your Family

I put in consideration the context in which the images were produced, because although a picture is worth a thousand words, a picture also hides a thousand different stories depending on who is narrating what went behind the scenes. In the process of invoking memories and creating the right sensorial environment to do so, it is important to also remember what was taking place behind the scenes (Kuhn 1991; Pink 2006). Images are also aid in the elaboration of certain stories, especially when words do not help expressing the emotions evoked by the hidden context of the photographs (Rose 2003). Whenever my brother and I revisit any of the family albums, we always stop at the images of our childhood birthdays. We both ponder on how happy we were and how simpler were the times back then, yet words never seem to come

together to describe how we are truly feeling, that is because part of the context is always not shown within the frames of the photo.



*Figure 1 My brother's (Abdallah) 3rd birthday. Photo taken by my maternal aunt (Shosho). Circa 2002. People in the photo from left to right: Teita (grandmother) Zeinab, Abdallah, me (six and a half years old), and Geddo (grandfather) Abdou.*

When researching memory, specifically familial memories, the photos are tools to help with the intersection between past and present. Photographs can offer a complimenting insight and accuracy to the context of which the events framed within the photograph took place (Kuhn 1991; Rose 2003). The process of meaning-making also depends on the story involved with the photograph. Most of the time, we tend to immortalise the perfect moment; to capture the ideal image and remember the situation as depicted within the frames of the picture and not as it actually happened. Photographs have the ability to send people revisiting them into a meta-temporal journey of what is beyond the perfectly orchestrated event (Kuhn 1991).

The photo above shows a moment of bonding between grandparents and grandchildren in the form of an intimate birthday celebration of their youngest grandchild (my brother, Abdallah) during the winter break of February 2002. Although Abdallah's birthday is in March, my brother and I were not going to be there at the time, because our break would be over, and we would be back in Jordan for the spring semester in school. Thus, my aunt decided that we

should celebrate the occasion when we could and not when we should have. She also made a gesture of inclusion by commenting that this celebration is also for my sixth birthday which nevertheless was long overdue in October of 2001, but again, since my brother and I were in Jordan for the fall semester of school back in October, she saw that celebrating the both of us is a better idea than dwelling on the chronological details of birthdays.

So, what is the picture not telling the viewer? Why do we still need to ask questions regarding the context of the picture when we have the final product in front of us? What the picture does not show is the fact that neither my mum (Hanan) nor my dad (Mohammed) were present at that moment of celebration. My mum was back in Jordan due to her work, and my father chose to spend the evening with his mother because there was a family dinner that evening with most of his family members gathered and he wanted to attend since he misses them dearly and have not seen them all in a while because of his time in Jordan.

As a form of compensation for the absence of our parents, my maternal aunt (Shosho) orchestrated this intimate birthday party as a means of lifting our spirits and, as part of her habit of creating pleasant childhood memories with both Abdallah and me. The picture does not show that this birthday is a form of compensation; that Shosho knew that we wished our mother were there so she called her over the phone to sing us happy birthday with the rest of them, but found her sleeping because she has work early the next morning; that every birthday for the entirety of the nine years we spent in Jordan, my brother and I would either spend it like any other day in Jordan, or celebrate it as a form of compensation in Egypt. The tale told of this photo, although from my own perspective as both one of the owners of the photograph and as one of the viewers, showcases the importance of meaning-making, as Kuhn (1991) argues, through the conceptualisation and unfolding of the context through which the photo was taken. The photos that follow in this thesis not only allow the reader/viewer a better understanding of

the situations I discuss and analyse, but also give both meaning and depth to the concepts and methods I used during my research.

“Sorry, My Internet Connection Is Bad”

Although it challenges the main ideals set around the term “fieldwork”, and the traditional concepts of “away” and “home,” conducting fieldwork virtually emphasises the basic definition of the discipline of being “holistic”. Cyberspace is not to be thought of differently from any other space involving real-life communication or vis-à-vis interactions (Hine, 2000). The challenge of virtual ethnography is to explore the definition of barriers and the making of connections, especially when it comes to knowing what is ‘virtual’ and what is ‘real’. As much as the interviews were important and they stressed on essential points in my research like the connection a mother creates between her daughter and the kitchen space, the intimacy of face-to-face interviews and the rapport built from shared experiences and sensorial stimulation was scarce and the interviews felt bland.

Due to Corona, I continued my interviews; however virtually, via video conferencing platforms such as *Zoom* and *Google Meet*. Although this might have been a fruitful ethnographic experience to another anthropologist, I did not yield the needed fieldwork experience from it. This might have been due to my lack of experience in virtual interviewing, nevertheless, the interviews lacked the senses of relatability and intimacy I found throughout the different types of interviews I carried out. The virtual ones did not have the familiar setting of sitting in a living room or a kitchen space where we both talked about things while sharing other material like cooking a meal together or looking at a family album.

The virtual interviews felt more like a formal conference call that the interviewee and I wanted to end sooner than later. Even if the interviewee was someone willing to talk and share their thought, there was still a sense of alienation roaming around us. The feeling of formality could be because we had already subconsciously established the bond between these

platforms and our work meetings and lectures, so we could not get out of the formal ambiance these virtual rooms imposed.

All in all, the three interviews I carried out over the internet, although had some important points and helped me with my understanding of positionality and subjectivity in the field, did not quite resonate with me as much as the face-to-face interviews did, even the ones I carried out with my friends, and the internet connection was bad most of the time that we both needed to keep checking if we hear each other. These circumstances caused the loss of continuity and cohesiveness of stories in some cases (Boellstorff et. al 2012).

#### Between the Binaries of Arabic and the Complexities of Food and Family

We use language to create reality by naming and giving meaning to aspects of experience from a specific point of view, as individuals take up particular subject positions and produce themselves through language (Keating & Egbert 2004). Conversation and language are vital resources for ethnographers in their goal to understand a society from the local perspective (ibid.). I argue that it is more important to convey the right image from a local perspective to an international reader, especially when conducting fieldwork in a place where its language is gendered and hierarchal. In the process of turning my fieldwork encounters into coherent chapters, I needed to make sure that the essence of the Arabic language used during my fieldwork was caught in the lines of this thesis chapters.

In the Arab culture in general and Egyptian in particular, giving people who are older in age a title means showing respect and appreciation, unless the older person prefers to remove formalities during conversations. The honorifics we give to others can “offer a window on the construction of gendered identities and social relations in social practice” (McConnell-Ginet 2003: 69). Parkinson (1985:225), in a study of terms of address in Egypt, notes that “knowledge of the proper use of terms of address is, therefore, as important to the overall success of a communication as knowledge of the conjugation of verbs would be. The terms give the entire



communication its social setting and tell addressee how the rest of the communication is to be taken or understood” (Bassiouney 2020:174). Due to the symbolic meaning given to the gesture of giving titles to elders I felt obligated to leave in the “Tante/Uncle” honorifics for my older interlocutors who I came in contact with, especially because I have known them for a long time. Mentioning both my parents’ first names throughout the thesis to give them agency instead of simply referring to them as “mother and father” also felt alienating and simply not right, especially that there are no other honorific titles I could have used, but it is necessary to create a more coherent experience to the readers.

However, the older people whom I mention without the honorific titles are people I did not come in direct contact with; thus, I did not feel the moral obligation to show respect through my use of my language. Although the literal translation of these titles indicate that me and the interlocutors, I refer to using these titles are blood related, with Tante literally meaning auntie, and uncle indicating the person is my direct uncle, we are not related, but it is common in Egypt to use these surnames when referring to elders.

Furthermore, the name titles and respect-giving was not the only challenge I faced when translating my fieldwork encounters. The real challenge was trying to translate the swear words and profanity uttered in Arabic and trying as much as I can to capture the true essence of the foul language when written in English. A word like *sharmouta*, can be easily translated into “bitch” or “whore,” but the more complex Arabic curse words, (e.g., *ebn metnaka*, literally meaning son of a fucked-up woman) were the ones trickier to confine within the English translation, because it did not deliver the intensity of the Arabic meaning when code-switching. The reason why I chose to speak about profanity is because how much of a strong connection it has with gender in my research. Profanity, as will be seen in chapter two, is used by my father as a form of power dynamic to compensate for his downward mobility within the household.

Additionally, the gendered linguistic arsenal of both men and women is starkly different (Gauthier 2012).

During my fieldwork, I noticed that men can easily lose their temper, start cursing and cussing, and put on a show of anger and hostility, all as part of their behaving as socially constructed men. “Yel’an abu kasalek,” (God damn your laziness) was how my uncle, Ahmed expressed his dominance over Wafaa, his wife, was sitting on the sofa while he was in the kitchen helping his brother, Mahmoud, prepare breakfast. Although he willingly got to the kitchen, he later on came out to the living room and felt the need to shout and display the range of his voice as a form of regaining dominance by making his wife go to the kitchen instead of him. When Wafaa got into the kitchen, she was upset and frustrated and called the whole situation “ghabie,” (stupid) although she mumbled the word not wanting her husband to hear her.

The daily interactions of men and women within the household can be reflected on the bigger scale of the interactions of men and women within the Egyptian society. When linguists study the Arabic language, they generalise their assumptions, and when linguists make generalisations about a community at large, and such generalisations are applied to gender by extension, since Arabic is a gendered language (Holmes & Meyerhoff 2003). Gender, however, is not only an essential factor in language variation and change, but also a factor that interacts with other independent variables in a community, that is, it has to be ‘put into context’ (ibid:9). This generalisation gives the assumption that women in general are more polite than men and are concerned with self-preservation. However, gender, much like power, is context-dependant (Kiesling 2003; Bassiouney 2020). The mentioning of the profanity I encountered in my fieldwork, as long as trying to translate it as accurately as I can, was important to showcase how men use foul language to assert dominance and control, while women, if they ever use it, to try and express part of the frustration they feel due to everyday situations.

# **An Anthropological Set Menu: On Conceptual Framework and Review of Literature**

The different themes that showed up as I went along in my fieldwork and during my write up need to be laid out and explored in a more obvious way rather than leaving the reader figure out which chapter discusses what theme. There are four main themes in this thesis that revolve around, and showcase, a different aspect of food: Food and the senses; how food can be used to stimulate the senses as well as make sense of the different contexts and modalities of everyday life, and the impact that has on memory and nostalgia (Bergson 1989; Howes 2019; Sutton 2010). The process of mimesis can be used, even if unconsciously, by people to live a certain memory from the past (Gibbs 2011), and how that greatly affects our emotional capacities and interferes with our everyday dealings with affect (Massumi 2015).

The second theme is concerned with food and the politics of kinship and domesticity (Abu-Lughod 1998; Joseph 2018); how food plays an important role in setting familial hierarchies and mediating power relations. I address how food is a signifier of gender roles within the household and how societal constructs shape most of our perceptions (Joseph 2012, Counihan 2004).

The first two themes of food and the senses and food and gender and kinship are more concerned with the domestic politics of food. The other theme is juxtaposed within a wider space; looking at what has been said about food outside the household, and how food is an important aspect of hegemony and symbolic power. Through this theme I explore food through social representation, identity, class distinction and food in the age of globalisation (Bourdieu 1979; Rouchdy 2000; Beriss 2019; Zubaida 2021).

## **Sensorial Recollections: On Memory and the Senses**

The mobilisation of the word “taste” to describe refined and discerning choice -and the social status that might go with it- should alert us to the way that bodily sensorial life is implied

in such judgments from the start. Here taste is more than cultural capital, it is cultural power played out on a violently affective plane (Bourdieu 1979). The way family members mobilise within the kitchen space showcases how it can be used to reorganise the domestic sphere depending on multiple categories, including the age, gender, and financial status of the family members.

“As place is sensed, senses are placed; as places make sense, senses make place” (Fleld 2020: 179), and synaesthesia can also be a space of explaining the senses, the sensorial, and the human sensorium (Highmore 2012). We are heavily influenced by our synaesthetic experiences with food when we buy it, prepare it, cook it, showcase it on the dinner table and share it with others (Sutton 2010). According to Henri Bergson in *Matter and Memory*, during the process of our memory formation, we record the events of our daily life as they take place in a unique time and provide each gesture with certain spatiotemporal coordinates (i.e., a place and a date). We maintain this past, and preserve it in our minds, regardless of its utility and practical application. We preserve it in itself and, at the same time, contract it in various states by the needs of action that we always position in an actual present, because we are in a constant movement from past to future through the present moment. This repetition of memory-images/recollections through the stimulation of the senses through our bodies caused by food merits the ascription of the word memory, not because it is involved in the conservation of past images, but rather because it prolongs utility of the recollections into a present moment. The task of this kind of memory is to ensure that the accumulation of memory images is rendered supplementary to practice, making sure that only those past images come into operation by coordination with a present perception, and so enabling a useful combination to emerge between past and present images (Bergson 1988).

Through mimesis, we replicate the actions of the people we shared our food experiences with, by our bodies, in order to re-enact memories of the past (Taussig 1993). Re-enactments

of sensations and potentialities of synaesthesia are more than just actions, because “with the immediate and present data of our senses, we mingle a thousand details out of our past experience” into our present moments (Bergson 1988:33). The mimesis of the sensorial worlds we experienced as young children in our current adult lives can be one of the ways we make sense of the world surrounding us. Through the social construction of food and feeding as practices that can be passed on from mother to child (Counihan 2004), I cannot help but link the three concepts of the passage of feeding experience, mimesis, and synaesthesia together (Counihan 2004; Gibbs 2010; Sutton 2010).

Synaesthesia also shows the ways that sensory experience is not simply passively registered but also actively created between people, because food is often a vehicle for such synesthetic practices. Synaesthesia is a key concept of the senses for food memories. In the sense that memory has multiple interacting sensory registers (Sutton 2010), because “sensing is conceptualised as an active social, rather than passive or purely psychophysical, process” that helps us with placing our senses within our memories and re-enacting our memories through our senses (Howes 2019:18).

What also defines our current state of culinary being is how much we are affected by our nostalgic senses and past imageries of childhood and upbringing. There is always this strong criticism on how Egyptians, are losing our culinary identity due to the modernisation of our lifestyle because of globalisation among other affective factors (Rouchdy 2000). Because the urban middle-class Egyptian families tend to follow what is *en vogue*, and how they always try to stay up to date with what is trending, be it in the culinary world or any other world of that matter, there is a great deal of concern regarding the disappearance of local Egyptian culture and authenticity in the face of the invasion of the Western culture (ibid.).

## Hyperrealities and Distinction: Identity and Taste

I demonstrate how the ruling class with its social, economic, and cultural capital can be defined as the generator of taste, while being modulated, and oriented mainly by state-controlled outlets (i.e., media, commodities, institutions...etc). Since my topic revolves around class differences and how that affects their overall tastes, Pierre Bourdieu's theories sufficiently support the arguments of my research. In his "*Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*" (1979), he distinguishes between the taste of luxury and the taste of necessity, the former explains the taste of those who can afford luxury and because of it become alienated from the latter's realm. This distinction, he argues, is clearly seen in food consumption, whereby this approach explains the systematic inclination of the lower middle class to the tastes of the upper classes. They attempt distancing themselves socially from the realm of necessity and from the realm of "the popular" in order to move closer to the refined or distinctive.

The contemporary Egyptian kitchen has been rigorously researched by scholars and academics in different disciplines. Such research involved how the kitchen space has changed and got influenced by different agents through time (Rouchdy 2000). Egyptian families have often used their kitchen spaces as a symbol of upgrading their socioeconomic standards of living along the model of the upper classes, and this has caused harsher economic conditions among the middle and lower classes which has led to frustrating results (ibid.)

However, it might not be as dark of change or culinary advancement that the culinary tastes are constantly changing according to the current local and global scenes. Globalisation might have been present even in the Middle Ages when different tastes and new kinds of food and cooking moved from one place to the other through trade, conquests, and colonialism (Zubaida 2021). This is why, I am more concerned with the rapid effects that globalisation has

on the modes of representation through food and culinary preferences within Egyptian families, rather than with the evolution of globalisation in itself.

Furthermore, the constantly changing economic conditions keep affecting the food choices that each family makes. What was considered in the past as fancy, refined food only eaten by royalty and nobles, might now be considered ordinary or *Baladi* (local) to some extent; thus, not consumed by higher social classes for its rather lower taste standards. I keep this in consideration due to its importance in constructing identities that relate to the businesses of catering, hosting, and public discourse (Zubaida 2000). Moreover, the kitchen space is controlled and monitored by whomever is in charge of preparing the meal for the family, this includes mothers, fathers, and children. The gastronomic preferences of the family members are kept in the consideration of whoever is preparing the meal in the kitchen in order to not only nurture the family, but also to create a pleasant eating experience.

Finally, I use the theories of *Simulacra and Simulation* (Baudrillard 1981) to argue that the supermarket, especially during the Ramadan shopping turns into a mayhem of food hoarding and grocery shopping mania to the point that Ramadan became a representation of itself through the food and events, advertisement and shows under its banner. In a Baudrillardian sense (1981), Ramadan became a hyperreality of itself that we can no longer dissociate from the foodstuffs associated with it, the social events that take place in it, and the TV ads and shows that emphasise on the idea that Ramadan is "*Lammah*". Not only does the supermarket become a hyperreality, but also it has become a representation of certain classes and social strata in comparison with the simple *Souq* is a compare and contrast situation I touch upon in the third chapter.

## The Rites of Passage: Food through Gender and Kinship

One aspect of the many that are imposed by the state on the community is the gender roles and dynamics within a household. Judith Butler, in her deconstructive performativity theory, spells out the implications of such theory for hegemonic constructions of the social -in particular gender- identities that people perform under the normalising effects of the cultural chronicles and rules (Fritsch 2013). Lila Abu-Lughod (1986), for example, asks us to rethink the ideologies that govern the domestic life of families and the relationship between Bedouin men and women. The different aspects of understanding family norms and traditions not only point in different directions, but also show the range of problems that have to be considered in reviewing what previous ethnographies wrote about families (Joseph 2018).

In most cases, it is the women of the family that are in charge of the processes of food and feeding, and it is their responsibility to organise and maintain the social and public relations of their husbands through their cooking (Rouchdy 2000). Their social recognition is derived from their ability to excel in the making and preparations of a certain dish, and the more complex the dish is, the more valuable the woman becomes (ibid.) This mostly happens in elite social circles and/or upper-class families, where the matriarch is not necessarily the main cook, but is closely monitoring and supervising the cooks responsible for meal preparations. In the final chapter, I demonstrate how their portrayal of the ideal image of the family adds to how much this image of the family around the dinner table is constantly hegemonized by the upper-class practices through shopping habits and division of labour in the kitchen space. This is useful in regard to analytical studies concerning family norms and how they are generated by gendered relations and interactions, along with the different forms of capital (economic, social, and cultural) such families possess, resulting in new ethnographic knowledge highlighting the microsphere of the family (L. Abu-Lughod 1998; Mahmood 2012).



Another aspect that has hugely influenced the Egyptian familial setting within the kitchen space is the power and gender dynamics (Joseph 2018). Abu-Lughod (2013) among other anthropologists researched the Egyptian family, she argues “in their attempt to nuance this approach, scholars attempted to reshape our concept of family through “deconstruction” and by using an idiom of power that addressed the nature of human interaction and explored the extent and kinds of family connections and practices under various social and economic conditions” (Naguib 2018:44).

Looking at the kitchen as a space of praxis –as a space of labour division, time consumption and surplus commodification, it is a showcase of extensive labour experience, especially that of women. The Egyptian women here are an example of how much time is put into training, perfecting a certain recipe, cleaning the aftermath of a gathering, or devoting days of one’s life to orchestrating the perfect feast. Kitchens as sites of decision making are structured by relations of power, authority, and gender dynamics; as hierarchical organisations, they raise issues of consent and obedience; as spaces of exclusion, they pose questions about membership and obligation (Weeks 2011). The way a mother trains her daughter during her coming-of-age years in the kitchen to have her rite of passage to womanhood is the socially constructed way of telling her that this is her one of few ways of becoming a “good wife”.

### **Navigating the Cairene Table: A Summary**

By the end of August 2021, I was ready to cook up the meal I have been gathering the ingredients for and start the rituals of dinner. In the following sections and chapters, I layout the fruits of my labour to share with the reader what I discovered, how I discovered it, how it affected me, and why I chose to include it, or not included, in this thesis. The fieldwork I carried out simmered down to five main groups, being Lujain and her family, Lamis and her family, Belal and his family, Dina, and her social circle, and me and my family.

In the first chapter, I discuss the aspect of Old Times versus Nowadays. How people, be it from older age groups or people my age, are constantly wishing we can go back in time when everything was “perfect”. This whole notion of romanticising the past is intriguing. The past is desired only because it is inaccessible, especially when it comes to family bonds, how members of the household navigate their relationships with one another and how their foodways change overtime. I further discuss our sensorial stimuli and how it can affect our judgements and understandings of prices, values, and ideologies, and the revisiting of certain memories, especially memories of kitchen talkies and family gatherings.

During my fieldwork, I noticed that my interlocutors’ judgments were governed by their pasts; always drawing their ideals and “perfect images” from their childhoods, a time when they were younger, past events, or to put it simply, from the past. Furthermore, how they do that is a point of relatedness and intimacy, because it is something that I noticed we all do (by all I mean my interlocutors and I). We would recollect the past by playing a certain song, eating a certain food item, smelling a certain scent/aroma, or by doing a certain thing that our parents used to do for us growing up. Another aspect I reflect on in this chapter is the aspect of “things were better in the past”, meaning that anything that happened before “now” is better, and I came to realise that this is the case only because it is taking place in a different time frame other than the present and it does not hold the suspense and mysteriousness of the future. This makes the past the perfect place to reflect and rather dump all our long-lost desires, dreams, and goals in life into.

Finally, this also the case with my father, an almost sixty-year-old man who is convinced, to his core, that all aspects of food, commensality, family and even marriage have lost their “*Baraka*” blessings, due to many aspects, including women no longer preferring to

be housewives and kids no longer preferring home-cooked meals due to the over-availability of delivery services and the abundance of junk food.

In chapter two I review the complexity of the power relations and gender dynamics and constitutions within the households by turning to my fieldwork and seeing how both men and women carry themselves in regard to how they view themselves vis-à-vis how society views them. I start with the women as I came to realise, through my fieldwork, that women tend to portray the servant figure in their respective households. However, most of the time, the servitude is coming from a place of love, appreciation, and even to give meaning and value to their self-worth and a purpose to their lives.

Although the reasons of their actions might not always be due to oppression, these women are carrying themselves in a self-abnegating way because it is what they know they should do. Be it because of their way of upbringing, their unspoken agreements with their husbands, or to fulfil their purpose in life. All these factors seem to be socially constructed in a way that most of these women carry themselves that way because that is the only way they know how. It is also because this is the way that is constantly promoted and praised by the general and everyday situations within the Egyptian society, be it by norms and traditions or by religion.

I then move to the men of the families, and how men use food and the kitchen as their territory of power, and how others use it as a way to keep their women “in their place,” as I witness in comments’ sections on social media, or hosts in TV shows, or two men exchanging a casual conversation in the street, or even women themselves believing that their sole purpose in life is to exist in the kitchen. Through the lens of societally constructed gender roles, I will further elaborate how men deal with their constructed, rather bestowed status in society, as

breadwinners, sustenance providers and so on. This is also coming from a place of how society views the roles of men and women and pressures both genders to act within these parameters of dominant/subordinate, respectively.

Finally, in the third chapter, I discuss the modes we use for representation. How our ways of eating, our ways of navigating the kitchen and table spaces, our ways of choosing certain words to convey certain messages, identify us and speak on our behalf. As one of my interlocutors put it, there is a difference between asking “would you like some eggs with cheese?” and “would you like omelette du fromage?”. It came to my attention that we do not just eat and drink and socialise in between, we eat and drink as a form of identity. In addition, food can be a phoneme of representation, social class, and cultural capital.

What does it mean to choose to eat with your hands, or choose to use the knife and fork? Why is matcha green late means you are cultured with a sophisticated testing palette while drinking normal black tea means you are of a lower class? What are the semiotic implications of inviting people over for dinner because you are the eldest or wealthiest member of the family? What does it mean throwing parties and social events to show off your wealth to people as a means of confirming your upper social status?

Finally, I argue that the upper classes of society isolates themselves from the lower classes as a form of distinction between themselves and the others of the lower classes (Bourdieu 1979). Furthermore, I showcase that, even people from upper classes only show their wealth and upper social status when people are around. This will help in further expanding on the notion of the *e'ib-haram*, but from an aspect of “what would people say about us?” Also, this will give me the chance to analyse the different meanings and forms of social representation and simulacra (Baudrillard 1981).

## **Chapter One**

## **Past, Present and the Persistency of Memory**

*“But when, from a long-distant past, nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised a long time. Like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection.”*

—Marcel Proust (1913).

### **Setting the Scene: Where It All Began**

Back when I was 5 years old, I was my maternal grandfather’s and aunt’s favourite companion in the kitchen. I was like their shadow as they moved around getting meals done for the rest of us at home. It wasn’t until the age of 7 that I started helping my grandfather with the meals he prepared, firstly by starting with simple tasks like watching out for the French fries to not burn, then picking out the onions or tomatoes from the fridge and handing them to him, then bit by bit, I started stirring pans, seasoning salads, and by the age of 10 I was chopping the onions I only used to choose. My grandfather, Abdou, was mainly responsible for breakfast. He would go out at around 9 in the morning and buy *Foul* (fava beans) and falafel paste as the main ingredients for the breakfast feast. His next stop was the bakery to buy the freshest pita bread in the *Souq* (local market). He always used to tell me, “You know the best bread from its smell”, and I believe he and my aunt were the reason why I depend on using my sense of smell the most nowadays in the kitchen while cooking. He would then come back and go directly to the kitchen where he would have the tomatoes already marinating in vinegar, and the potatoes peeled, cut, and marinating in brine.

The moment he stepped in the kitchen he found his little *Sous Chef*<sup>1</sup> waiting for him to get breakfast ready. He started off the breakfast by opening up the pantry to get the home-made

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<sup>1</sup> The person ranking next after the head chef in a professional kitchen.

ghee container and take two big spoons out of it to place them in the skillet. This was my que to get the eggs from the fridge and hand them over to him. He cracked each one of them with one hand directly into the skillet. The sizzling sound of the eggs in the ghee along with the generous dashes of salt and pepper added to them, as he scrambled them away, was -and still is- music to my ears. The smell of ghee, till today, makes me happy because it became associated with some of the best childhood memories of my life, and the taste of eggs made *à la Geddo* (Grandpa) is one of the comfort recipes I cook for myself as a way of guilty pleasure and sweet escapism.

My aunt, Shosho, on the other hand, was responsible for dinners and dinner hosting. She had the ability of cooking for over 12 people in one setting. I was always fascinated by all the tasks she can perform at the same time. I would be standing with her in the kitchen and meticulously observing how she would be cutting the carrots, coring the courgettes, frying the aubergines all at the same time as if she is a maestro conducting an orchestra. My favourite day of the week was always Friday. Shosho had a fulltime job throughout the weekdays, so we would not be having a very fancy dinner, just light things that would be quick to prepare and easy to cook. Fridays were the days of the feasts and festivities. She would wake up in the early morning and prepare the ingredients, but she would not start cooking until after the *A'sr* (mid-day) prayer.

The usual menu was Dolma, bechamel pasta, chicken pane, and vermicelli soup. The whole process of producing such a big meal, for at least 7 people, can be a lot of work, but Shosho always made it look so effortless and would not take more than 2 hours in the making. She usually started with the minced beef and the dolma's stuffing. Shosho added a pinch of cinnamon to the minced beef as it simmered with the onion and garlic was her trick of giving it a nutty and earthy flavour. She seldom tasted the food she was cooking, because she depended on the aroma the food produced.

She would always look like the chef in a *brigade de cuisine* (Professional kitchen hierarchy found mainly in restaurants) in an industrial kitchen, although we had the humblest kitchen there is, but with an unlimited imagination, possibilities were infinite within a couple meter squares kitchen. I sometimes got carried away and would always tell her that we are currently on set in her TV show, and I would go on commenting on every single thing she does. My aunt would always tell me to close my eyes and smell the food to know what is missing. She made me her connoisseur; tasting every single note of the spoonful of food she would give me. With time, I started to know all the spices in a dish just by taking a bite. Today, I can simply smell the food to know what it needs, even if it just needs an extra pinch of salt.

In this chapter I argue that food has an impact on our memories, it transcends through taste and smell and becomes part of who we are. Food's sensorial qualities, especially taste and smell, have transcending temporal abilities that help us identify and make sense of our surroundings (Sutton 2001). I will also discuss how we use food as a way of seeking solace from our pasts in the present, how food is the easiest thing to refer to when pointing out the generational differences and disappointments between our parents' generation and ours, and how through food, I came to understand how my parents' generation viewed food as a medium of constructing cultural and societal values and traditions, actively acting as a temporal and ideological habitus (Elias 1965).

#### Smelling the Past: Tasting the Present

Each Egyptian house has a ritual of its own on Friday because it is the beginning of the weekend and is considered a festive day-off for Muslims in general and is usually the day where all family members are present at the same time at home. Sutton (2001) describes how certain tastes and smells are connected to certain occasions, regardless of how big or small said occasions are. In our house, growing up, I woke up to the smell of *bokhour* (incense) mixed



with the signature breakfast scents of fried eggs, *foul* and fried falafel, the voice of *Al-Hussary* reciting Quran on the radio and the sight of sunlight beaming through the window.

Odours become such powerful markers because of their sensory properties, in this case their lack of confinement: They do not stay put in kitchens, but mark houses and apartments, clothing and bodies, and thus potentially cross lines of private and public (Sutton 2010). Before witnessing the food with the eyes, the nose can identify the meal from its aroma of spices. The registration of the smell becomes inscribed in one's memory that no matter how much time passes, we can always travel back to that precise moment in time just by smelling it again.

According to Bergson (1988), in the process of our formation of recollections, the events of our daily life are recorded as they take place in a unique time and provide each gesture with certain spatiotemporal coordinates (i.e., a place and a date). This past is retained in our memories regardless of its utility and practical application. The past is preserved in itself and, at the same time, contracted in various states by the needs of action that we situate in an actual present. The breakfast menu always consisted of, but was never limited to, *foūl*, *falafel*, fries, green salad, pickled onions, feta cheese, and fresh pita bread. The only difference between the Friday breakfast and the everyday breakfast was the gathering and number of people eating together. During weekdays, it was usually just my brother and I with my grandparents. However, during the weekends, the house would be buzzing with my uncles and aunt and the rest of the household members. We would all share the food and catch up with what each of us went through during the week. Then, after breakfast, at around 2 pm *Teita* (Egyptian Arabic for Grandma) Zouba would note that it is now time for tea, which with time I learnt to do it myself and would always take pride in her compliments whenever I got her preferred *tale'ima* (tea:sugar:water ratio) right.

This repetition of memory recollections through actions of the body merits the acknowledgement of the word memory not because it is involved in the conservation of past images but rather because it prolongs these memories utility into present moments. The task of this kind of memory is to ensure that the accumulation of memory-images is rendered ancillary to practice, making sure that only those past images come into operation that can be coordinated with a present perception, and so enabling a useful combination to emerge between past and present images and practices (Bergson 1988). I do not have a manual, or a written handbook on how to carry out the perfect Friday as per my upbringing. I do, however, have a carried knowledge within my body that has been passed to me from my grandparents in the form of synaesthetic memories. There is no written recipe for Zouba's tea *tale'ima*, but I have made tea for my grandmother enough times to know how to make it again whenever I like. There is no written recipe for my grandfather's grand Friday breakfast as well, but the transmission of such culinary knowledge was not simply entailed orally, via their verbal commands the first few times he showed me how to crack an egg or she showed me how she liked her tea done, but it was through the different haptic, olfactory, and tasting elements as well (Gaul 2019).

When this certain memory or recollection is sensorial, or connected with the body and its senses, it can be examined and explored affectively. Brian Massumi describes affect as an energetic dimension or "capacity" and emotion as a selective activation process or expression of affect from a "virtual co-presence" of potentials on the basis of experience, thought, and habit, or in this case, memory (Massumi 2015). This selective process can also be interpreted within the frame of mimesis and affect contagion. Gibbs argues that "mimesis can morph bodies, changing colour, odour, form, or movement; or it might choose words or clothes or cars or even ideas as its medium. But what it signifies and the medium in which it operates is less important than its mode of operation. Mimicry is not a representation of the other, but a

*rendering...*” (2010:193 italics in original). This rendering is of the similarities traced due to the selective activation process of the memory re-enacted from the past in the present moment.

Silvan Tomkins defines affective contagions as bio-neurological means by which particular affects are communicated rapidly and automatically between people transmitted from body to body (Gibbs 2010). Mimesis, like affect, is not necessarily best thought of as occurring at an individual level. It is not linked to either subject or object, but a path in which both are swept up so that memory processes can be seen as “the sensuous traces of [the] amodal linkage” between them (Massumi 2003:148). Through mimesis, I am able to muster sensory re-enactment in order to feel home again. Kierkegaard (1972) described the sense of displacement is caused by not being able to identify with a given place, or relate to it, due to its lack of sensorial stimuli. Memory recollection through the practice of sensorial re-enactment does not only eschew the feeling of alienation, but it also gives way to identifying the mundane, in this case food and drink, through different cultural, societal, and spiritual contexts.

#### An Ode to *Ahwa*<sup>2</sup>: Honouring the Guest, Honouring the Dead, Honouring the Self

The senses do not only function as tools of identification of the surrounding world, but they also function as tools of making sense out of it. “The senses, in fact, are not just one more potential field of study, alongside, say, gender, colonialism or material culture. The senses are the media through which we experience and make sense of gender, colonialism, and material culture. And... the medium is the message.” (Howes 2020:4). Focusing on the medium of taste, and how it boards the universal and transcends greater societal contexts, Farquhar (2002) puts the spotlight on the taste of bitterness, more specifically the figurative use of experiencing it. “Ingesting bitter food as a representative of bitter experience can be found in many societies and rituals...” (Sutton 2010:8). The experience of different flavours through food or drink

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<sup>2</sup> Egyptian Arabic name for coffee.

comes in handy specifically when trying to make sense of one's surrounding world(s), especially through the process of contextualising socio-cultural rituals.

My first memory of coffee is shared with *Teita* when I was 8 years old, when I came to learn from her that coffee is served to special and/or dear guests, given that it is more expensive than tea and requires more skill in its preparation. She also later on clarified my confusion regarding serving “*Ahwa Sada*” (Sic Coffee) in funerals. I noticed that everybody gets served “*fengan ahwa*” (Cup of coffee) in funerals without being asked about their preferences “*sada, ‘al reiha, mazbouta, zeyada...etc.*” (Different ratios of sugar to coffee preferences. By order: no sugar/sic, low sugar to coffee ratio, equal sugar to coffee ratio, and more sugar to coffee ratio). She told me that in funerals, it is not much about the guests' preferences as much as it is about sharing the bitterness of losing a beloved someone to death, which is why we serve it *sada*, without sugar, because sugar here symbolises happiness and there is nothing to be happy about on such occasions. The context here also echoes Mary Douglas's (1966) binary take on the pure vis-à-vis the impure. Serving bitter coffee is serving coffee in its pure form; just mixed with water and heated in a *kanaka* (Special pot used to make Turkish coffee). Depriving the coffee from the sweet taste of sugar preserves its sacredness and, figuratively, symbolises honouring the dead by momentarily depriving life from their sweet memory.

In general, Arabs use coffee as a symbol of hospitality and generosity. Be it served in special occasions, or as a morning ritual to get caffeinated, coffee is an essential sensory medium that aids in making sense of the world(s) surrounding us. Lujain (30, female, grew up in Saudi Arabia) tells me about her own encounter with coffee by relating its scent and flavour to Ramadan. In Saudi Arabia, much like most countries of the Gulf and Levant, *Qhwa Arabi* (Arabian Coffee) is as essential in households as Turkish coffee is in Egyptians'. *Qahwa Arabi* has its traditions and symbolism; much of it also relating to Arabian generosity towards and honouring of guests.

It is a habit of Lujain and her three younger brothers to freshly brew Arabian coffee every day during the Holy month. Along with the iftar preparations, her youngest brother, Tareq (26), is the one usually responsible for getting the ground Qahwa from its container, putting a measure of two tablespoons along with half a litre of water in a small pot and placing it over low heat on top of the burner to stew for an hour or so to be served with three dates when the *Maghrib* (Dusk) prayer signals the end of the day's fast. Lujain and her siblings, as aforementioned, picked up this habit or fasting ritual from an early age.

Lujain recalls being in elementary school when she first had *Qahwa Arabi* with three dates for iftar. This is something her mother incorporated into their Egyptian household from her Saudi colleagues, and Lujain has turned the habit into a household tradition by making *Qahwa* to enjoy with her siblings. For Lujain, the smell and taste of the coffee never fails to take her back to her childhood as well as keep her from overeating during iftar; something that most people fall into doing after a long day of being hungry.

Howes (2020) discusses the notion of sensorial emplacement through smell, and I argue taste as well, as something countering the sense of physical and social displacement. To emplace one's senses in order to make sense of one's surroundings helps in creating a familiar space where one can identify with and not feel alienated. To further expand on this notion, Lujain also clarified that her *Qahwa Arabi* drinking ritual is something to help her keep on track and not cause her any gastronomic discomfort. In a way, she is honouring her own self through her body by providing a safer eating experience in the form of dividing the meal into three stages, starting with the coffee and three dates combo. She emplaced the special smell and taste of the beverage into her daily Ramadan routine, from her childhood, as a form of memory recollection through sensorial re-enactment.

### Old is Gold, Or Is It?

The events of sensorial re-enactment only structure our memory, but also become particularly significant when one reflects on their own identity through memory recollections (Tabboni 2001). The embodiment of the memory being constantly reproduced through and into different forms of knowledge does not exist as a separate realm from authorised domains of knowledge but is itself constituted through historically specific cultural contexts (i.e., the Ahwa rituals in the previous section, or the sensorial and temporal habitus I discuss in this section). As a result of the subjective nature of perception, memory is then rendered as a problematic form of knowledge, because it forms our perception of the world rather than the self (Swanson 2000). When we want to define ourselves, or others, through emplacement, we give fundamental role to memory as a source material of reference, in which memory is rooted in the event when pronouncing a present, or future, project (Tabboni 2001).

I examine the concept of sensorial emplacement through habitus, where we not only make sense of our surroundings spatially, but also temporally. Bourdieu (1979) explains habitus as “the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them” (Navarro 2006:16). Elias further expands on this concept by reflecting on it temporally. He explains that time symbolises the relationship between human groups with the capacity of memory and synthesis, established between two or more changes, “one is used by it as a frame of reference or standard of measurement for other or others.” (Elias 1992:46).

Time, much like the senses, is measured and felt through the body, and is used as a tool to compare and contrast between the self and others. It is, as Bergson argues in *Matter and Memory* (1988), the bodily mechanisms of mind and body that register time as memory and use the senses to recall the past into the present, are an act of recollection. I argue that this act takes place through mimesis and synaesthesia by which the invoking of memory through the

senses juxtaposes the body as a channel connecting the past to the present (Feld 2020). However, there is a difference between mimesis and the blind copying of certain acts and rituals. Mimesis has the synaesthetic potential of recalling “iconicity, the ways in which perceiver and perceived blur and merge through sensuous contact, experiencing inner resemblances that echo, vibrate, and linger on traces from one sensory modality to another ... continually linking bodily experience to thought and to action (Feld 1988; Jackson 1989: 119-55; Ohnuji-Tierney 1991)” (Feld 2020:181). By trying to force mimesis or re-enactment of certain acts, ideologies, rituals...etc. (e.g., the insisting on buying certain commodities from one place as will be seen with Shorouq’s parents in the following encounter), the act of mimeses becomes the act of mindless copying or repetition, and the simple, yet self-lending notion of no repetition of anything is the same (Bergson 1988) is overlooked. This overlooking causes conflict, something I encountered during my fieldwork.

From what I encountered during my fieldwork, I noticed great dissatisfaction and contempt with our generation from older ones (parents’ and grandparents’ generations). Such expressions were shown by my older interlocutors in the forms of complaining, belittling, and underestimating. This could be due the (un)conscious longing and sometimes romanticisation of their past based on their ongoing processes of building temporal habitus.

Tante Nagda (63, female, housewife) is Shorouq’s mother. Nagda has been a wife for more than 30 long years, through which she battled cancer, survived it, managed through other sever illnesses, all while making sure she is looking after her husband, nourishing her kids, and taking care of the house. She is Shorouq’s mother, and I have known them for more than 7 years now. In August 2020, I decided to go spend some time with Shorouq, since we both realised that we have been self-isolating for almost all the period of lockdown, so we might as well isolate together. I spent a week with her in her house while her parents were away for vacation at their beach house in *Sahel* (the North Coast).

After that week, her parents returned, and I spent another 2 weeks with them before travelling to Saudi Arabia to visit my parents. At the beginning, although Shorouq's parents have known me for almost a decade as I mentioned before, I never spent that much time in their house, so I have always been treated as a guest. Although I discuss the different meanings of kinship in a later chapter, I want to note that the dynamics of the interactions between Shorouq's parents and I changed. As Leila Abu-Lughod discusses it, there was a shifting in my status in their household from guest to daughter (2016). Nagda's critical comments of Shorouq's eating and sleeping habits, for example, started finding their way to me as well. Her father, Gamal, also started commenting on how I handle myself and my weight in a similar way as he did with Shorouq.

By the end of the third week, Shorouq and I were both put under the category of daughter. Although most of their comments and criticisms were coming from a place of care and love, their ways of conveying such emotions and thoughts did not always resonate as such. One day, I went to the supermarket to buy the things my mother requested I bring with me when travelling. Among the list was *Feteir Meshaltet* (Flaky, Egyptian layered pastry. Usually baked by peasants and people from rural areas but can also be found in abundance in supermarkets and bakeries). Knowing how much Shorouq's parents like *Feteir* and how it would be a gesture of showing gratefulness and appreciation to them hosting me for those three weeks, I decided to get them a *Feteira* (Singular for *Feteir*) as well.

I got home, put the things my mother requested beside the luggage to pack them later, and went back to Shorouq's place with the *Feteira*. Her parents were in the kitchen, with Gamal sitting on the kitchen table, facing Nagda who is preparing dinner behind the kitchen counter. "Look what I got!" I exclaimed, as I placed the *Feteira* on the counter for Nagda to examine. Without missing a beat, she asked me how much I paid for it. "Well, this is a gift, really. I don't think we are supposed to disclose such information," I responded. She insisted I tell her, so I



gave in, “35 pounds,” I shrugged. She and Gamal chuckled mockingly as she walked to the fridge to get a *Feteira* they brought back with them from Sahel. The *Feteira* was double the size of mine; almost triple. “This whole *Feteira* is for 30 pounds!” Gamal exclaimed triumphantly. “We bought it on our way back. It is made with *Zibda Fallahi* (Butter made in farms by people in rural areas), baked by *Fallahein*, and its price compared to its size is better than yours!” Nagda said in support of her husband. Between their subtle abjection and my own disappointment with myself that I could not match their standards, I froze for a moment.

Shorouq came into the kitchen, asked what the fuss was about, to which her mother responded, “*sahbetek elkhaiba* got this small *Feteira* for 35 pounds. Your father and I were just telling her about the baker we got our *Feteir* from in Sahel.” Shorouq realised that I was being reprimanded, so she tried to lighten the mood by commenting that now “we have more *feteir* to enjoy for breakfast.” only to receive another backlash from her parents, “it’s not even made with *zibda fallahi*,” Gamal noted. “You are a generation with no taste, and you don’t care on what you spend your money. You should have told us you were buying *Feteir*.” I explained that I bought *Feteir* for my mother and I did not know they already had *Feteir* at home. Nagda suggested they buy me *Feteir* the next time they are in Sahel, but Shorouq noted that I am already travelling in a couple of days, so I will not be catching them next time they are back from their trip. Her father offered to be responsible for by the *Feteir* next time I need it because my mother “sure misses the authentic taste of *Fallahi*-baked *Feteir*” and thanked me for my thoughtful, yet unnecessary, gesture before retreating to the kitchen table to wait for dinner to be served. Nagda announced that dinner will be served shortly, “will you girls be joining us, or will you order some bland, tasteless and fattening food?” Shorouq and I exchanged a subtle eye roll and decided we will join them shortly.

The above interaction is Nagda’s and Gamal’s, as well as most of their generation’s way of genuinely providing advice and passing on life wisdom and experience. It was all

sourced from good intentions, regardless of the delivery. I now know that the supermarket I am used to getting *Feteir* from does not offer a good bargain; that the *Feteir Fallahi* is best bought from an authentic *Fallahi* baker; that I need to pay attention to my budgeting skills; and that I should always ask the elders for what is best.

During our conversation, Shorouq's father tasted the *Feteira* I got them, and he did not like the taste. He remarked that it does not taste as *Feteir* is supposed to according to his palette. This was also the basis on which he and Nagda based their argument regarding our generation vis-à-vis theirs. Newcomb (2017) had a similar account with her interlocutors and how they criticised the foods made by caterers in one event she attended. The food was immaculate, clean, and served a large group of people. The elders, however, were not satisfied with it and kept pointing out that its taste was not familiar to them; it was always missing something.

Gamal and Nagda drew their habitus from their own built-up sensorial ideologies (Howes 2020). As we grow, insofar as our experiences take us, our senses contribute a great deal in contextualising and rationalising our surroundings. The *Feteir* did not match Shorouq's parents' taste because they could not connect or relate to it temporally or sensorially. Thus, they deemed it unauthentic causing an urge in them to jump to the rescue by criticising, and rather advising me on what is subjectively a good *Feteira*. As embarrassed as I was by the incident, I was thankful for their responses, because the search for iconicity (as I discussed previously through Feld (2020)) is something I am personally increasingly becoming interested in as I grow older.

The reason for Nagda's and Gamal's narrow-mindedness towards our "good-for-nothing generation' is because they concretely believe that if they give in to our 'inauthenticity' they will be letting go of who they are. Hence, instead of reaching for the future's unknown horizon, they retreated back to the known; to the familiar, and although this might be causing them more damage than good, they keep optimistic that we (the later generations) will find

solace in their sources of optimism. Therefore, instead of going with the flow of changing times, they must criticise, condemn and object to whatever comes their way from our generation. As I am growing older, I am starting to understand their ways of navigating and manoeuvring life. I find myself holding on to the past, be it to make sense of my present or to guard myself against what the future holds. I relate to the older generations in the sense that we both “beat against the current, borne back ceaselessly, into the past.” (Fitzgerald 2017).

### Has Anyone Seen *Baraka*?

*Baraka* is the Arabic word for blissfulness. It is a gift bestowed upon us from God. We get to sense its presence and its absence from our lives, and elder people correlate it to authenticity. *Baraka* is something the older generations reminisce about most of the time, especially the absence of it, turning it into a generational trait that my generation rarely gets to experience. In a conversation I had with my father (58, raised in a traditional household) last summer regarding the changing and shifting aspects of familial life, he started reflecting on his own, rather gendered, sensorial relationship with food growing up, and *Baraka* found its way through his words.

*Barka* can be found in the simplest of things; a small meal shared with a large group of people; a humble sum of money sustaining the family till the end of the month; enjoying oneself without the luxury of having many options, and so on. According to my father, we are losing this sense of contempt and satisfaction that *Baraka* brings:

*“...back in the day, the mother would slaughter a chicken, clean it, cut it to pieces and make a stew, mulukhiya<sup>3</sup> and tabeikh<sup>4</sup> out of it. It would be a full-on meal that can satiate 4 or 5 hungry people! But today? There is no Baraka in the food we buy, prepare, or eat. You buy the chicken from the supermarket, already cleaned and frozen, and God knows for how long they have been freezing it. It is small in size, and it won't satiate a couple of people. It won't even taste like chicken, rather it will taste like the preservatives and add-ons it is filled with.”*

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<sup>3</sup> Mallow Soup.

<sup>4</sup> Animal protein or vegetables cooked and simmered in tomato sauce till thick.

Muhammed's statement echoes the same dissatisfaction of Nagda's and Gamal's and other people in the same age category, and there is a tone of resentment that can be detected in the voices of older people. The changing pace of life, and how now most of the family members (fathers as well as mothers) have full time jobs, they do not usually have the time for prolonged mealtimes or the energy to stand in the kitchen after a long day of work to cook what my father considers a "satiating meal". Furthermore, there is an obvious change in the gender dynamics of domestic labour. My father grew up in a household where his mother was dividing her time between cooking, cleaning, and looking after him and his siblings. Women would be, as Counihan (2004) discusses in her own account on Florentine women, regarded as inadequate and unworthy if they did not know how to take care of their households. My father made it clear that there is a difference between the golden past and today, and contributed most of these differences to the changes that took place from within the household:

*"Women no longer cook; they care more about their careers than they care about their houses. Kids no longer obey their fathers; they have their own minds and it's all because of their mothers not being good role models for them. It is a challenging time for everyone. The fact that women now must work in order to help in providing for their families says a lot about the times we are living in. But this makes men deprived from the necessities of life. God created men to work and be the breadwinners and women to stay at home to nourish and raise the kids. Today one can't simply order his wife to prepare food for him, she won't do it. If he is tired from work, she is too. If he can't cook, she can't too. It is all too complicated nowadays."*

My father's comment demonstrates the embedded patriarchal vantage point of how men and women should be. There is a symbolic division of perception into masculine and feminine, although ascribed since the 17th century, still persists till today, when it comes to the senses and their attributions to society (Classen 2005). "Men were believed to be empowered by God and nature to see and oversee the world. Women were required by the same forces to stay at home, stitching the clothes, stirring the stew, and rocking the cradle...Touch, along with taste

and smell, was imagined to be essentially feminine in nature: nurturing, seductive, dissolute in its merging of self and other.” (Ibid:70) Women are supposed to use their senses, and instincts, to care for their families, otherwise, back in the 7th century, they were considered witches and sentenced to trials. The difference between a woman and a witch is that the witch had diabolic sensorium, in which each of her senses was dedicated to serving her own needs and not used for self-abnegation and sacrifice for society (ibid.).

The comments my father gave that day matched the rest of the conversations and encounters I went through during fieldwork. The older people felt alienated due to the fast-moving world around them. Shorouq’s father, Gamal, would not accept buying *Menein* (Fallahi biscuits that require extensive time and exquisite effort to bake in the kitchen) from the bakery or the supermarket. He would rather have his wife, Nagda, bake it from scratch for him at home simply because it tastes more like how his mother used to bake them. He disregards the process of making *Menein* as tiring because there is nothing tiring in serving the man of the house, and Nagda, although a cancer-survivor with a poor health condition, does not mind exhausting herself to serve her husband. She views servitude as a blessing and as part of a woman’s purpose in life.

### Conclusion

“At each repetition there is progress; the words are more and more linked together, and at last make a continuous whole. When the moment comes, it is said that I know my lesson by heart, that is imprinted on my memory” (Bergson 2005: 79). The way that, through practice and repetition I received the needed sensory information from my grandparents on how to prepare a subjectively proper Friday breakfast or make the right tea *tali’ema*; it caused me to have embedded memory within my body due to how “the past survives under two distinct forms first, in motor mechanisms; secondly, in independent recollections.” (Bergson 2005: 77). Such

is a habitual memory, a memory that is also a key concept when mastering a certain skill, in my case cooking and food, that requires apprenticeship (Sutton 2006).

This synesthetic synthesis of memory also focuses on intersensory connections that further facilitate the memory recollections. Such synthesis, not only help in the process of recollection for the sake of recollection, but it also helps in the sense-making processes of our surrounding world. Through the repetition of certain rituals, such as cooking a certain meal at a certain time, that transcend oral and verbal cues (Steinberg 1998; Sutton 2006; Gaul 2019) and depend more on other senses such as visual and olfactory, we gain the needed experience to be able to go through the comparisons necessary to judge a successful dish, for example (Steinberg 1998), or in Shorouq's parent's case, a successful *Feteir*.

Another side of the judgement and comparison of what is deemed successful and what is deemed lacking in *Baraka* is the usage of sensorial memory recollections with gendered nuances to justify the changes and shifting in our everyday lives within the domestic sphere, and how this is negatively impacting “*geil el-youmein dool*” (today's generation). The intersensory recollections of my father's past showcases that food, with all its sensory abilities, although sourced from nature like humans, is still a product of culture (Howes 2020).

## **Chapter Two**

## **Who Cooked This? On the (un)Making of Gender and Kinship**

### **Setting the Scene: In the Name of The Father, The Daughter, and The Household**

My brother, Abdallah, and I spent most of the year abroad, living with my parents and attending school in Jordan. My father, Muhammed, took care of the whole kitchen and the cooking processes, since my mother, Hanan, was and still is always working, and he was to take care of the house matters. We would come back from school and take a nap till my mother came from work, which was usually around 4-5 pm. He would then set the dinner table in the kitchen, and we would sit down to eat whatever he served. There wasn't much of a variation, and he usually cooked what he preferred. The menu mostly included pan-fried chicken, *moloukhiya* (Jews soup), and rice. I never liked eating *moloukhiya* because of how gooey and gluey it is, and because I could not understand why he took so much pride in making it. However, he is convinced that I love it until today.

He was, and still is, always angry and agitated about the whole gender arrangements within our household, though nobody truly forced him to take the responsibility of anything. We were always obliged to sit on the dinner table, to eat what he served, Abdallah and I would even get beaten up or scolded if we did not finish our plates, let alone protest that we did not want to eat at all. He would wake up in the morning to have our school sandwiches prepared, and not a single sprinkle of creativity was ever added to the process. It was 12 years of feta cheese/processed cheese sandwiches and that was it. To this day, every time I encounter a cheese sandwich, I am reminded of how bland and boring the experience of school lunch was. His creativity would only spring up to the stratosphere when we had guests coming. He would cook veggie-rice, his infamous *moloukhiya* that everybody loved and sworn of, roasted chicken, okra, and fried lamb chunks. His most favourite meal was fish, all sorts of it; grilled, fried, *Siadeya* (simmered in tomato sauce), and most importantly, boiled. My mother, Hanan,



Abdallah and I hated fish, but he had other preferences. The leftovers of such meals were the worst because it meant I have to eat it for more days.

The problem with my father's food is not just the food itself, but it is also in all the nuances and feelings I feel and experience throughout the years of living with him under the same roof. The synaesthetic experience of food and feeding was the least pleasant out of all the childhood experiences I went through. The food tasted like discontent, spitefulness, anger, and negligence. When Muhammed cooks a meal, he is not just adding ingredients together and mustering up a recipe; he is treating the dish like his b\*\*\*h. "Come check out this mother\*\*\*er," he calls for Abdallah, Hanan and me to go to the kitchen and taste a pot of *koshary* he just finished, or when asked what he added to the dish to make it taste good, he would answer: "some fuckery seeds".

Due to Muhammed's free use of profanity and how he navigates the kitchen space, I am often uncomfortable standing in the kitchen with him, although our kitchen in Jordan was very spacious. It even had a wonderful view of pear, apple, and lemon trees outside its window. Nevertheless, the kitchen was always gloomy and intensely asphyxiating every time my father was inside. He would be doing the dishes, or fixing us a snack, or even making himself a cuppa, and he would still be looking as though he is coercively fulfilling his military duties. The way my father approaches the kitchen, and his terminology makes me argue that this is the kind of coping mechanism men choose to deal with their prejudice against domestic skills and chores, especially ones taking place within the kitchen space. This is due to the low status from which women have suffered throughout decades of patriarchal and capital measures that has been used by society to devalue domestic skills by association (Freeman 2004). However, Muhammed did not have the patriarchal or capital authority to take command of the household navigation, due to my mother being the main provider and supporter of the family, and due to

our migration to Jordan with my mother in the early 2000s. These circumstances has caused an inevitable shift in the gender roles around the house.

An Ode to *Mulukhiyah*: On Family Men and the Reshaping of Masculinities:

My mother moved to Jordan in the early 2002 for a job post as a university professor, and then moved my brother, my father and I with her in 2003. For the year we spent in Egypt, it was usually *Geddo* or *Tieta* (Grandpa and Grandma) who took care of my brother and I and we barely saw our father due to his demanding schedule as a swimming coach. He left for work before we woke up and came back after we slept. The situation changed when we moved to Jordan, and he became a full-time father. Although our household was not a strictly patriarchal one to begin with, in the sense that my mother has been the main provider and supporter, be it to her natal house or her marital one, there still was an obvious shift in the gender roles when we moved to Jordan. As the case with George's Indian men (2005), where the husbands of the Keralite immigrant nurses relied and were mainly dependant on their wives' income, so is my father. Even if my father found work during our time in Jordan, it was to support himself financially, with my mum remaining the primary breadwinner. Because of his choices, the given circumstances imposed on my father a new mode of living; the mode of domesticity, and it meant that he had to assume the role of the homemaker as a response to my mother assuming the role of the breadwinner.

In the process of losing his job to multiple sabbatical leaves, my father made it clear that my brother, my mother, and I were the primary reason as to why he was not getting promoted and climbing the career ladder back in Egypt. "I gave up my future for you," he always protested whenever there was an argument or a fight between him and my mother, Hanan. George (2005) was the only one to point out the scarcity of literature on how men cope with their social losses and changing circumstances during immigration and how that affected the domestic gender roles. To compensate for the loss of career choices and, by affiliation, the

loss of purpose and self, during the downward mobility in the work sphere required some search for assertion and control in other spheres or spaces (ibid.).

For my father, it was taking control over the kitchen space, controlling what we eat, when, where, and with who. As my brother, Abdallah, and I grew older, we started noticing that my father cooked for himself, that he cared for nurturing himself first then we came second. Even our school sandwiches were mainly bland cheese cubes, carelessly smeared in the bread. When he went back to his work in the summer, Hanan would take on the duty of preparing our sandwiches. She always got creative and tried as hard as she can to make us our favourite food items, like panne sandwiches, and minced beef sandwiches, in order to make sure that we finish our lunches satiated and not feel deprived of anything.

Till today, Muhammed comes back from the *Asr* (afternoon) prayer, with grocery bags filled with his own food preferences, usually consisting of courgettes, potatoes, and carrots for soup, an animal protein source, usually lamb chops or any part of the lamb/veal, and bananas for a snack. When asked about what he has in the bags, he says “*ghadaya*” my lunch. I have noticed, throughout my life, and my fieldwork as well, when women do the cooking or hire someone to cook, all the family members’ preferences, especially the husbands’, come first. However, when men are the ones doing the cooking, it is almost always based on their own preferences first and foremost. My father would enter the kitchen, and chaos would ensue. He deals with the kitchen as one deals with an abandoned warzone, bountifully and with entitlement. The kitchen can be looked at as a territory of power and control, especially when most of the gender and kinship dynamics within the household are shifted due to special circumstances. In my case, the special circumstance was immigration.

He opens all the grocery bags he got, assembles them on the kitchen floor, brings a pot, a knife, and a plastic bag, sits on the floor, and starts the rituals of meal preparations. My father has his own “signature dishes” that, if anyone were to make any of them, he would feel

the obligation to guide them, and even do it for them. His utmost signature dish is *Mulukhiyah* (jute mallow soup). He takes great pride in being able to cook it, and the spotlight this dish puts him in gives him all the affirmations he needs. People who tasted his food praise him for his *nafas* (personal touch in cooking), and they keep telling him they cannot get enough of his *Mulukhiyah*. Even when we go to visit my grandmother, if he finds out she cooked the dish without waiting for him to cook it, he will keep passive aggressively insinuating and indirectly commenting how bland and untasteful the dish is.



Figure 2 Muhammed sitting on the kitchen floor preparing food. Photo taken by author. September 2020.

Additionally, in January 2021, we had a big family dinner at our house when my mother came for the holidays after a full year of being abroad because of travel restrictions due to the pandemic. All her four siblings were here, and my aunt took it upon herself to cook all items of the feast (*Macarona Bechamel*<sup>5</sup>, *Chicken Roast*, *Potato Boats*, *Soup*, *Mikhalel*<sup>6</sup>, and *Mulukhiyah*) photographed below, especially that my aunt is considered our family's chef and her cooking brings back all the great memories from our golden past, when we all used to live under the same roof when my grandparents were still alive. My father tagged along, although

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<sup>5</sup> Pasta with Bechamel sauce.

<sup>6</sup> Pickles

he kept showing me resentment to the food and how much he does not like it and how bad it tastes by having a nauseated expression on his face, specifically when he tasted the *Mulukhiyah*.



Figure 3 Macarona Bechamel, Potato Boats, Soup, Mikhalel, Chicken Roast, and Mulukhiyah Displayed.

Little does he know, I was going to the bathroom, which is right next to the kitchen, when I caught him standing in front of the stove, gulping full ladles of *Mulukhiyah* down his throat as if curing his thirst with the green gooey liquid instead of water. Although my father loved my aunt's *Mulukhiyah*, he would never admit it. Firstly, because there is always an unspoken rivalry between the both of them of who is the better cook and who is our favourite, although he knows that we always prefer our aunt's cooking, because she puts in consideration what we actually like to eat. Secondly, because if he admits that her *Mulukhiyah* is better, then he is willingly giving up his title of being the king of *Mulukhiyah* in the family, along with all the praising and the ego-fluffing that he gets from cooking it.

The thing with *Mulukhiyah* is not the dish itself, but what it symbolises. My father views the kitchen as his territory, this is greatly because it is one of the few places, if not the only

place, where he feels he is in control. This shows because whenever my mum cleans the kitchen and turns it into a health department's summer dream, he deliberately goes in and cooks dishes that only he eats (i.e. ox tail and veal stomach and other exotic platters), using as many utensils as he can, in order to turn it upside down. *Mulukhiyah* is the perfect dish as proof of his rebellious behaviour. This is his way of regaining some of the power he lost during the shifting process of the gender roles around the house (George 2005).

He brings the *Mulukhiyah* in its raw form: green leaves, which need to be cut, cleaned, and minced. The mincing of *Mulukhiyah* requires a certain knife, called *el-kharrata* (the mincer), which is a big knife in the shape of a semi-circle, that you keep passing over the plant for many times until the *Mulukhiyah* turns into a green gooey paste. Any leafy greens bleed chlorophyll when cut in the form of a green, stubborn stain that hardly comes out. He cuts and minces the plant on the white marble counter, without a cutting board, and leaves it there until he finishes preparing the rest of the dish ingredients. By the time he places it into the pot, the white marble is covered in green carnage with knife marks engraved into its cadaver.

Cooking an elaborate dish such as *Moloukhiya* not only requires the mincing of the plant, but also the mincing of garlic and then searing it, in a different pan, in some ghee, butter, or oil, along with cumin, coriander, salt, and pepper, to then be added to the pot containing the *Moloukhiya*, and the making of broth, which requires another pot. Then, there is a fourth pot, where the *Moloukhiya* is added into the soup, to then have the seared minced garlic mix added to them along with the *Shah'a* (the gasp). The gasp is the act of inhaling deeply, in a shocked manner, when adding the hot garlicky grease to the *Moloukhiya*. It is an act known for women, but men usually do it mockingly. The act has become so popular and embedded in the culture that people now cooking *Moloukhiya* would do it simply to not jinx the dish and ruin the meal. The main reason of the *Shah'a* is lost in the soup, but people still do it because they do not want the *Moloukhiya* to "*te'ta'*" (literally means to be cut) to separate into layers of inedible liquids.



Back to the kitchen where my father is orchestrating the *Moloukhiya*, while mockingly performing the *Shah 'a*, he adds the contents of the viscid green ingredients of *Moloukhiya* and stock into the pan where the sizzling minced garlic is wallowing in oil/ghee and spices; the loud hissing of the contact renders the performance a success. Mohammed uses an excess number of pots, pans, cutleries, and all kinds of utensils. He would not feel that he made any progress unless he has the stove working on full capacity, a couple of pots on the floor, the sink filled to the brim with dishes and the once icy white counter turned into a green crime scene. Turning the kitchen upside down like that makes my father feel that he has conjured a masterpiece. It gives him a sense of accomplishment and makes him feel triumphant and euphoric. He would even call upon me, my mum, and my brother, to come and stand before the grand reveal of the dishes he mustered. We would come into the kitchen, stand around the stove and he would start uncovering the pots, one by one, to show off his exhibition.

When my father goes to clean the kitchen, which only happens when he can no longer find any clean utensils to use and my mother and/or I are too busy to clean it, he makes sure that we all acknowledge how clean the kitchen is and how much effort he had put into it. However, unlike my mum, the only thing he does in the kitchen is wash the dishes, which is, after all, something he does for his own convenience first and foremost in order to be able to use those utensils again, to cook his signature dishes for the sake of praise and pride.

Another example of praise and pride would be my maternal uncle, Ahmed, and his wife, Wafaa. In the occasion of the celebratory dinner we had for mum for finally being able to have a proper holiday in Egypt after a yearlong of being away, we decided to have a big sleepover like old times, where all of my mother's siblings come over along with their families and spend the night and the following day. In the morning following the sleepover, it was time for breakfast. My youngest maternal uncle, Mahmoud, loves being in the kitchen and is a great cook, especially when it comes to breakfast items.

He took the liberty of going into the kitchen, getting the eggs, the butter, the milk, the fava beans paste, and the falafel paste out of the fridge. He got the potatoes, the onions, the garlic out of the storing drawers, and the salt, the pepper, the spices, and the oil out of the pantry, and cue breakfast parade. In rhythmic and harmonious movements, he started creating all our favourite dishes like a composer creates music. He skilfully cracked the eggs with one hand into the buttery dunes in the pan, while stirring the fava beans in the second pan with his other hand as the falafel were deeply frying in the oil in the third one.



*Figure 4 Ahmed, to the left, washing the veggies in the sink for the salad. Mahmoud, to the right, monitoring the food items on the stove. Both of them noticing me enter the kitchen. Photo taken by author. January 2021.*

However, he needed help with having the potatoes peeled and the salad made, so he decided to ask his brother, Ahmed, for help. Unlike him, Ahmed does not assist with the kitchen in his house. Wafaa is the one responsible for everything within the household, to the point that he does not even move a finger when it comes to helping out domestically. Although Ahmed does not help out, he was ecstatic and happy with the nostalgia that was roaming the place and the nuances of the past lingering in the air, so he unthinkably agreed to make the salad and peel the potatoes.



A few minutes pass by, everything is fine, my uncles are in the kitchen, their wives are in the living room with their kids, my aunt, my mother, and myself. It is a great family morning, till all of a sudden, Ahmed comes out of the kitchen, fuming with rage, heading directly to his wife. *“Why aren’t you in the kitchen peeling the potatoes and helping us with breakfast?”* He asks her, interrogatively. We all pause for a moment, feeling like we missed something. He continues by shouting that she is sitting there, relaxing like a prima donna, when she should be the one standing in the kitchen. *“Isn’t it enough I work all week long? Now I have to do the cooking?”* He brought the potatoes to the living room, for her to peel them instead of just sitting there doing nothing.

We all tried to calm the situation down, but all he noticed was us trying to defend her against him and that did not help the situation. My mother even noted that it was unlike him to be willingly standing in the kitchen, but she appreciated the gesture. However, it seemed that he did not share the same sentiment with her. He kept shouting and raising his voice, to the point that Wafaa got up and went to the kitchen along with Mahmoud’s wife, Samah. The whole situation made the women uncomfortable that they both felt the urge, as wives and mother, to have been the ones preparing the breakfast instead of *“shamelessly”*-as Ahmed put it- letting their men do so while they rested.



Figure 5 Wafaa sitting in the living room, peeling and cutting the potatoes.



Figure 6 Samah, in the front of the frame, continuing the potato peeling, while Wafaa is handing her another piece.

Finally, as we sat down to eat, it was important to acknowledge who did what. This, of course, was to point out that Ahmed significantly helped actualise this feast, and we would not be eating if it were not for his abnegate efforts to sacrifice his resting time to feed his family, like any loving father would. The ladies did half the work, but only the men were the ones acknowledged and appreciated for their efforts and their significant *nafas* in the food cooked. Nobody wanted to mention my uncle's fit of anger later on, and when I asked my mother to comment on what happened, she said that his wife would not react to his anger in front of us because it is *e'ib*, because that would have humiliated her husband, overlooking the fact that he humiliated his wife. This was also a live example, for me, that pointed out how women are expected, by both men and women of the family, to be selfless and serving to the men of the family or else they are not obedient and respectful wives/mothers.



Figure 7 The breakfast assembled, with us all gathered around it. Photo taken by author. January 2021.

### On Family Women: Servitude, Selfhood, and Selfless Resistance

Tante Nagda, who I introduce in Chapter 1 when discussing issues of Nostalgia and generational conflicts, used to work as an accountant before getting married; had her own career with her own income, but still believed that to actualise her womanhood into being, she needed to be a wife and a mother. After marriage to Uncle Gamal, she quit her job and became a full-time housewife. She gave birth to Shorouq and her two older brothers and ever since felt like she reached the highest levels of womanhood. Shorouq always tells me how her mother feels blessed with the gift that is her husband, without whom she would have never gotten to where she is now. Tante Nagda believed that being a housewife and a mother is the ultimate goal for any woman in life. It is a woman's life purpose to be the servant of her husband. Her achieving that and not having to work or do anything else except be a good wife and mother is enough and is in and of itself a blessing. She is forever grateful and always tells Shorouq that there is nothing better for a woman than marriage.

Although Tante Nagda and Uncle Gamal are not strictly religious, and except for the occasional *EL-Sharaawi* show that they watch on television every now and then, they do not really follow a strict Islamic doctrine at home. This being said however, they immensely care about people's opinions about them, and they strictly follow the socio-hegemonic understanding of Islam, which is the societal interpretation of the religion and how it is the dominating ideology, especially when it comes to gender roles and marital relations in Egypt.

Tante Nagda, who is a cancer survivor, has many other health complications, cannot stand on her feet for prolonged periods of time, does all the house chores, including cooking, by herself. Shorouq helps, and sometimes even does the cooking, along with having a lady that comes to clean the house once every weekend. However, Shorouq's mother insists on tidying up the place a bit before the cleaning lady comes, or else, "what will the cleaning lady say about us?". Shorouq's father, Uncle Gamal, sees absolutely nothing wrong with having his

wife, although incapable of efficiently performing daily domestic chores, take care of everything around the house. At one time, I was visiting Shorouq and planning to stay with her for a couple of days, before mutually deciding on spending the following three weeks with her because she had badly fractured her foot. That day, among many other similar days in the context, I noticed Shorouq's mother was in the kitchen all day long.

Their kitchen is very elaborate, in the sense that it functions as a kitchen, as a dining space, and as a space to lightly socialise and hang out. It is designed with an open counter facing the terrace, showcasing the oven, the sink, the main fridge where they keep their day-to-day food items that do not require deep freezing and leftovers, and another mini counter adjacent to the kitchen door. This area is where the cooking and food preparations are carried out. In front of the main counter, to the left, there is a small kitchen table, with four chairs surrounding it, above it is a large TV screen, beneath it, right beside the table, there is another fridge where the animal protein products are mainly deep-frozen. To the right of the front of the kitchen counter, there is a big, worn out, red leather sofa, that is usually used for either sitting or carrying the fresh laundry load that is waiting patiently to be folded and put away by Shorouq's mother. This ensemble of vintage furniture covered with random clothing items is thoughtfully yet reluctantly placed beneath an old wooden book library that is filled with old books and other trinkets. Beside them is a big wooden cupboard similarly carrying objects of the same category.

Shorouq's mother spends her time between the counter, the table, and the sofa. In that day, she was standing behind the counter, leaning forward and using it as support, obviously out of breath, covered in sweat, with a myriad of kitchen utensils and equipment in front of her. The stove was already filled with pots and pans steaming and simmering, indicating that dinner is almost ready, with the aroma of tomato sauce and baked goods filling the air.

I said my hellos and asked politely how she's doing and if she needed any help. She replied with her usually exhausted and motherly voice, "*thanks, dear. I am managing just fine.*" I know she is not managing just fine, and I know she is not well, yet I also know that her husband wistfully wished he eats *bameya bi-lahma wa rozz* (Okra cooked with meaty tomato sauce and rice) and he also wanted *menien* (biscuits baked in a certain way, very popular in Egypt, originating from the countryside) to have with his tea in the morning/evening. What I kept in consideration is that I cannot say anything, because to Tante Nagda, her husband's wishes are her command. He is the breadwinner, and he has the obligation of supporting his family till the day he dies. In her book, *Nurturing Masculinities* (2015), Naguib notes that food talk and practices appear to be driven by obligation and traditional sensibility, but also by personal choice and outspoken expressions of gender and generational roles, relations, and transformations. As Fahmi, one of her interlocutors, emphasised, a man's ability to provide for his family involves more than simple consumption; rather, it fundamentally symbolises and structures the man's identity, his aspirations, and his relationship to his family. This put in consideration, and as a form of compensation, no matter how tired, ill, or sick she is, Tante Nagda will still happily cook and feed her husband, and by affiliation her family, whenever and whatever he desires.

Although I discuss this concept of the compensation of women in the form of being "obedient servants" to their husbands (al-Saldaan 1999:120), it is important to point out that as much as the religious discourse has to do with the hegemonizing of this aspect, economic and social transformations, capitalism, and patriarchy end up interchangeably reinforcing this as well. As a consequence, but also as a condition for their parasitic existence, capitalism explicitly serves patriarchy by facilitating the oppression of women. Patriarchy, on the other hand, is useful to capitalism as it provides a devalued population from which it will be able to derive maximum benefit (Daelen 2020). Just as my mother was used by both capitalism and its

demanding financial obligations that made her turn to migration for resolution, and used by patriarchy and its demanding familial obligations, my mother, and the mothers I encountered in my fieldwork were also part of the devalued population that the patriarchy-capitalism symbiote feeds off of. The different forms of labour that goes by different names such as unwaged labour of love (Federici 1975) or affective labour (Hardt 1999), emerge from such a combination are usually disregarded, overlooked, and/or unappreciated.

On another note, Belal, a good friend of mine, tells me about his mother, who has a full-time job as a university professor, does not allow, neither him nor his brother, to help in anything. Belal tells me that she would get into big fights with him and start throwing tantrums all over the place when he decides to go help in the kitchen or do his own laundry. He elaborates by telling me that his mother firmly believes in the normative rules of gender roles in the house, and she would not allow him to break them. The problem Belal seems to have the most with his mother is that, although she insistingly refuses any help from him or his brother, she is constantly complaining about their lack of help around the house.

It is also important to mention that Widad believes so, not only because it is a woman's job to carry out all the chores around the house, but also because she believes that men are physically unable to do any kind of household chores efficiently. At one time, Belal tells me, it was his day off and he was spending most of it in bed. It did not make sense to him to make his bed while still in it. When Widad woke up and noticed that Belal is in bed, she complained that his bed was unmade, so he told her that he will make his bed when he gets out of it. A few moments go by, she comes back in again, and tells him in a rather passive aggressive manner that "*odtak kharaba*" your room is a dumpster, to which he says that he will tidy it up, but he needs to physically get out of bed first. The third and final time she comes in and starts making the bed while he is still in it, to prove to him that he is incapable of making his own bed and

that she “*lazem te'mel kol haga fy el beit da be nafsaha!*” must do everything by herself in this house.

Widad, Belal's mother demonstrates what Counihan (2004) calls the traditional motherhood of emphasising clear differences between what is masculine and what is feminine. Through her ways of upbringing and socialising through mothering and nourishing, she contributes to the reproduction of individuals with the same roles by removing males from the servitude equation to protect their masculinity and restricting females to housework to keep them confined within the lines of femininity. By doing so, Widad is contributing to the patriarchy-capitalism symbiote without noticing that her actions are feeding, instead of eliminating the problem.

Although I did not get the chance to talk with Widad, Belal elaborated as much as he can about how his mother treats him and his brother differently than their sisters when it comes to house chores and gender roles. One of Counihan's interlocutors, a mother, and I found her very similar to Widad, gives a simple yet fitting example of how mothers tend to be the main factor in affecting how both males and females are conditioned during their upbringing to know their roles within the domestic hierarchy of the household. Valeria admits that “*maybe I didn't try hard enough to get him in the habit of doing housework. I don't know. I don't even know how to explain how this came about... I didn't succeed in getting Arturo to do anything, because I would grumble at him and grumble at him about leaving his clothes all over the place, but then I always went and straightened everything up... And then it's our fault too because we always blame the women if the house is messy, not the men. So why should the men clean? It's not their problem*” (2004:147-148).

Moreover, Belal admits that he used to be a lazy person during his adolescence, who enjoyed being served and did not mind the care given to him at all. However, this is understandable since his mother is the type of mothers who socialise their children with beliefs



essential to male gender privilege: that household chores are women's duty and men have a right to expect domestic service (Counihan 2004). However, this all shifted when he went to work in a different city and had to live alone for a whole year. He takes a great deal of pride in himself that he was able to overcome all the domestic chores he faced, and this has actually made him feel more mature and more of an adult than just a young boy unable to function without his mother. Furthermore, only then did he realise the intensive work that goes into domestic chores and how exhausting and boring they are.

Belal's efforts in carrying out domestic chores go unappreciated in Belal's household because of his mother, Widad, and how she imposes her own belief system regarding men and domestic labour on him and the rest of his siblings (one younger brother and two sisters, one of which is older than him). She not only would prohibit Belal from carrying out his daily chores but would also make any of his two sisters do the work for him. This scene is met with an equal amount of anger and tantrum-throwing when neither Muhammed nor Belal participate in any household chores. Belal assures me that his mother's frustration with men is satisfyingly confirmed -it is evidence that she is right about her claims and beliefs- when he or his brother ignore or forget their mother's command:

*"I promise you; I truly don't mind doing the work. I see her tired and unable to stand on her feet, yet she still wouldn't allow me to help in anything! She would even get super angry with me and shame me if I insisted on helping, especially if it's within the kitchen!"* (Belal, June 2021).

His mother would tell him that he is not enough of a man for carrying out labour that was *"intended solely for women."* It is something that can be easily noticed in my fieldwork since I frequently hear statements of the sorts. This form of gender socialisation and conditioning is a standard for most of the Egyptian middle-class families, which is part of the familial socialisation and gender as practice rather than a personality trait (Flynn 2011).



Under certain conditions, however, including times of crisis, war, or conflict, and economic migration, the patriarchal balance shifts in favour of the women in the family (Joseph 1994; George 2005). Such conditions reshape the gender hierarchy of the household and gives new meanings of gender socialisation for the children (Joseph 1994). Lujain is the oldest of four siblings and is the only daughter; she and her brothers grew up in Saudi Arabia and then each of them started settling in Egypt for college. By 2013, her and Adham, (her 29-year-old brother) were living together. She tells me she needed to establish some solid ground in the household control department, because, although she does not know from where he got his gender ideologies, he had a heteronormative mindset of how things should go around the house. Lujain and her brothers all grew up in a household where gender roles were divided equally among the family members, including the mother and father. With her being the oldest sister, she was given the reign of the household when she and Adham went back to Egypt for college. The re-establishing of gender roles and division of chores around the house took Lujain a solid two years for Adham to abide by what he was already brought up on doing. The patriarchal renegotiations were reinforced and backed up by Lujain's parents who remotely supported her decisions and control dynamics around their house in Egypt. Having women take control around the house is not a novel thing to witness or experience.

As a third example, I noticed that Lamia's father, Uncle Sanaa activities around the house consisted of either on the sofa in front of the TV or in his bed, also in front of the TV, and helping out the gardener in very rare occasions. Other than that, everything was mostly done by the maid with the help of Lamis's mother. Lamis's mother quit her job when Lamis and her brother were still toddlers in order to be able to take better care of them. She became a full-time housewife to make sure that her kids got the care and nourishment they needed. After 7 or 8 years later, she decided that her kids were old enough to take care of themselves and she went back to work.

During those 8 years, Lamis's mother would do all the house chores by herself. Lamis's even tells me that her father was not as lazy and laid back as he is now back in the day, but when her mother stopped working, she did not give him the chance to do anything around the house. She saw that he is a working man, who is at work for long hours of the day and deserves to rest and relax when he gets home. She would do all the cooking before the kids got back from school, finish the cleaning, take a nap to energise in order to be completely focused when staying with the kids for their homework. When Uncle Sanaa comes home, she would not let him do anything, "*mabyshelsh ma'ala'a*" he would not lift a spoon, as she puts it. This is interesting because I hear this phrase quite often and its meaning always varies depending on the context.

When Lamis's mother says that she did not allow her husband to lift a spoon, she said it with pride and a sense of accomplishment. She serves her husband to the greatest extent that his needs and wants are being fulfilled, even before he even verbally expresses them. However, when Lamis's tells me about her father, and how much he is embracing the life of retirement to the point he no longer does anything around the house, the phrase comes out as a form of complain rather than a praise, "*da hatta mabyshelsh ma'ala'a*" he does not even lift a spoon, meaning that he would not even carry out the simplest of tasks.

As Tante Samia went back to work, they needed to hire a maid to help in the housework. It is Tante Samia's duty to assess the maid, make sure she is competent enough, teach her all the house rules, show her all the how-to's of the cleaning, and trains her in how to cook the way the house members prefer. It is important to note that Tante Samia's case is not the only one I encountered where the woman is the one responsible for the maid and her work, although most of the time, the mother is the last one to need the maid. This is usually because women are the ones already familiar with all the house chores and they tend to be taking care of

everything around it, so it is easier, and of more sense, to have the wife/mother, be the mentor and main guidance for the maid.

Moreover, now Tante Samia and Uncle Sanaa are both retired, but Tante Samia is often ill and unable to move, unlike back in the day when she would not let her husband “lift a spoon”. Unfortunately, this somewhat conditioned Uncle Sanaa to be used to being served unconditionally and rely heavily on the figure of the servant, be it his wife, his daughter, or the actual maid. Now that Tante Samia is unwell most of the time, he somewhat does not perceive that he needs to be more helpful and sees that her caretaking is also part of the maid’s responsibility.

Additionally, when the maid quit her job and the house became maid-less, at one point, Uncle Sanaa was extremely distressed, because he did not know who will make him his breakfast, fix him his coffee, bring him his meals, and peel his apples for him. Instead of carrying out these self-serving chores, he would call on Lamis, at her own house, to come and spend the day with them during her days off from work, or the days when she is working from home. Lamis tells me that she realised her sole presence in her parents’ house is not to spend quality time with them, but to serve them and make sure their needs are actualised. She tells me her father and her brother would not eat or drink if it were not for the maid.

This falls as an example of another saying I hear most of the time when the topic of husbands and family matters is being discussed: “*ebnik a’la ma terabeih, wa gozik a’la ma ti’awedeih*” your son will grow up on what you teach him, and your husband will become familiar with what you make him used to. It means that the son will grow up believing in and acting out what his mother made of him. If he is used to being served growing up, he will become a man who is dependent on maids and servants. If he is used to carrying out his chores by himself, he will grow up to be a man who is independent. Same goes with newly wedded couples, the wife will set the rules of the house, be it verbally or non-verbally, by having a

certain set of rules and routines followed by all members of the house, that will make the husband abide by them and, by time, become familiar with them.

As aforementioned, Lamis is a newlywed. She got married just a few months ago and is learning her way through married life and responsibility. She tells me that her and Mahmoud, her husband, have most of the house chores divided between them. Although Mahmoud does not cook or help in the food-making process, this is only because he does not know how to cook full-course meals, and they both do not have the time to experiment in the kitchen. Other than the cooking and the kitchen, Mahmoud is fine with following this newly introduced routine in his life. I have not had the chance to sit and talk with Mahmoud, but I have met him a few times and he is a very welcoming and helpful person. Lamis always tells me she is finding more and more freedom with him than she did in her parents' house, and this is because she gets to have a saying in household matters now that she is a wife and responsible of a home of her own.

Finally, a couple of months ago, Tante Samia broke her leg. As aforementioned before, when Lamis and her brother were kids, she quit her job and made sure that she is fulfilling her duty as a woman and as a mother and stayed with them and made sure her husband was compensated for his long working days and tiring job. However, Tante Samia did not receive this compensation and comfort, be it when she had a full-time job like her husband, or when she stayed at home and raised her children. All she has is little to no reward other than her own sense of fulfilling a cultural ideal based on self-abnegation, which she is proud to define as the right maternal behaviour (Counihan 2004).

#### On The Gendering of Kinship

Growing up, my brother and I were living under a matriarchal domestic regimen where my mother is the main provider of the family, thus, she is also the decision maker in the household, with my father coming in second place. This dynamic shaped my and my brother's

understanding of power/love relations (Joseph 1994). My mother is the oldest of her siblings in her natal house, and I am the oldest in mine. I have been socialised into my gender roles around the house accordingly as did she. Being the older sister means I am responsible for all matters around the household, especially since my mother and father are not living with us in Egypt most of the time and are in Saudi Arabia almost all year round. As my mother has been conditioned during her upbringing that she needs to look after her siblings financially, socially, and gastronomically, I was brought up into doing the same.

The gender socialisation process can start from a very early stage in one's life due to how their parents introduce gender as a personality trait (Kretchmar 2011). "*Women of this family are the men of the house,*" my mother always tells me. Due to the responsibilities we take on from a very early age, we tend to mature earlier and faster than the males of the household, making us more reliable when it comes to serious matters. Because of my mother's better education, and her having a PhD under her belt, work opportunities and later on her travelling to Saudi Arabia in the early 90s before conceiving me, immigration to Jordan for 9 years in the early 2000s, then back to Saudi Arabia for another 11 years in the early 2010s, she has been deemed the breadwinner of both her natal and marital houses. Her better economic status has opened the door to her abandoning the heteronormative gender roles of the Egyptian household. It was a patriarchal bargain she made which helped her negotiate her way through domestic gender roles (Kandiyoti 1988). Due to our immigration and lack of settlement in one place (moving from Egypt to Jordan to Saudi Arabia), me and my brother's upbringing was based on the bargain my mother did. This caused both of us to be conditioned on a not very traditional set of societal gender norms. Although I took on cooking and taking care of the kitchen from a young age, it was because of my grandfather's and aunt's love for cooking and culinary skills and was a form of protest, or a counter-negotiation to my father's feeding methods.

Through the kitchen, I came to understand my own gender, as well as my matriarchal position in the household. Taking my mother as the primary example of caregiving, I started looking after my younger brother when she was not around. This happened quite often due to our summer vacation travel back to Egypt while she stayed in Jordan. I made sure that my brother ate before me and is well satiated and satisfied. As we grew older, the caregiving grew with me. Although Joseph (1994) discusses the brother-sister relationship in depth and from multifaceted disciplinary perspectives (i.e., psychoanalytical, ethnographical, political...etc), she is discussing the relationship from a one-sided point of view; her fieldwork is in a Christian Maronite society and the Christian system is patriarchal par excellence. I am not refuting what she is saying per se, but I want to go back to her point of the shifting of the love/power dynamic between brothers and sisters in times of crisis only. It is not the case, especially if the ruling system of the house is a priori matriarchal. I am the one in control of the relationship my brother and I possess. However, this control is sourcing out of love and care. Although love and care are taught by parents to their daughters and sons in different contexts, in which daughters as sisters need to show love through care and nourishment to their brothers and the sons as brothers need to show love through power, protection and control (ibid.), it is important to note that in my and Lujain's household, we are navigating and constantly shifting between the role of care and role of power due to the given circumstances and form of familial and gender socialisation we both received growing up. Power and love dynamics, even if from a psychoanalytical point of view, between members of the same kin, are regulated by different factors, depending on the context through which they are constructed.

### Conclusion

I need to reflect on the change of stance I went through as this chapter came together, since it went through a lot of changes, edits, and endless discussion stages. Admittedly, I started this chapter with an agenda of “all men are” and “all women are”, and I tried to fit the

material I gathered from fieldwork into this frame. However, it was better for me to simply take a step back, examine the material from afar, and look at it from a wider perspective. I came to the realisation that, each of the cases presented above is unique in its own right, and I cannot stir them in the same pot. This is why I considered each of the stories aforementioned as a case of its own.

By putting each individual's practices into clusters, we can better understand why Lamis's father, for example, became glued to his sofa and TV. Why Belal became more aware of house chores after living alone. Why my father is more interested in marking certain dishes and kitchen spaces as his own territories, than any other areas of the house, or our lives. Clustering helps in understanding each individual case based on its context and circumstances, instead of the usual, generalised analysis. Moreover, when studying food and family praxes, I consider foodstuffs and family relations as practices rather than behaviours, especially that food is extremely incorporated into our daily lives to the point of redundancy, that we often forget it is an important factor in understanding family relationships as notions of power, agency, and control, (O'Connell & Brannen 2014; Wills et al. 2008).

Furthermore, Food practices also needs to be put in consideration that when it comes to the opposing voices of the general discourse discussed here, I need to shift the attention to the generational differences found between our own and that of our parents. Belal and his mother, Shorouq, and her parents, and it must be pointed out that the age gap between Shorouq and her parents is approximately 40 years. They can be considered to be part of the generation of grandparents, and they are in fact grandparents to Shorouq's brothers' children. To give a little context, Shorouq is the youngest among her siblings, with an age gap between her and her oldest brother being 15 years or so. Although her family also immigrated to Saudi Arabia and Shorouq was born there, the household is a traditional, heteronormative one, with her older brothers taking the patriarchal reign over her through the psychodynamic of love and power

(Joseph 1994), while her mother abiding by the same rules that apply to Shorouq. In their case, the father is the breadwinner and main provider of the house, which causes Tante Nagda to always feel the need to compensate and over-sacrifice herself in order to prioritise her family.

Another and final example is Lujain. Both her parents are immigrants in Saudi Arabia, but they brought up all their three sons and daughter on equality around the house when it came to domestic gender roles. Lujain's father, Uncle Mohammed, although used to be a full-time architect before retiring, used to do the same chores as her mother. When the load of the housework got out of hand and both parents were working extra hours at their jobs, they decided to hire a nanny, with both Tante Hala (Lujain's mother) and Uncle Mohammed (Lujain's father) cooking and meal-prepping and storing food in the fridge for the nanny to heat up, until the nanny caught up with the foodways of the Allam family and started cooking the meals herself.

Another thing that our parents taught us, be it directly or indirectly, is that they gave us the tools, at least they gave us the motivation, to search for the meaning and values that helped us build our own ideologies and critiques about the different aspects of life, especially our private, domestic lives. This is only a showcasing of the different contexts through which gender and patriarchy are constantly being socialised, bargained, and renegotiated (Joseph 1994; Freeman 2004; George 2005; Kretchmar 2011).

On the one hand, the reason why Belal, who lived alone for a year as part of his work as a site engineer, disagrees with his mother's ideologies and cultural values about gender roles is because he had the opportunity to walk a mile in his female counterparts' shoes for an entire year; he was exposed to the different gender roles, firstly imposed by culture, and then imposed by his circumstances. This caused him to be more empathic and more understanding when it came to the effort exerted in maintaining a household through daily, mundane, and exhaustive domestic chores. On the other hand, the reason why Uncle Sanaa, for example, is no longer an



active member in housework, is because his wife, Tante Samia, would not allow him to “lift a spoon” as a way of compensation and showing appreciation for his hard and long hours of work.

Thus, from a young age, my uncle, Mahmoud, learned how to take care of himself, how to cook his own food, look after his own affairs and even find his own ways of expressing love and emotion. Later on, Uncle Ahmed’s college of choice was Law, while Uncle Mahmoud’s was Tourism and Hospitality, and he majored in the culinary arts. This is also another kind of exposure that Uncle Mahmoud got through, that my other uncle did not get to experience. Mahmoud learned how to express his love, his emotions and even practice his own understanding of power through food and the kitchen, while Ahmed got the exposure of understanding power through enforcing it through law and order.

Finally, and because of how close he was to *teita*, who was the figure of authority within the parameters of the household, he learned how to lead a household, while Uncle Mahmoud, being closer to *geddo* my grandfather, who was mainly responsible for feeding the family. This was in the form of cooking and maintaining sustenance and always being present in the kitchen, unlike *teita*, who seldom cooked, because of her growing health complications.

Furthermore, when it comes to my father and his ways of navigating the kitchen space and how he deals with food and feeding, I find my way standing at a crossroad, not able to solidly determine where to place him. This further emphasises the complexity and multilayering I mentioned earlier. On the one hand, my father genuinely enjoys cooking. He even expresses such enjoyment and contentment whenever he gets the chance. On the other hand, he is well-aware that food and food practices is a portal to control and dominance, which shows in certain situations where his stubbornness surpasses his cooking skills.

I have to admit, although my father may seem like a selfish person who only cares about his food choices and preferences, when given a second look, I find that he is doing what he was

brought up on. He is constantly, and most of the time unconsciously, using his temporal and sensorial habitus (Bourdieu 1975; Simonetta 2001). He sees that his food choices are the healthiest there is because these are the foods that helped in building him up. Secondly, when he usually cooks his foods, be it *mulukhiya*, ox tail, lamb loins and the likes, he genuinely feels upset when we refuse to share these foods with him because we simply don't like them. He views these foods as the stuff that will "*toroumm a'admokoum*" scaffold your bones. This being said, he sometimes tries to meet us halfway and cook something that we might all enjoy eating every once in a while, but he still makes sure that we all acknowledge his efforts. This is because, again, the kitchen is one of the few areas where he feels dominant and in control, so the rest of us (my mother, my brother and I) sometimes fluff his ego and compliment his great culinary skills and the tasteful food he makes, because it is always important to keep the façade that he is in charge, because that is what the ideal image that our culture entails.

The different dimensions of food and family practices (practice performances and practice entities) are also difficult to explore and Spurling et al.'s (2013) practice iceberg metaphor is useful for visualising these challenges as it illustrates that although the tip of the iceberg (the practice performance) may be visible, the submerged elements of the iceberg (the practice entities) are harder to observe. This, along with the remaining ocean of the different factors and circumstances that helped in shaping these people along with their living contexts. It is important to keep in consideration that I chose to look more closely to the context of each individual, rather than going with a notion of a generalised analysis. This is because I found that I might be hindering my own thought processes by trying to fit the stories into a cast of stereotypes.

Finally, to answer the question of whether it is *e'ib* or *haram*, it is simply neither nor. The answer got lost among the institutionalised religious discourse, the internalised sexism that women, like Tante Nagda, Tante Salwa, even my mother, parade under the name of love,

gratitude, womanhood, and safeguarding what the ideal image of the nuclear family should be. Hence, the *e'ib-haram* duplicity is a social construct based on several factors, with the care given to the public social image and the juxtaposition of the person among the various class stratifications of society through their tastes and ideologies being the most important among them.

## **Chapter Three**

## Shopping for Food, Shopping for Identity: Food as A Social Simulacrum

### Setting the Scene: Love and Lust in the Supermarket

Going to the supermarket felt like a fieldtrip during my childhood. Every beginning of the month, with every monthly payroll, and after my mother gets through the monthly balance sheets and budgeting, she took my brother and I to the supermarket to buy our monthly stock. She had her list, and my brother, and I had ours. In Jordan, the supermarkets varied depending on the neighbourhood they were in, and most of the supermarkets we went to were part of a mall, so the whole trip was a family outing and an opportunity for mother-children bonding.

Two of the supermarkets we used to visit are the ones vividly stuck in my memory. The first one, *Cozmo*, is a hypermarket/department store located in the 7<sup>th</sup> Circle neighbourhood, where not only foodstuffs are sold, but it had clothes, house appliances, electronics section...etc. Like its name, *Cozmo* is a microcosm of an upscale *souq* (old-fashioned market), a sophisticated shopping experience offered within building limits, that provides local as well as international options, or as my mum put it, “a whole other world within concrete walls”. My mind buzzed from all the brands I was surrounded with in *Cozmo*. We would enter the supermarket, rush to the trollies section, and grab two trollies. My brother would grab the small trolley made for children, and I would grab the one for adults and hand it over to my mother.



Figure 8 Cozmo Supermarket's Facad. Photo Source: <http://wikimapia.org/929766/COZMO>



Figure 9 Cozmo Supermarket's Fruits and Vegetables Section. Photo Source: <http://wikimapia.org/929766/COZMO>

The other supermarket, Miles, had a different setting. It is located on the ground floor of *Mecca Mall*, in the *ash-Shumaysānī* neighbourhood. Although a supermarket, offering mostly foodstuffs and the usual body and hair products, it is marketed as an international marketplace catering for people looking for gourmet products. The wooden floors, low warm lights, and granite walls give a “European feeling” to the place as my mother and her friends described it the first time we visited.



Figure 10 Miles Supermarket's entrance in Mecca Mall. Photo Source: <https://meccamall.jo/english2/product/miles-supermarket/>



Figure 11 Mile's Supermarket from the inside. Photo Source: <https://meccamall.jo/english2/product/miles-supermarket/>

Both trips, either to Cozmo or to Miles, had prior planning due to how far they are from where we lived, and also because of the amount of money we spent. Although my mum could have bought the groceries from the local *dokkaneh* (what a small market is called in Jordan, usually selling goods by the piece and usually has most of the foodstuffs we needed to go by our week) and buy the meat and poultry from the local butcher, she found the whole trip to the local markets more tiring and hectic than going to the hypermarket where everything we needed for the house was of a walking distance within a closed, clean, and well-ventilated space. Although the mentioned supermarkets and their counterparts are deprived from sensory experiences such as the usual noises surrounding us in the street when shopping for food in local food markets, the proximity and organising of everything within the supermarket isles saves time and effort for women like my mother, who have full-time jobs and still need to find the time to buy a consistent and well-nourishing foodstuff (Newcomb 2017).

Another reason why my mum preferred, and still prefers, shopping in upscale supermarkets is because the experience makes her feel that she has upgraded her socioeconomic status from working class to upper-middle class. The usual trips to the *souq* (local market in popular neighbourhoods) she used to make with her father back in their lower class neighbourhood in Egypt growing up, included having to face the smog of the cars passing by, the dustiness of the stalls where the goods are displayed, and the dirtiness of the street due to the accumulation of mud due to the rain in winter; the smell of sweat from the people walking by and the pungent smell of produce rotting due to the overheat of the summer, while having her ears polluted with the noise of the city.

This was met with the stark opposite of the unsullied cleanliness of the supermarket, the sonic sterility of the overall ambiance, except for the monotonous jazz music playing from the speaker and the price tags labelling every single product indicating that this is not a place for bargaining or negotiations. There is no place for a small talk or a quick chat with the vendor or the cashier, it is a straightforward transaction with the checkout person checking the items for my mum and my mum paying for the goods she bought. Other than the occasional “have a nice day” or “thank you for shopping with us,” there is no need to ask how the kids are doing or catch up on the small talk she started with the vendor last week as her father used to do.

By shopping within an enclosed environment, there is also a symbolic as well as literal barrier between the people with-in the space and those with-out. This distinction offers identity through the assortment of different tastes within class categories (Bourdieu 1984). The supermarket gives the shoppers the chance to identify as people from higher classes, even if said shoppers are not necessarily buying the overly priced, imported products, or not buying anything at all, their presence within the parameters of the supermarket gives them the privilege of associating with the higher classes of society (Newcomb 2017). Although we bought our monthly groceries from these supermarkets, we were still limited with the budget my mother

sat before leaving the house. This limitation caused my brother and I to not buy whatever we desired or fill our small trollies with the goods that most kids wanted and some afforded. My mother usually ended up buying the necessities and my brother and I were left with the lust for more and hope that maybe next time we are there, we get to buy what we desired.

### Identity through Segregation

In the past couple of years, I have been involved, be it directly or indirectly, with social circles from higher social classes for the sake of exploring, and hopefully understanding, the differences and similarities in taste and identity between the ever-so-ambiguous social classes of the Cairene metropolis. Such circles include people who own their own businesses, and who define people based on the figures in their bank accounts. For the sake of consistency, and to keep things simple and to the point, I will be sharing the case of Seif, a 23-year-old posh boy who I came to know through my best friend, Dina.

Seif was Dina's boyfriend for over 4 years, which meant that things are supposedly serious between them. He introduced her to his family, took her with them on trips to their beach houses, would invite her over for family outing and dinners...etc. Although they both come from the same upper class, Seif's family always viewed themselves as being of a higher social status than that of Dina's. I only met Seif three or four times in total. However, I was present with Dina throughout all the stages of her relationship with Seif, and she would always call me or meet with me to tell me the updates of her relationship with him.

As a matter of clarification, and based on what I observed in my fieldwork, being of a higher class means you need to possess a flexible mentality. A mentality, however, suitable with the cultural norms and traditions you live in. Inasmuch open-mindedness as I saw, they are still bounded by the *e'ib-haram* duplicity I discussed in the previous chapter. Having any kind of relationship outside marriage in Egypt is a controversial topic because it is considered a taboo, yet when put in the context of what is ideal vis-à-vis what is real, we find that having



a boyfriend or a girlfriend, especially in higher classes, is not something that people frown upon directly (voorhoeve 2012). This being said, as long as the daughter or the son have their partners with them under their parents' supervision, it is fine to carry out this relationship.

Back to Dina, and her relationship with Seif. The details and juicy snippets of her relationship with him, and more specifically her dealings with and observations of his family, came later on after they broke up at the beginning of 2021. Dina and I met several times over coffee or at either of our houses for her to give me a full scope of what it was like mingling and hanging out with what she calls "filthy rich people, or at least people who pretend to be." The reason why she kept mentioning that is because Seif would usually tell her that his father's urban and road planning company is in debt, and he is not sure whether they will be able to pay that debt or not. She tells me, however, that the way they lived and acted, and the way they spent money and threw parties, showed otherwise.

It is something she always comments on, that they were always bragging and showing off their wealth. According to Dina, for some reason their life felt like a performance or a representation of wealth, but not actual wealth. For example, Seif's father, Kamal, would invite her over, along with other friends and family members, to a social gathering at a fancy, upscale restaurant, to then order almost all of the menu for his guests, but then nobody would actually eat anything. She sees that it is a way of showing off, because the kind of food they usually order (i.e., *Kabab* and grilled vegetables) can be ordered at any other place with a cheaper price, but it would not be a matching representation to Kamal's social image.

Furthermore, she notes that these patterns of bragging increase when they are spending time at one of their beach houses in an upscale gated community, with a members-only access, at the North Coast<sup>7</sup>. The North Coast, or simply *Sahel* (meaning Coast) as most people refer to it, is known to be one of the hotspots for high class people to hang out in the summer; it is a

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<sup>7</sup> The private beaches of the Northern Coast of Egypt are known to be the summertime vacation spot of the rich and wealthy.

place where everything trendy, fancy, and expensive is found, and people there have their ways of going above and beyond to demonstrate their wealth. As Dina puts it in another way, “*be’yallo a’la ba’ad*” they are in a competition of showing off with each other. This notion is sensed because of the branding and labelling of everything bought or every place went. “The Elites,” as she says, always have their ways of demonstrating who is richer, from the A-list brand of someone’s swimsuit, for example, to the name of the gated-with-a-private-beach-community you own a house in.

Moreover, the food there is not simply food you eat. The food needs to be marketed as imported from its authentic place, whether this is true or not; it needs to reflect some sort of identity. The food reflects who you are as a person, and you need to be cultured enough, with a sophisticated taste palette, to understand the depth of flavour and the complexity of the dish. It is also another way to price-tag the products, and in accordance, price-tag the person. The farther away the country of import, the higher the price, and the better the quality. Sushi ingredients are imported from Japan, chocolate for waffles is imported from Belgium, parmesan cheese for the carbonara imported from Italy, and so on. The type of food itself is purposed to market for an international taste palette to showcase how culturally sophisticated the restaurant or food outlet is. You will not be walking around in one of the gated beach communities in Sahel to find the usual restaurants found in downtown Cairo, for example. Even if the restaurant is vending Egyptian food, like *Moloukhiya* or *Mahshi*, it will be branded, for example, in an old Ottoman fashion to showcase the authenticity of the food outlet. Ironically, however, it only reflects the reality dissociation and temporal dissonance, along with the internalised cultural appropriation of the place, because Ottomans did not eat *Moloukhiya* or *Mahshi*.

The different modes of representation is something I discuss extensively later on in this chapter because it will lead us to taste distinction (Bourdieu 1984); symbolic power, with a

closer look to the possibilities of the term self-limitation (Bourdieu); social and cultural simulacra (Baudrillard 2010) and identity and capitalism (Moran 2015). For now, and to start the build up to that point of extensive discussion and analysis, I return to Dina and her lavish class adventures. To further emphasise their wealth and social status, Seif's family recently moved from a 3-bedroom apartment in an upscale neighbourhood, to a three-story high villa in a high-class gated community. Each floor has a certain thing or two that act as its highlight or centre piece(s).

In their old house, they only had one maid, but in the new house, they have a full serving staff, formed of a chef, a sous-chef, a butler, and three maids. The house's structure itself speaks volumes on the extent of how aware they are of social classes. The house, as aforementioned, is three stories high, with a roof, a basement, and a spacious backyard. The basement contains the maids' bedrooms, and is built to contain a fully equipped, state-of-the-art, industrial kitchen. This kitchen is accessed by the staff and is mainly used to cater for the events and parties the family throughs every now and then. Rania, Seif's mother, rarely enters that kitchen, and when she does, it is usually for management purposes only. The basement also has an indoor pool that can be heated in the winter. The ground floor contains the reception area, and the dining area, where there is the dining table with 18 chairs and is mainly for guests. Once you enter the house, there is a huge chandelier hanging near the stairs, in the foyer, from the highest floor all the way down to the hallway in front of the entrance, showcasing extravagance and "exaggeration" as Dina put it.

The first floor is the living room and where the family members mainly hang out. It contains an 85-inch TV screen, with a sound system and an ambiance that gives off a private cinema theatre at best. The second floor contains another kitchen. However, this kitchen is more of a boutique kitchen, designed according to Rania's, Seif's mother, desire and preferences. The space also contains another, more private and smaller, dining table, with only

6 chairs, for the main family members. The staff members are not allowed into this kitchen. It acts as Rania's personal space, where she gets to cook her signature dishes, e.g., truffle stake, smoked salmon, cannelloni, and to prepare for her weekly meals since she follows a strict diet of mainly imported, gluten and dairy free, products. The only staff member who is allowed in this kitchen is Amna, her sue chef, who helps her with the preparations of the dishes and to clean up after she is done. The third and final floor has the master bedroom, Aisha's and Fatima's bedrooms, Seif's sisters, and Seif's bedroom. Each bedroom has its own bathroom and dressing room.

Moreover, when the family relocates to their beach house in the summer, they need their staff with them. However, the staff members never ride with the family members, although Seif sometimes offers to, his father and mother refuse. The staff are moved, along with the needed furniture and utensils, in a different pick-up truck, with the driver. They are not to be seen with the family members and are sent to the beach house a day prior to the family's arrival in order to clean up the house and set it up for the summer vacation. In their beach house, when Rania enters the kitchen to cook something, the staff members are ordered to leave the kitchen, because she does not like to be in their company.

Another thing Dina notes is how Seif's family treated the servants. She tells me although they treated them nicely, there was always something hypocritical about their attitude towards them. The staff got their basic needs covered, yet they were always reminded that they are servants. The size of their bedrooms was awfully small, especially compared to the grandiose house they served in. The way Rania would not allow them into her kitchen or allow them in with her at their beach house kitchen, was due to her subtle disgust of them and her classist view that servants and masters are not to mingle in the same space. Additionally, Seif's parents would frown upon Dina's "overly nice" attitude with the servants, although all Dina did was the occasional greetings and smiling since the staff members were older than her, so

she had to be polite and respectful. Kamal would ask Dina not to hang out in the kitchen too much so the staff would not get “too friendly” with her, and she never understood what that meant. Overall, she tells me, the staff was always “kept in place” and refrained from moving freely around the house. However, what Rania is doing is not only segregating the house-staff from the rest of the family members, but she is also limiting herself within her upper-classness, or as Bourdieu (1982:106) puts it:

*“The mystery of performative magic is thus resolved in the mystery of ministry (to use a pun close to the heart of medieval canonists), i.e., in the alchemy of representation (in the different senses of the term) through which the representative creates the group which creates him: the spokesperson endowed with the full power to speak and act on behalf of the group, and first of all to act on the group through the magic of the slogan, is the substitute for the group, which exists solely through this procuration. The act of institution is thus an act of communication, but of a particular kind: it signifies to someone what his identity is, but in a way that both expresses it to him and imposes it on him by expressing it in front of everyone (kategorieren, meaning originally, to accuse publicly) and thus informing him in an authoritative manner of what he is and what he must be.”*

In addition to the domestic segregation, Dina tells me that there is isolation in grocery shopping as well. Dina went with Seif for his family’s grocery shopping a couple of times, and she tells me she noticed something that he used to do, under Rania’s command. On the one hand, his mother would give him an extensive list of the goods and products she and the other family members needed for their weekly groceries, and he would go to certain hypermarkets that only sell high-end imported goods to buy them. Dina elaborates by telling me that they usually bought things in abundance, and they mostly bought them out of leisure, not out of necessity. Such goods included, but were not limited to, matcha green tea, Swedish caviar, gluten-free bread, plant-based milk, extra-virgin olive oil, truffle oil, sun-dried tomatoes,

arborio rice, and the likes. On the other hand, there was a stark difference in the grocery list for the servants. Again, commanded by his mother, Seif would buy locally produced goods which are mostly subsidised by the government, and would only buy the basics, e.g., rice, cooking/frying oil, sugar, tomato paste and canned food, like corned beef and fava beans.

Not only does Rania want to showcase the class distinction of her family, but she also wants to show off her family's wealth through the quality and quantity of brands she commands her son to buy. As Newcomb (2017) notes in Moroccan high-class families and how they do not like being associated with lower classes within the same proximity of shopping spaces, same with Egyptians of the same class. Rania and her family members only shop at high scale supermarkets such as the likes of *Gourmet* or *Fresh Food Market*, where only imported goods are sold and catered towards sophisticated taste and refined palettes. Even the ordinary, local products found in said supermarkets are sold in higher prices due to increased taxes, yet this does not pose an issue to Seif's family and their counterparts of the same class. The astronomical prices not only affirm the class status of the elites, but also adds to the confirmation that the place they are shopping at, is indeed, catering for the higher societal classes.

As de Koning (2009) argues, the excitement caused by the shopping in places like Carrefour, Alfa Market and Metro when they opened in the early 2000s, and later on in *Gourmet* and *Fresh Food Market* could not have been only about the products offered. A large part of the hype around said places seems related to the mere idea that an international formula for shopping/living had come to Cairo, providing for an exotic and sophisticated shopping experience (ibid.). The shopping patterns of higher-class citizens not only showcases exaggeration and demonstrates hoarding, but also comes as a confirmation that the more products they buy the more wealth they show. Such patterns drastically increase during the holiday seasons and special occasions, with Ramadan being the most prominent to witness such

dramatic shifts, regardless of whether the families buying the products practice the fasting and religious rituals of Ramadan.

### The Ramadan Pandemonium: A Shopping Mayhem

*“12<sup>th</sup> of April, 04:00 pm on a Monday. Ramadan begins tomorrow. I remind myself that a) the fridge is empty, and I need to get on with the grocery shopping, and b) I need to go to the supermarket today to observe the mayhem that is the shifting shopping patterns of the people shopping for Ramadan. The closest supermarket to my house is a 10-minute drive and is considered one of the upscale shopping centres in the area. Perfect. Not only will I observe people hoarding all the commodities they can get their hands on, but I will be observing high-class citizens hoarding all the commodities they can get their hands on ... The trip mainly consists of me, wasting my life in the car to and from the supermarket due to traffic, waiting for a parking spot to clear out for me to park in. Feeling sick to my stomach due to the smell of smog, the accumulation of the HVAC waste in the parking lot and the poorly lit parking space triggering my claustrophobia; going up to the supermarket itself, finding an empty, clean trolley, buying what I need to buy, waiting in an infinite line of customers to check out and head back to the car with the things I bought ... The whole experience feels like I am part of a herd, being moved into a certain lane, the only difference is we get checked out, while an actual herd gets slaughtered.”*

- (Excerpt from a fieldnote, written 15<sup>th</sup> of April 2021).

The supermarket, I argue, is not only a microcosmic society, but it can also be an analogy of a hegemonic force with an ability to redistribute class and identity. “...the supermarket centralises and redistributes a whole region and population, how it concentrates and rationalises time trajectories, practices creating an immense to and from movement totally similar to that of suburban commuters absorbed and ejected at fixed times by their workplace.”

(Baudrillard 1981:52). As I enter the supermarket, I am greeted with a security guard, giving out brochures of the latest offers and commodities on sale, asking to check my bag and take my temperature to make sure that I do not have a fever; a main symptom of Covid. Afterwards, I take a trolley and start navigating my way through the aisles. Although Covid restrictions impose a limited number of shoppers, or people of that matter, in any given public space, all restrictions seem to be overlooked due to Ramadan, as if Corona is taking some time off during the Holiday.

Walking down the aisles of the supermarket, I start noticing people's trollies around me, soaring with food and commodities. The meat and poultry sections are over-stacked with people, waiting in queues to buy obscene amounts of animal protein. I take a number and wait in line. My number reads 287, while the number displayed on screen, "QUEUE NUMBER 325".



Figure 12 Shoppers waiting at the poultry section. Photo by Author. April 2021.



Figure 13 Shoppers waiting at the meat section: Photo by Author. April 2021.

The prices displayed all over the place, with Ramadan decoration, the "Tahya Misr" initiative (Long Live Egypt) poster with the president's face displayed on it, indicating that the supermarket offers subsidised commodities, and the people moving from one section to the other, following the systematic shopping system that the supermarket imposes, showcases a hypermarket with a system beyond a traditional capitalist institution, with a controlled social space and a re-totalisation of homogenous space-time continuums. A space-time of a hyperrealist simulation of traffic and control (Baudrillard 1981).



Not only are trollies being over-filled and refilled, with some shoppers having two more trollies with them, having their shopping companions (husbands, wives, children) push them as they carry on their hoarding rituals, but also the items/brands chosen at hand speak louder than words. Said items are no longer commodities, or signifiers of what they mean, but rather a simulacrum of social identity and lifestyle. One is not simply buying a dozen of tomato puree packs, or seven kilos of lamb chops, he/she is buying the item as a representation of the life they navigate (Baudrillard 1981). Dina, while mentioning the shopping rituals of her own extended family members, she recalls how when once she went shopping with her aunt, Amira, she noticed that Amira only buys the more expensive/imported brands of the commodities she needs. For example, she only buys *fol* (fava beans) canned, organic, and overly priced. “You would never see Amira buying fowl from a fowl restaurant or a *rabiet fol* (fol cart),” Dina recalls.

During Ramadan, Amira does not simply prepare *Sohour* (the usual *fol medamess* (slow-cooked fava beans), feta cheese, yogurt, and dates), she prepares charcuterie boards consisting of the finest imported cheeses and deli cuts, canned fava beans heated in olive oil, and rai and sour bread. Amira’s extravagant *Sohours*, and brunches of that matter, not only introduce a rather exotic taste to the usual Egyptian palette, but also demonstrates what Massumi (2015) argues the possibilities of connections that products affectively produce and affectively reproduce. Buying and/or showcasing commodities and ways of consumption, like creating a charcuterie board instead of simply putting cheese in plates, turns food into “...cultural products, or products of experience that invariably have a collective dimension to them.” (Massumi 2015:24-25).

In her *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant is particularly concerned with the conditions of living or the state of the present, which she argues as structured through “crisis ordinariness,” (2010:10) and turns to affect and aesthetics as a way of discerning these crises; by trailing the various impasses we face today. Affect is embedded in terms of fleshing out and/or diagnosing

the present because it is felt before it is perceived, explicitly in the way that she is looking at the present as structured by the impasse, rather than movements towards any futures. The patterns of persistent showcasing of class identity through food choices “names a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility” (Berlant 2010:24). The way that Amira, or other people identifying themselves as the upper class, or the elites, is the way through which they attach their desires to tangible objects in order to make the promise of a good life in the present moment possible (ibid.).

I find Amira and the other shoppers in Oscar Grand Stores and the likes, demonstrating a collective dimension of class status, manifesting itself through the food they buy and consume. Although supermarkets are overly saturated with brands and different selections, it is a hegemonic representation of capitalism’s intangible powers to produce variety, because that will result in consumers entering vicious loops of buying for social identity and social representation through consuming. This vicious loop, although representing a failed system, still gives the required optimism to “ride the wave of the system of attachment they are used to” (Berlant 2010:28).

The way brands are advertised and sold to the consumer can no longer be considered as part of a niche market, rather it has become this affective relational market where individual consumers get inducted into collective processes of identity formations and social representations rather than being separated out as individual target audiences and addressed as free agents who make informed choices when shopping instead of shopping for identity (Berlant 2010; Massumi 2015). This turns the product from being the commodities we buy into us, the consumer, to the point that our life choices and potentials become inseparable from capitalist forces of production, and the means of production themselves become more and more intangible (ibid.). Shopping became overly structured to the point of sensorial sterility. The hyper-organisation of the supermarket imposes consumers to behave in certain ways. There is no space

for bargaining and negotiations; no small talks with the cashier or the deli worker; no space for possibilities produced by the chaos found in places that are not bounded by concrete borders, checkpoints, checkouts, or endless aisles of systematically arranged commodities.

An Ode to Souq: On the Sweet Soundscapes of Chaos and Possibilities

*“A long narrow street surrounded by square buildings, infiltrated by small alleyways that intersect the main street. The alleyways are congested with people, and the main street is buzzing with watchmakers, calligraphers, cafés, carpet sellers, tailors, antique shops ... The sky is veiled by the shade of nearby buildings and their protruding balconies, preventing the sun from penetrating its way to the street... The old quarter still retains its gracefulness and poise against the maddening speed of modernisation.”*

- Excerpt from *Khan Al-Khalili*, by Naguib Mahfouz (2015:08).

On a Thursday afternoon, Abdallah and I, under the persuasion of our father, decided to have grilled fish for iftar. It was the third day of Ramadan, which made it an unusual choice, since people usually prefer the likes of meat and chicken as iftar choices, especially in the beginning of the holy month. My father got excited that I will be eating fish with them, since it is not my favourite meal to eat, and decided to treat us with a special trip to *Abbaseya*<sup>8</sup>. “You’ll eat the best fish you’ve ever tasted in Cairo,” he exclaimed triumphantly. My brother could not come with us, because he had a lecture he needed to attend via Zoom, so I went with my father alone.

I seized the opportunity of going to the souq to lose myself in the sensory stimuli that will be surrounding me in the street, especially the acoustics of open-air spaces; with people going about their days, car honks and beeps protesting the overwhelming traffic, vendors voices reaching the sky with the offers they are exclaiming to attract passers-by, and children being as loud as the cars as they play in the street, not minding the heat or the tantrums the elders throw at them for not behaving. Taking a stroll down the streets of any given city, in my case, Cairo, to investigate sensorial possibilities is what Guy Debord (1955) calls psychogeography. He

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<sup>8</sup> Find map in Appendix.

argues that “the charmingly vague adjective *psychogeographical* can be applied to the findings arrived at by this type of investigation, to their influence on human feelings, and more generally to any situation or conduct that seems to reflect the same spirit of discovery.” (ibid.:23, italics in original).

Due to the sterile experience I had a couple of days with the supermarket soundscape before the trip to the souq, I needed to feel less confined within concrete walls. I needed to sense more than just the sound of the trollies passing by and the queue numbers being called upon. I took a moment to myself in the condiments’ aisle and stood there, trying to hear the sounds around me. Other than the hostile noise the HVAC system was making above my head, relentlessly going about its job, air-conditioning the place, turning it into a hyper-fridge, there were little to no sounds. The sense of socialisation through the senses is lacking, in the sense that people are affected by the hyper-sanity of the supermarket that they are either focusing on the commodities displayed on the shelves or busy peeking at each other’s trollies for mental comparisons of what kind of brands they are buying.

There are no small talks between passers-by, no conversations exchanged between the vendors and the customers, just hand gestures signalling what the customer needs and the vendor silently complying, unless the customer is of an old age and their background is from a working-class area, where shopping for goods takes place primarily in Souqs and Dokkans (mini markets). I notice that their sensorial habitus is coming to life as they start exchanging small talks with the vendor in the bakery section, for example, as they are choosing an ensemble of desserts, yet without keeping quiet or abiding by the place’s sensorial rules. Social exchanges in the working-class neighbourhoods of Cairo take place right in the street. In this way they play a role in the dramatisation of these places and clearly mark another stage in the publicising, through sound in particular, of people’s private affairs. These forms of socialisation contribute to the unmistakable sound ambiance of these neighbourhoods (Battesti & Puig 2016).

Walking down the Abdu Saleh Souq, in Amir Bek Alley in El Weili, Abbaseya, I am met with a vast array of sonic elements. It is 03:00 pm, and my father and I are waiting for the fish we chose for grilling to be done. We need to waste some time, so I start noticing my surroundings. The bakery on my right is soaring with fresh baladi bread coming out. The smell of the earthy aroma of the bread is overridden by the sound of the big industrial oven in the back of the bakery, shrieking with rusting gears and machinery parts that, from the sound of it, seem like they have been in need of maintenance for a long time now. The bakery sounds as it looks, old, shabby, in need of restoration and upgrading, yet persevering and maintaining its bread quality, with the people lined in front of it as a testimony of how good the bread is.

To my left is a fruit and vegetable vendor, with a parked cart on the sidewalk acting as a moveable shop, displaying a colourful selection of oranges, guavas, bananas, lemons, tomatoes, cucumbers, chilli peppers, and potatoes, with a fresh selection of greenie leaves. With each produce basket displaying a price, you would think that the price is definitive. My father approaches the vendor, strikes up a conversation with him, the usual “where you from?” “Are these fresh?” pointing to the produce, and “how long have you been here?” after the vendor told my father he is from Menia and comes here for his business in produce. My father then picks 1kg of tomatoes, 1kg of lemons, half a kilo of guavas, and asks the vendor to measure a kilo and a half of bananas. He then asks about the price of each item, although the prices are stated, to which the vendor responds “illy inta a’yzo ya basha” (they costs how much you want them to, sir). “ehna zabayenak,” (we’re your customers) my father responds, indicating that him and I are the vendor’s customers, although we have only encountered the man a few minutes ago. This is part of the socialisation process, through the dramatisation of sound that Battesti & Puig (2016) discuss. How simple conversations symbolise life affairs and bargaining processes. The vendor makes a discount for my father with 1 pound off each item’s price, which is considered a good bargain, given that the talk exchange was short and brief.

My father and I return to the entrance of the alley, where a mobile cart has been set up as a patisserie and dessert shop. Specialising mostly in Ramadan dessert, with a menu serving konafa, baklava, sawabe' Zeinab (Zeinab's fingers, a kind of oriental dessert made of baklava paste, filled with crème and nuts, and drizzled with simple syrup), basbousa, balah al-sham (oriental version of churros), and the likes. The stove fire is hissing, the vendor's tongs clacking on the pans filled with freshly prepared basbousa and konafa respectively, waiting for the first side to crisp and turn golden brown to flip them on their other side, his assistant preparing the carton packages to serve the customers their take-out orders, with the sound of the hard paper rustling in his hands, the sound of simple syrup sapping from the hot pan and sizzling over the freshly fried sawabe' Zeinab; suddenly, my mouth starts watering. I look at my watch, 04:37 pm, two hours to go till Maghrib. I ask my father to buy me some basbousa, from the fresh batch coming up, and the rambling of my stomach reminds me that we need to go check on whether the fish is ready.

He buys me basbousa, and buys himself a selection of different desserts, thanks the vendor, wishes him a Ramadan Kareem, then we head to the fish restaurant. Although it is a few steps away, my father still seizes the opportunity to lecture me on how good this place is, starts reminiscing on his childhood in this neighbourhood, when they used to come visit his grandparents, and starts telling me that the Souq is still standing in the face of all the infrastructural changes taking place around it. He also advises me that this Souq is better to shop in than any supermarket in the "new neighbourhoods that your generation likes living in so much". This transient interaction resonated with me, though I did not comment. The heat was scorching my nape, the asphalt was too worn out to pave a straight way for my feet, "anabeeeeeb!" (Gas cylinders!) a man yelled from his bike, carrying two gas cylinders for sale attached on the back of the bicycle, with a wrench in his hand to bang the side of the cylinders composing his signature *Tink Tink Tink* melody, with the high-pitched sound reverberating in

the corners of my head. As much as I wanted to go home at this point, I felt connected to the Souq scene constantly representing itself through the different sensorial elements found at every corner.

When I asked Lujain about her experience with going to the Souq, since she is one of the older interlocutors I encountered during fieldwork, she told me she hated every moment of it when she was younger. She never understood the idea of having to go the distance of moving from one shop to the next to buy groceries, when everything needed can be found within a few inches of one another in a supermarket. However, her mother, Tante Hala, loves every moment of being in the Souq, “the experience makes her feel alive,” Lujain confirms. Tante Hala loves the idea of going to each person, specialising in a certain commodity to buy her groceries. She goes to the butcher for meat, the poultier for chicken, and to the farmers’ stand for produce, reliving her own childhood and revisiting her memories, even if it means taking a longer time standing in the sun, or walking in the muddy post-rain streets to do so. This form of immersive movement can set in motion the kinaesthetic play of palpable haptic, acoustic and visual senses, which causes the body to be perceptually engaged and emplaced within the intertwined nature of sensory experience, emphasising a person’s sensorial habitus (Casey 1987).

### Conclusion

While capitalism has an obvious and fundamental set of economic features, it is also sustained and maintained socio-culturally, in belief systems, habituated practices and social values; and socio-politically, in terms of power and its unequal distribution, particularly as these are expressed in the relations of social class (Moran 2015). The attribution of social identity, involves the power to impose an identity, naming the Other by reference to the dominant group’s classification. This act of social categorising may be consensual (Epstein 1978) and can also be due to hegemonic forces imposed by society elites, setting the guidelines and

standards of what is considered high class and low class, with the power of their economic, cultural, and social capitals (Bourdieu 1978).

Globalisation is another effective element on social and class identity, especial when most of our daily-use commodities are advertised and sold as a way of living, and not a mere product to use. Although the concept of globalisation has been long discussed and studied, the modern aspect of it, starting with capitalist markets and imperialism, and accelerating at a rapid pace, especially in this post-technological era, with everything being the representation of itself in terms of production, distribution, and redistribution, has ushered in new perspectives to food systems, specifically from sociocultural viewpoints (Baudrillard 1981; Massumi 2015; Zubaida 2020). Shopping for commodities is being reproduced and redistributed as identity through class representation, and Ramadan is reproduced as TV ads and series, billboards, family gatherings, street, and home decorations, obsessive/excessive shopping and sohour parties, among others, that Ramadan has become a representation in itself of itself. The mundane aspects of life are losing their essence amid the hyperreality that is the age of capital production. “In fact, nothing really new can be expected until the masses in action awaken to the conditions that are imposed on them in all domains of life, and to the practical means of changing them.” (Debord 1955: 27).

The new formation of space through the rebuilding of more sanitised soundscapes has disconnected people from their habitual sensoria (Battesti & Puig 2016). The supermarket as a conceived space becomes a place for the practices of social and political power, where it is now designed to manipulate the consumers existing within them (Lefebvre 1991). The supermarket is only one establishment through which hyperreality is vividly represented, where the products are no longer commodities, but are codes of identity verification, and the consumer systematically moves from one checkpoint to the next (Baudrillard 1981). However, as I am checking out, I ponder on the fact that I would always choose the Souqs in the narrow alleys



wheezing with smog and tinkering vendors over the monotonous beeping of the barcode scanner and supermarket's ventilation system dry heaving cold air over my head.

## **Conclusion**

## **Ingredients to A Recipe of Recapping: A Conclusion**

My exploration of the sense during my fieldwork was sparked due to personal curiosity, but what kept the fire burning was my interlocutors' remarks and rituals. When Lujain told me about her coffee ritual, at first, I thought she meant they have *Qahwa Arabi* every once in a while, or at the beginning of Ramadan as a form of change. However, in the five times I went to Lujain in Ramadan last year (summer 2021) for iftar, I came to learn that qahwa is not just another Ramadan item on the menu, but rather it is incorporated into the iftar during the holy month. Lujain, and I quote, "can't feel the essence of Ramadan if I don't have qahwa when the maghrib calls. Ramadan is simply, but crucially linked with the smell and taste of *Qahwa*."

The senses inform our being in a way that we not only use them to identify our surroundings, but we also use them to contextualise and materialise our sociocultural norms; to learn new things; to record, reserve and recall memories; and finally, to help guide us through the everyday. When a certain memory is somewhat connected with the senses, it can be examined and explored affectively. Brian Massumi in *The Politics of Affect*, describes affect as an energetic dimension or "capacity" and emotion as a selective activation process or expression of affect from a "virtual co-presence" of potentials on the basis of experience, thought, and habit, or in this case, memory (Massumi 2015:5). This selective process can also be interpreted within the frame of mimesis and affect contagion (Gibbs 2010).

Although this notion of affect has been explored by Gibbs (2010) in the means of mimicked facial expressions and body gestures between mothers and enfants, I expand a bit on how this notion can also be reflected through certain behaviours to evoke selected memories by using Taussig's exploration of mimesis and alterity (1993), while also still remaining within the general context of childhood and upbringing pedagogy. Not only does the sensorial guidance pace our way through memories recollection, but also ignites the fire of habitus and its temporal and ideological elements (Elias 1965). When Tante Nagda or my father, or any of

the people from their age refer to us in a belittling manner, they are not doing so because they enjoy making us feel miserable. They do so, however, due to their inhabited sets of ideologies imbedded through their senses. The senses are the gateway to rationalising our lives, otherwise a sense-less life is a life full of nonsense (Sutton 2019).

Another method of rationalising is the socialisation of gender. Putting our senses through social contexts in order to engender new forms of knowledge assimilation and production. Through the socialisation of the senses, gender and gender roles start to be reproduced within each individual household, yet under the umbrella of patriarchy that rules the Egyptian society. Society conditions women to use their senses to cultivate their bodies, minds, and other strength areas in order to serve and nourish their families, because a woman who uses her senses for herself is a selfish being who is not as nourishing or as caring as God intended (Howes 2020). There is always the analogy of women being to men what nature is to culture, and it all begins with the body of the woman and its natural purpose of procreation and childbearing (Ortner 1972). It is also about how, as culture contextualises nature and uses it in all different ways that would benefit culture, same goes with how patriarchy uses woman in all different ways that would benefit society.

When members of the household are constantly socialised during their upbringing by media outlets, cultural and religious discourses, and older generations to carry themselves within a certain gender frame that is socially constructed, it culminates in the form of patriarchal hegemony. However, hegemony, much like habitus, is not constant, but rather varies and bends according to the ruling societal circumstances. Gender is contextually informed and influenced as much as it is socially constructed. Certain conditions of living and raising children require certain measures of adaptivity, which include the conditioning and socialisation of gender as a personality trait or as a behaviour instead of it being an identity. Although Belal, who I mention in chapter two, grew up in, and was very much socialised into a hegemonically reinforced

[patriarchal; household, his ideologies drastically changed when he lived alone for a year as part of his work as a site engineer. He developed deeper understanding and appreciation towards domestic chores (i.e., cleaning and cooking). Although the Egyptian society is a patriarchal one, we can still find exceptions within each household.

My household is matriarchal par excellence, in the sense that Hanan, my mother, is responsible for all aspects of the house, be it financially, socially, or culturally, except for the domestic chores which were delegated to my father as I explain in chapter two. Hanan is the provider of the family, both her natal and marital ones, and her role as the breadwinner was further emphasised when she immigrated to Jordan for a better job opportunity as a university professor. Her climbing the career ladder did not necessarily mean the same for Muhammed. According to him, it caused him to move downwards his own career ladder due to the prolonged sabbatical leaves he took in order to take care of Abdallah and me.

Since Hanan is the main breadwinner, the position of homemaker was left vacant, and my father, Mohammed, instead of seizing the opportunity to connect with my brother and I and cultivate the father-children bond, he dealt with the domestic affairs and the kitchen space as his power domain. This was shown through the considerably masculine dishes he cooks (i.e., *akkawi* (ox tail), *moloukhiya*, *kawar'ei* (cow shins), *kersha* (cow stomach) ...etc.), and his profane discourse when describing his triumphant meals, making Hanan, Abdallah, and myself feel uncomfortable, especially if any of us is standing with him in the kitchen. The kitchen space has become his territory, and it gave him the sense of reclaiming his masculinity and dominance in the house.

Food is also a social simulacrum and signifier when it comes to identity. It is not an object in and of itself, but it can be used to objectify and interpret different aspects of a sociocultural context, in my case, the exploration of the different ideas and arguments projected in this thesis. Food occupies a significant role of our daily lives, and not only in regard to

nourishment and satiation, but it also seems to be a main character in my research. Because of its role and importance in ethnographic investigation, food is an important tool to think with. This is why I made sure in this thesis to highlight the complexities and multilayers of food and its intermingling with familial and domestic life.

I could not view food and family as two motifs placed under the banner of binary oppositions, with them transitioning within a state of “raw” and “cooked” equilibrium. The Lévi-Straussian postulation of the raw/cooked dichotomy with the raw representing nature and cooked representing culture (Lévi-Strauss 1996) echoes Ortner’s analogy of women being to men what nature is to culture (1972). Although this iteration of the female to male relationship is important and counts as a canonical take when exploring gender and gender roles, it can be restrictive and binding in the sense that it confines the gender identity within the parameters of binaries and hinders the process of delving deeper into its multilayers and complexities. The understanding of gender within the Egyptian society might not be as confined within the limit of gendered division of labour due to binary constrictions as much by the hegemonic forces swaying the societal pendulum as the ruling institutions desire. In the case of Egypt, the hegemonic forces consist of, but not limited to, media outlets propagating state ideals through TV shows, series, films, and state ads emphasising the importance of maintaining the structure of a traditional nuclear family with the father being the breadwinner and mother being the homemaker. However, as seen in chapter two, this is not always the case within the households explored in this thesis. Additionally, the upper class, or the elites (as called by some of my interlocutors) have the power to choose what to trend and propagate and what to deem unfashionable and unworthy through their social, cultural, and economic capitals (Bourdieu 1984).

Hegemony is defined by Gramsci as cultural leadership exercised by the ruling class, and he contrasts hegemony to coercion that is “exercised by legislative or executive powers or

expressed through police intervention” (Gramsci 1975:235). This leadership, however, is not only exercised in the superstructure, because it also needs to be economic, and be based on the function that the leading group exercises in the nucleus of economic activity (Forgacs & Hobsbawm 2000). Gramsci functioned with a rather elitist conception in which ideas were generated by intellectuals and then dissimilated to the masses and put into practice by them. The masses could not become self-conscious on their own; they needed the help of social elites (Ritzer & Stepnisky 2011). The masses could not generate such ideas, and they could experience them, once in existence, only on faith (Bates 1975). In my case, the ruling class can be defined as the general societal conscious, modulating, and orienting the general public’s taste. Food is not only about its sensorial abilities for memory recollections, or gender dominance and/or assertion, but also how the kitchens we have and foods we eat act as a hegemonic social simulacrum/signifier of our class identity. Either through globalisation or otherwise, the hyper-incorporation of different cultures and tastes into our usual food stuffs has caused people, especially from the higher social classes to obsess over buying food as a way of sustaining a lifestyle instead of sustaining a living.

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