Gendering Death: A Study of Oppressive Stereotypes Underlying Muslim Funeral and Burial Rituals in Egypt

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Abstract

This research explores how Muslim funeral and burial rituals in Egypt are shaped by gender stereotypes and socio-cultural norms that predispose masculinity and femininity. It examines the experience of research participants in the context of these gendered rituals and how it affects their participation in them. I adopt a qualitative methodology using personal narrative and auto-ethnography. Analysing physical and emotional experiences, I assess how the regulation of female bodies impacts women participants' understanding of their bodies. Gender stereotypes, such as the association of women with irrationality, are scrutinised in regards to how they influence ritual and ceremonial practices – such as sex segregation - and in turn affect the emotional experiences of participant women. Furthermore, I address the performativity of masculinity imposed by the ceremonies and assert that Muslim burial and funeral rituals are a norm, a form of power demarcated by gender stereotypes. The gendered nature of the rituals shapes our experiences as males and females, rendering it unequal.

Keywords: Islam and Gender; Performativity; Religious Rituals; Funeral Rituals; Egypt

Introduction

This study explores how Muslim burial and funeral rituals are shaped by gender stereotypes and socio-cultural roles that predispose masculinity and femininity. It examines how research participants experience the gendered nature of the rituals and how this experience affects their participation in the ceremonial process. My research aims to answer following questions: First, how are Muslim burial and funeral rituals in Egypt gendered? Second, how does the gendered nature of the rituals shape the participants' experiences in relation to binary masculine and feminine performativity during their grieving experiences?

The choice to focus this research on funeral and burial rituals rests on these rituals' importance in an individual's life in every society. Religious rituals (RR) are cultural and historical, and act as educational methods for religious socialisation.[1] Rituals educate congregation members on existing norms, power relations, and social structures. As such, they play an important role in

identity formation for religious congregations, forming and maintaining that identity within social structures. Similarly, 'beliefs and customs surrounding death, funeral rites, and mourning provide a window into a society's most deeply held values'.[2] Studying funeral and burial rituals therefore gives us key insight into social structures and power relations within societies, as such rituals mirror cultural and societal beliefs and hierarchies. The decision to explore this topic also stems from my personal experience and that of the research participants with special reference to the passing of each of our fathers.

My first research question interrogates the gendered nature of the practice of burial and funeral rituals in Egypt. The body is the starting point of my inquiry in its materiality, sociality and emotionality. Therefore, Corporeality and Affect theories set the foundation and the theoretical framework for my research.

Earlier scholarship on gender explored how womanhood and manhood are assigned to bodies according to their anatomy, i.e., sex. Sex as a given is a product of a socio-discursive regime of sexuality[3] and the body is terrain on which to exercise power. In many cases, this is enforced, reproduced, and internalised in how regulatory power shapes the subject and brings it into being through this regulation.[4] Gender is then a 'multiple interpretation of sex; the discursive cultural means by which 'sexed nature' or 'natural sex' is produced and established'.[5] In this context, a corporeal style, the set of behaviours expected from each sex in their everyday life, is based on anatomical differences. This set of behaviours is then socially attributed to 'gender'.[6] The distinction between sex and gender explains how masculine and feminine behaviours are mediated, created, and imposed through a set of cultural and structural power relations.

While it is important to recognise gender as a social construct, the focus on the social aspect only limits the importance of the body which then alludes what people 'might find central in their individual experience of gender'.[7] Within the same vein, other scholarship[8] challenged the dichotomy of sex and gender, explaining that sex is also a social construct. In this context, Anne Fausto Sterling[9] notes how 'Gendered structures change biological function and structure'. At the same time, biological structure and function affect gender, gender identity, and gender roles at both individual and cultural levels.

With these considerations in mind, I look at how Muslim burial and funeral ritual in Egypt are shaped by norms that underlie masculine and feminine traits assigned to each of the research participants, including myself. I then reflect on how this impacts our experiences of the ritual practice. I aim to explore this physical sense of genderness, looking at the material and emotional experience lived through the rituals and its impact.

Here, Corporeality informs my understanding of the importance of the body in gender studies and in studying rituals. By framing the body as 'providing us with a perspective: The body as a point from which we begin, and from which the world unfolds',[10] I delve into the material religious experience of practising rituals. By incorporating a study of the materiality and emotionality of the practice of Muslim funeral and burial rituals, I aim to explore 'the way it feels to be the kind of bodies we are'.[11] This moves away from the study of religion within 'semiotics and representational frames'[12] and anchors the knowledge produced in personal experiences.

On the other hand, Affect explains the importance of dealing with emotions as a source of knowledge and exploring how emotions shape individuals as well as collective bodies.[13] Within my analysis I examine the movement of affect, tracing how emotion moves culturally and how it is attached to bodies. Emotions 'are crucial to the very constitution of the psychic and social as objects'[14]. I approach emotions and affect produced by the practice of RR as an epistemology and a tool of learning about the self, identity and social

positioning. Understanding the knowledge produced by practising these ceremonials through corporeality and affect, I investigate the gendered nature of the Muslim burial and funeral ritual in Egypt and how it shapes our experiences of the practice of ritual.

Research Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative methodology as it focuses on behaviours, attitudes, reflections, and social impacts rather than on measurable outcomes.[15] Further, it centres the individual experiences of the research participants, including myself; therefore, a qualitative methodology using personal narrative and auto-ethnography, as well as a social constructivist approach, is utilised.

Social constructivism highlights the importance of cultural settings and personal interactions in understanding and creating knowledge about what happens in a society.[16] Knowledge is therefore a human product that is socially and culturally constructed by individuals through the interaction among them and with the world.[17] Subsequently, the research analysis focuses on how the participants make meaning of the gendered nature of Muslim burial and funeral rituals, shaped by their social interactions and interpretations.

For this research, I chose narrative inquiry and auto-ethnography as research methods. Narrative inquiry is 'learning through individual stories told by individuals'.[18] Eventually, these stories tell us both the individual experience in the narrative, as well as the social experience when individuals in the stories interact with others.[19] Moreover, narratives as a research tool allow people to 'construct and understand their social world',[20] which is the essence of this research. Narrative inquiry also assumes that there is no absolute truth in human lives and reality and that there is no correct reading or interpretation of anything, instead, it advocates for pluralism and subjectivity.[21] This perspective is very useful in studying social practices like the funeral and burial rituals in Egypt, as narratives do not solely focus on content but also on the meaning behind the story.[22]

Reflecting on my own experience within RR practice, I also use auto-ethnography as a research method and as a narrative approach. Auto-ethnography 'seeks to describe and systematically analyse (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)'.[23] Auto-ethnography questions the authority of the researcher, her neutrality, and claims of objective truth in social science. [24] In auto-ethnography, the researcher's own narratives are 'written in'[25] 'explicitly, in rigorous and analytic fashion as a central, fundamental and integral part of the research process, rather than as a subsidiary, confessional "aside"'. [26] Auto-ethnography is also a clear demonstration of how the personal is political; by making my life public and my personal experience political, I hope to explore the gendered experience of burial and funeral rituals in Egypt and its effect on gender performativity. I reflect on how I, along with the research participants, witness our own reality in relation to our culture and religion in our own context.

For this personal narrative inquiry, I chose the general interview guide approach as a data collection method. This is more structured than informal conversational interviews, yet its composition allows for flexibility.[27] The interviews had a small number of questions that were selected to encourage responses in the form of narrative. It allowed me to ensure that the general areas and topics discussed are collected from each of my participants while also giving space to explore a more personalised approach with each interviewee.[28]The stories that came out of the interviews were sequential and described the participant's life from a young age, growing up and their relationship with religion and the practice of religious rituals.

As with my interviewees, I wrote down my experience and story in the same flow, from a young age and growing up, until my recent experiences with funeral and burial rituals.

Narrative research studies commonly involve a small group of subjects, as the quantity of data collected through a free-flowing discussion with each participant is larger than traditional research methods.[29] Hence, the research relies on only two interviews in addition to my own narrative. I interviewed a female and a male participant. Considering the sensitivity and emotionality of the topic, I opted to choose two participants who willingly volunteered to participate in the research upon hearing me discuss its concept. Ali[30], the male participant, approached me upon hearing me discuss the research with my cousin. Mariam[31], the second female participant beside myself, sent me a message on social media after seeing a post I wrote about the concept of the research. Ali is a young Egyptian man in his late twenties.He was born and raised in a coastal city in the north of Egypt before moving to Cairo for work in his early twenties. He comes from a middle-class Egyptian family. Mariam is a young Egyptian woman in her mid-thirties. While Mariam was born and raised in Cairo, her family's original hometown is village in the Egyptian Delta. Like Ali, Mariam belongs to a middle-class family.

Considering the subjective nature of the research, I adopt an interpretative phenomenological analysis approach (IPA). IPA recognises that people perceive the world in different ways contingent upon different personalities and experiences.[32]IPA therefore 'operates from the logic of attempting to understand this specific phenomenon from the perspective of this particular group'.[33]Within this context, I attempt to explore, understand and make sense of our life stories and personal experiences based on each individual's subjective interpretation of life events. In analysing and writing up my analysis, I first engaged with my transcripts in search of specific themes.[34] The themes in my analysis - masculinity, femininity, sex segregation, and affect - arose from a systematic observation of the transcriptions. I have then drawn connections between the themes and noted subthemes under each of them.

Ethical Issues and Research Limitations

Personal narrative and auto-ethnography, as both study life stories, have similar limitations when it comes to how the researcher influences the content and whose voice is being heard.[35] I discuss below my approach to dealing with my positionality as the researcher and the ethical responsibility to protect the privacy and dignity of interviewees, as well as my approach to dealing with ethical issues related to this study.

The research is a conversational process about a sensitive and emotional topic. I hoped that my position in the same social context in Cairo has created a safe space and an emotional ease in our interviews. I am also aware that this familiarity may be challenging and thus strove to ensure there was no guiding of answers or attempt to influence the participants' narratives by avoiding any intimation that could lead to certain outcomes. The interview process was a dialogue; more than once, Ali and Mariam wondered if I could answer the same questions. Throughout the interview process I was often a researcher as well as a researched subject, which created a sense of solidarity and collaboration.

Additionally, the nature of the topic discussed with my participants can cause emotional distress for both participants and researcher. I have discussed, with my research participants, ways that they can attain emotional support if needed. The data collection method of open guided interviews was specifically chosen to give interviewees the power to choose what they would like to share. Although it is at times impossible to avoid triggering intense emotions, the open

interviews helped to alleviate distress. Ali and Mariam were both informed that they can stop the interview whenever they would need to, and the decision is theirs to continue or withdraw at any point.

During the interview with Mariam, we stopped recording a few times when she became emotional and began crying. The fact that we knew each other already created a safe space where we could both let our emotions out. Each time, the recording resumed only after Mariam asked to start again, insisting that she needed to let this out and that the topic is something that she wanted to talk about as part of her healing process. After the interviews, I followed up with Mariam and Ali via phone call and text to check on how they were doing and if the interviews had any impact on their psychological state. In more than one instance, they both confirmed that the experience was healing rather than triggering and thanked me for providing them with a safe space to speak through their experiences.

I, as a researcher, am also emotionally impacted by listening to the interviews and relaying my own experience. Considering this, I attempt to maintain a balance between listening and containing my interviewee's emotional expressions as their experiences are recalled.[36] I recognise, however, that emotions cannot be entirely removed from research, nor should they be. In my writing I have consciously ignored the urge to strip emotion from the work, as this research in fact hinges on being 'open and receptive' to 'Vulnerable Writing'.[37] Adopting a feminist approach, I am aware of the embodied knowledge produced through emotions being gathered through the interviews and how these were shaped by my feelings, as well as how my interviewees feel, the questions asked, and the choice of words.[38] I focus on understanding my interviewees' ways of making sense of their reality rather than imposing a definition or a meaning to it.

My study has only two participants beside myself. Sceptical at first of the low number of participants, I decided, along with my academic supervisor, as this was part of my MA dissertation, to stick to the two participants, seeing the richness of the narratives collected. However, studying the practice of burial and funeral rituals in Egypt in different socio-economic classes, geography, ethnicity and religions other than Islam was beyond the scope of this research. Belonging to minority religions is also an important factor that shapes this experience. Further research is required with a more diverse sample and larger number of participants, as rituals differ from one place, class, religion to another. Finally, conscious of the relation between power and knowledge and being sensitive to 'politics of any representation'; I shared my final analysis with my two research participants, aiming to share interpretative authority with them. They both did not have any comments on the analysis.

Emergent Themes from Experience with Muslim Burial and Funeral Rituals in Egypt

In the coming section, after explaining the ritual phases, I discuss sex segregation in relation to the objectification of women's bodies. I look at the contrast between masculinity and femininity when it comes to regulations imposed on the body and how they differ, the labour division that is based on the binary of masculine and feminine traits, and the different emotional experiences of the research participants.

There is no detailed description of the rituals in the Quran. The ritual performance can then be based on the *hadith* and social socially constructed norms. It is noteworthy that the roots of the rituals can partially be traced back to the era of ancient Egypt[39], which indicates that there are some cultural features that appear in the customs of death and the rituals are not purely religious. Moreover, Coptic rituals do not differ greatly from those of Muslims, which again indicates the cultural influence on the practice. Whether the rituals are purely religious or socially imposed is beyond the scope of my research. My emphasis here is on who has the power over the organisation of rituals. The below description is of the rituals as they happen in Egypt currently and as I personally experienced them throughout my life.

Once a person is pronounced dead, the body is washed. The washing of the body is called *Ghusl*. Only a person of the same sex can wash the body of the deceased. A menstruating woman is not allowed to wash the dead body. Once the body is washed and shrouded, it should be put on a bier that is usually carried by four men. Women are not allowed to hold the bier or walk behind it. The body is then transported to the graveyard. Women are discouraged from entering graveyards, are not allowed to bury the deceased, and are forbidden from observing the burial, whether the deceased is a man or a woman. It is worth noting that this may differ between urban and rural areas as well as according to socio-economic class. After the burial, families have the choice to conduct a memorial service, referred to as *A'aza*, in either a mosque or a home. Men and women are often separated during the memorial service in the mosque. Often in rural areas, if the *A'aza* is in a home, it is customary to serve dinner to the attendees. In this case, women are usually in charge of the cooking while men receive condolences in a separate room.

Sex segregation

Men and women are segregated during most stages of the death and burial process. In this section I reflect upon how this segregation leads to an objectification of women's bodies. I also observe the relationship between bodies and space due to this segregation.

The first theme that emerged from our narratives when it comes to sex segregation is the objectification of women's bodies. I remember when I was almost twenty, my uncle prevented me from attending the funeral and burial of my grandmother. My exclusion from the burials was obviously tied to sexuality. I still recall my mother telling me how he asked her to stop me from going '*like that*', because of my uncovered hair and trousers. The immediate thought that came to my mind is that they do not want me there as a sexual distraction. My objectification as a female did not only lead me to internalise inferiority as a sex object, it also deprived me of taking part in the commemoration of a person I deeply loved, which is then causally linked to a punishing response to my womanhood. The same objectification and 'woman as distraction' appears in Mariam's own words in speaking about the burial of her father:

> 'I begged them for fifteen minutes to pray next to the coffin where my father is. I know women and men are separated during prayers, but it is the funeral prayers, we perform

it standing. I will not be kneeling, no one is going to see my ass, I will not distract you. But they said "no!" So, I had to leave crying, going back to the women's room'.

In Mariam's testimony, there is a clear link between objectification and learned inferiority in our experiences. But still further, these RR are imbedded in an assumed heterosexuality. In other words, the fear of heterosexual interaction and women being a 'destructive power' are the basis for the confinement and exclusion of women.[40] Mariam's and my experience with this separation during funeral and burial rituals intensified our feelings of inferiority and alienation.

The second theme within this context was the organisation of space. Space becomes comprehensible and visible as we exist and interact within it and amid our movements through it. We learn about ourselves through our inclusion or exclusion from specific spaces. 'Place and position are defined with reference to the apparent immediacy of a lived here and now. These are not reflective or scientific properties of space but are the effects of the necessity that we live and move in space as bodies in relation to other bodies.'[41]

From the first moments in the death and burial rituals of my father, I felt rejection and exclusion. I was denied entry to the room where his body was washed because my presence as a woman was undesirable. In the mosque where we held the funeral prayer, I stayed with my aunt in the women's room, completely isolated from the main hall. I recall these moments with grief and sadness. All I wanted was to be close to my father's body in the last moments before his burial, but I could not be. Mariam noted in our conversations how the space reserved for women in mosques is always smaller in size, isolated and less equipped than bigger halls; it has a separate entrance that is usually in the back of the building. The assumption that the number of women coming to the mosque is smaller than the number of men is reflected in the size of the space where they are confined, suggesting that their presence is secondary.

When it comes to space access, the women in Ali's family were described as 'socially empowered' by him, as they were present in the graveyards after burial but could not attend the burial itself. Ali's sister, per example, was able to attend their father's burial because Ali used his position in the family as a man to convince others to allow his sister to have access to the space. Ali's masculinity gave his sister access to her father's burial rituals, something that Mariam and I were denied. Interestingly, Mariam's mother goes to the graveyard in Cairo, but not in their home village. While the specifics of the exclusions change from space to space, context to context, the inclusion or exclusion is nevertheless in the hands of men.

When I tried to attend my father's burial after the funeral, I found the women who were praying with me blocking my way, asking me to wait until the men went first. Crying, I begged them to let me pass so I would not miss the burial, and their answer was that I should not attend it anyway. When I manoeuvred my way out, men who I did not know obstructed my path, preventing me from seeing my father being buried. They stood in front of me and attempted to convince me that my father would be punished if I were to see him being buried. I am even denied the punishment as a woman, and my father as a man, although dead, bears the consequences of my actions. Mariam, breaking down hysterically when she was prevented from seeing her father buried,

refused to visit his grave after the burial. She describes her feeling as being 'defeated and boxed out'.

Space affects the way we see others as well as our own understanding of our position and the different forms of our existence within this space. Our experiences left us feeling 'homeless' in the confined spaces assigned to us in rituals; in our own bodies, we felt alienated, inferior. We no longer belonged to a congregation, but were instead subordinated or as Mariam described it, 'pushed out'.

Femininity and masculinity

The prevailing assumption in Egyptian society portrays men and women as opposites. Men in this context are physically stronger and logical while women are weak and controlled by their emotions[42]. Men are also often cast as the sole breadwinner of the family[43], the 'man of the house'.[44]Which in that case, the financial responsibility of organising the rituals is put on men. Within this section, I explore how the ritual processes are divided around strict adherence to binary definitions of masculinity and femininity.

The difference in responsibility was another observation in the ritual experience. In Egypt, there is an apparent labour division. When I first spoke to Ali about this, he described the ritual practice as a 'manly activity', where men are supposed to arrange everything including hiring someone to wash the body and transport it to the mosque and graveyards. Men are also expected to pay for everything. In Mariam's story, women oversaw cooking and serving coffee to congregants at the funeral while men were preoccupied with organisation.

Ali, after both his paternal grandparents passed away in the same month, found himself in charge of organising both funerals. He describes his father and aunt as being overwhelmed and feeling the need for someone must step up and be 'in charge'. In an encounter with his maternal grandmother after the funerals, Ali was endorsed as a '*real man*' after his efforts in the funerals. Ali did not see it as an imposed expectation; he recalls that he was not asked to step up, he just felt he had to do it. He also stressed how he was only nineteen at the time, saying 'If I think about it maybe I wouldn't do it, burying my grandmother when I was nineteen. But I didn't think about it, I just did it'.

Similarly, Mariam recalls how everyone giving condolences at her father's funeral addressed her brother, announcing that he is now the replacement of his father, the '*man of the house*' who is supposed to take care of his sister and mother. She laughs sarcastically, saying: 'We take care of him! I always take the initiative, I take the responsibility, I felt sorry for him'.

Ali stepped in to his role within the labour division by taking the initiative and it gave him praise and more power within the family. Mariam's brother did not benefit equally, experiencing the role as a pressure to assume his father's role as the protector of the house while he may not have wanted to take on this role or may not have had the ability to properly grieve.

Mariam and my experiences as female were different. I was able to arrange and pay for the logistics surrounding the burial authorisation, and the washing and transportation of my father's body to be buried. That was accessible to me only because I arrived first at the hospital and my

brother was unable to attend. Yet, I was under pressure from my aunts who disagreed with the fact that I, as a woman, paid for everything. They pressured me to accept a refund of the money, which I refused.

Mariam expressed frustration with her lack of responsibility in her father's burial and funeral. Following the refusal of the family to allow her to enter the room where her father was being washed, she insisted that the burial would take place in their home village. She opened the family home, and along with other women cooked and served lunch and tea to those who came to pay condolences. The labour division is again apparent in the distribution of tasks.

Labour divisions in religious ritual is based on stereotypes of feminine and masculine traits, which results in socially assigned responsibilities for one of us. The role we perform in everyday life comes from 'claiming a place or responding to the place that has been given to us by the way we conduct ourselves' in different situations.[45] Ali as a man stepped into the role he was socially assigned to perform while Mariam and I attempted to take on responsibilities that were not assigned to us. We resisted our socialised role to gain the right to an experience equal to that of men.

Thus, womanhood and manhood, masculine and feminine traits, are not fixed; the gendered polarity of responsibilities is in fact fluid. We mediated the gendered nature of the rituals. As a female, I demonstrated traits of masculinity according to the gendered role when I insisted on organising my father's burial and paying for everything. On the other hand, Mariam's brother, who according to her is 'timid', was forced to assume a gender role that he did not aspire to in the first place.

Likewise, appearance is of value during the rituals. After her father's passing, Mariam was obliged to go shopping for 'presentable black clothes' as women are supposed to wear black in *A'aza* and for a specified time period after the death of a relative. Mariam recalls this incident:

> 'I don't wear all black, it suffocates me. I remember I was home after the burial, we were back in Cairo. I was wearing all black and suddenly I started having the worst panic attack I ever had in my life. It literally suffocated me, I had to go to the hospital, they gave me oxygen and it took me two and a half hours to get out of it'.

The woman's body, in this case Mariam, as 'a seduction, distraction from knowledge, away from God, capitulation to sexual desire' needed to be controlled.[46] Black takes away from the seduction and the femininity of women, lessening their impact on men present as Mariam explains. It is not only a sign of sadness but also of modesty. The gendering and confinement of Mariam, the body regulations enforced on her, affects her body and causes her a panic attack.

The power of men, and other women in some instances, is not only limited to the organisation of tasks and space but also includes regulating the female body itself. My attire, although black, prevented me from attending my grandmother's funeral because I was wearing trousers, which show the body's shape.

Mariam notes how women are only forced to wear black outside of the home. Once you are inside the house, you can wear any colour; 'You need to still look pretty in the eyes of the men you live with'. Regulating how women look in and outside of the house is based on the desires of men. In public space, you are compelled to show sadness and modesty by wearing black but still need to be presentable and appealing to your husband inside the house. This practice of power reaffirms that the 'female body in all materiality is regarded as the primary object through which masculinist power operates'.[47] The control is not limited to appearance only. Interestingly, Mariam speaks about a moment when her mother lost her temper and started yelling at her because she wasn't eating or sleeping after her father's death and the day before the funeral. Her mother was worried that Mariam would be physically unfit for the funeral and burial the next day. 'My brother's state was much worse than mine; he didn't eat or drink or sleep. But she yelled at me because she thought I am the weak woman who will collapse and make a scene the next day', says Mariam.

Body control is therefore also based in binary definitions of masculinity and femininity. The female body - weak, seductive, and uncontrollable - needs to be regulated whether by controlling its appearance or the way the body is treated and fed, within the framework of the woman's assumed vulnerability. By contrast, the male body, strong by nature, does not need this regulation, as it represents the dominant or hegemonic definitions of masculinity.

It is somewhat surprising that throughout my conversations with Ali, he did not bring up the subject of the body. The word 'body' appeared in our dialogue nine times, and not once did it reflect on Ali's body, rather it discussed other bodies. It is my contention that Simone De Beauvoir's argument that only the feminine gender is marked and represents 'the other' to the masculine may be an explanation as to why Ali's experience did not reflect on the relation between rituals and his body.[48] Here, the 'the universal person and the masculine gender are conflated, thereby defining women in terms of their sex and extolling men as the bearers of a body–transcendent universal personhood'.[49] Hence, the disembodiment of the 'abstract masculine', associating the body with only the female.[50]

The male subject is then abstract 'to the extent that it disavows its socially marked embodiment'.[51] Having one male sibling growing up, Mariam noticed that body control is exercised more on our female bodies. This in no way intends to deny the fact the male bodies, too, are under social and religious policing. Other studies have specifically set out to examine embodiment and masculinity in Egypt,[52] while my argument is to show that it can go unnoticed in lived experience.

In times of grief and despair, our emotions and expression of feelings become a way of knowing and comforting. Emotions are also a site of socio-political control and thus cannot be isolated from culture and social convention.[53] Our emotions have a role in our 'economy of attention, our conceptualisation of knowledge and process of knowledge acquisition'.[54] How we feel during rituals and towards the death of our loved ones, and how these emotions are perceived, teaches us about our position and belonging in our social environment.

As a woman, you are expected to be irrational and emotional. Your grief and sadness along with your way of expressing these feelings are expected to be more intense and visible. These expectations are heightened when you lose a father. Women are deemed 'too emotional' and as embodying of a specific kind of emotionality that is demanded of them. Yet, women are also penalised for being over-emotional. Mariam recounts that she had to consciously control her feelings throughout the process of her father's death:

> 'My grief and sadness are destructive. If it was up to me, I would scream my heart out, but I didn't want to be judged being the weak emotional woman, so I had to shut myself up. I am a woman, so I need to tone down my anger and my grief and my shock'.

She recalls being angry with her mother for fainting in front of the hospital where her father died and telling her to 'pull herself together'. Mariam projected the pressure that was put on her onto her mother, urging her to be stronger, hide her feelings and become less emotional so they could handle the situation of her father's death. Women are trapped between the assumption that they are emotional and pressure and judgment if they embody it. The assumed emotionality of women leads to their exclusion from several parts of the ritual process, which then directly impacts their feelings of belonging and identification with the group. Their conditional participation in the group is based on the regulation of their behaviour.

As a man, Ali, on the other hand, was threatened by his own emotions. He mentions 'in these situations, I am very practical. I keep myself contained because when I let go, I really collapse. So I prefer to do that after everything is done'. This could be seen as a result of the lack of emotional space available for men that allows them to become aware and conscious of their feelings. In addition to that, men, as the bearers of power, cannot suffer emotionally.[55] Ali's emotions and grief constitute a private matter, so he should release such emotions only in private. This reflects a gendered norm that 'men often learned to harden their hearts against feeling since emotions are deemed to be feminine and so a threat to male identities'.[56]

The regulation of emotion during the burial and funeral rituals dictates how men and women should perform their emotions. This performance then reinforces our understanding of how each gender experiences emotions.[57] The rituals in this instance shape our individual behaviour according to our assigned role.

Conclusion

The analysis of our personal narratives centres upon answering the following research questions: First, how are Muslim burial and funeral rituals in Egypt gendered? Second, how does the gendered nature of the rituals shape the participants' experiences in relation to binary masculine and feminine performativity during their grieving experiences?

I explained in detail the gendering of funeral and burial rituals. I started by centring the body in ritual practice, which shows how the regulation of women's bodies impacts female participants' emotional understanding of their bodies and their experience with burial and funeral ceremonies.

Demeaning women's emotionality and associating women with irrationality – a gender stereotype upon which the sex segregation in the ritual is based – has led us to attempt to control our feelings in times of grief and loss, affecting our emotional experiences. The research also addressed the performativity of masculinity imposed by the gendered nature of the rituals. Ali was compelled to control his feelings and take initiative, and was promoted to the 'man of the house' after overseeing two funerals. Ali's willing and successful adherence to this performance earned his family's respect. For Mariam's brother, however, the performativity of masculinity was imposed on him and demanded a role for which he was unprepared.

Regulatory power shapes the subject under its power and brings it to into being through this regulation.[58] This research suggests that Muslim burial and funeral rituals are also a norm, a form of power shaped by gender stereotypes and socio-cultural roles that predispose masculinity and femininity. It explains how the gendered nature of the rituals influences our experiences as males and females during the rituals, rendering it unequal.

As much as we acknowledge power structures, we must also recognise that through practising rituals, the three participants understood more about themselves, their social positioning, and their embodiment. We were not docile subjects, but rather active participants. Mariam and I pushed the boundaries as much as we could in order to gain access to decision making authority and power reserved for men. Ali used his masculine authority to include his sister in their father's burial rituals, which was in defiance of both his role and hers. We each mediated masculine and feminine traits, striving for an equal experience.

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About the Author

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