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The American University in Cairo

School of Humanities and Social Sciences

**The Construction of Chaos: Cinematic Representations
and Politics in Egypt in the 2000s**

A Thesis submitted to

The Department of Sociology, Anthropology, Psychology, Egyptology

In Partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in

Sociology/Anthropology

by

Fayrouz El Sayed Karawya

Under the Supervision of

Dr. Hanan Sabea

July 2009

The American University in Cairo

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The degree of Master of Arts**

Has been approved by

Dr. Hanan Sabea

Thesis Committee Advisor

Affiliation

American University in Cairo

Asst. Prof. of Anthropology

For **Dr. Mark Westmoreland**

Thesis Committee Reader

Affiliation

American University in Cairo

Asst. Prof. of Anthropology

Dr. Arab Loutfi

Thesis Committee Reader

Affiliation

American University in Cairo

Film maker (visiting artist JVA)

Helen Kijjo
SAPE Dept. Chair **Date**

Ann M. Hesch
Dean of HUSS

28/7/09
Date

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For my father who encouraged me to wonder and transferred to me
his conviction that doubt is better than absurd certainty.

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I would like to thank my committee that made writing this thesis a real enjoyment and a fruitful learning process. My committee did not reserve any effort to help me focus on every single detail pertaining to my arguments. They provided me constantly with perspectives and references to deepen my engagement with the subject, suggested new angles and ideas to reinforce the reasoning of my case. They were supportive all the way and extremely passionate about the topic of my thesis and the larger field of my study.

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questioning of life, since the years of my early childhood and continuing until the present with the same determination and love.

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Eventually, I need to mention that I chose this topic and started my work in an attempt to understand and provide an interpretation for social and political phenomena in my country. Through this attempt, I came to realize more and more my love for this place and my commitment towards its concerns and struggles. Thanks to this thesis, I am more at peace with my position and affirmed about my passion.

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Chapter One

Introduction

1.1. *El Lemby* and *Heen Maysara*: Challenging Middle Class Normativity

In 2002, the actor *Mohamed Saad* (1965- present) starred in a movie called '*El Lemby*'. He presented a caricaturist profile of a poor popular quarter dweller who cannot find appropriate work to earn his living and goes through many failing attempts to overcome his troubled situation. The film was the biggest box-office of the year and continued to be shown in movie theatres for seventeen consecutive weeks accumulating unprecedented revenues of twenty two million Egyptian pounds¹. In 2004, a sequel of the movie was released ('*Elly Baly Balak*') and earned similar success (eighteen million pounds in twenty four weeks)². *Saad* became the top-rated Egyptian superstar of his time and his surprising success rendered the character of the popular quarter dweller an extremely attractive one for other actors. Following *El Lemby*, many films about people living in informal urban expansions that surround and infiltrate the Egyptian capital emerged. With a prominent sarcastic style, the series of movies treating dramatic stories occurring in *ashwaiyyat*³ became a recurrent element of the Egyptian cinema market⁴. *El Lemby* and the rest of the popular heroes were generously received by the audience that imitated their manners and repeated their cynical comments.

El Lemby (part 1) was however aggressively criticized in official and independent media discourses in Egypt. Except for few supportive critics, the film was perceived as a low-rank fragmented plot that distorts the reality of the poor dwelling in *ashwaiyy*

¹ . Hammond, Andrew 2007. *Popular Culture in the Arab World: Arts, Politics and the Media*. Cairo: American University Press in Cairo. Pp. 137- 158.

² . www.Egyfilm.com (Egyptian database of Arab films), November 2008.

³ . *Ashwaiyyat*, the plural for *ashwaiyya* (literally meaning 'half- hazard') is the term used in public to refer to the informal housing communities that emerged in the seventies as urban expansions of Cairo and continued to infiltrate the Egyptian capital until now (Bayat and Denis, 2000). The word bears connotations of poverty, disorganization and vulgarity of the dwellers as the imagery permeates public discourse. It is usually used to stress the distinction between civic quarters for the middle and upper classes and haphazard quarters for the poor and marginalized classes.

⁴ . Starting in 2002, Egyptian cinema presented around twenty six movies depicting lives in *ashwaiyyat* and narrating the stories of heroes dwelling in them. Scriptwriters like Belal Fadl, Nasser Abd Al Rahman and Ahmed El Beih wrote the majority of these films like '*Saye'e Bahr*' (2002) , '*El Lemby*' (2002) and '*Elly Baly Balak*' (2003), '*Haha We Tofaha*' (2005), '*Heya Fawda*' and '*Heen Maysara*' 2007, '*Bolteya Al Ayma*' (2008).

quarters by portraying them as ignorant and incoherent subjects. The discrepancy between the film revenues and the harsh criticism in TV programs and newspapers was quiet obvious, yet, confusing.

In 2007, '*Heen Maysara*' (Whenever it's possible), a movie written by Nasser Abd Al Rahman (1960- present) and directed by Khaled Youssef ⁵ (1965- present) reflected on the miserable reality of *ashwaiyyat*. Abd Al Rahman scrutinized the reality survived in a poor neighborhood, although he did not insist on presenting the mannerisms and language of its dwellers as a comic material, though his script included characters that were very similar (in the broad lines and style) to *El Lemby*. These characters' language and sarcasm sounded bitterer and not laughable, especially when placed in the dramatic context of the movie.

This tragic representation raised even more criticism. The film tackled sensitive issues about how these quarters function, the nature of sexual relations therein, and how their inhabitants relate to the police and other state officials. Youssef presented a pessimistic representation where a horrific moral decomposition and an obvious corruption and impunity were the basic rule. This image that seemed to be beyond the expectations of the majority of cinema audience in Egypt ignited a harsh criticism, to the extent that members of the Egyptian parliament and Al-Azhar professors discussed banning the film⁶.

In many critical readings of *Heen Maysara* the characters stimulated fear and sadness rather than laughter. Samir Farid, the well-known cinema critic argued: "the middle and upper middle class viewers for the first time watched a touching drama about *Ashwaiyyat* and witnessed how the reality of these people is unbelievably cruel and inhumane"⁷. Youssef and Abd Al Rahman courageously presented prostitution, incest, promiscuity, and rape as daily patterns of sexual relations in *ashwaiyyat*. They tried to clarify the suffocating economic and social conditions behind these comportments and how those people were obliged to accept humiliation and authorize debauchery for reasons related to their class position and their economic situation.

⁵ . An Egyptian director known for his socialist inclinations. Some of his films depict the social reality of the poor and marginalized strata in contemporary Egyptian society.

⁶ http://www.aksalser.com/?page=view_news&id=24793128973a465f1930eed64f4ed57b&ar=810200570. November 2008.

⁷ . *Al Ryad* newspaper. December 2007.

Moreover, one of the radical steps that *Heen Maysara*'s producers took was their conscious attempt to confront the audience with the nature of the relationship between the characters of the film (or *ashwaiyyat* residents) and the Egyptian security apparatus. The film discussed *Baltaga* (thuggery) in *ashwaiyyat* as an essential behavior reinforced and encouraged by state officers. The film detailed how corrupt relations involved policemen, criminals and popular quarters' thugs in a network that structured daily life in Egypt at large. Youssef in *Heen Maysara* exposed the interdependency between state personnel and *ashwaiyyat* dwellers, demonstrating how they share the public space according to hierarchical power relations. This representation of power relations between the inhabitants of *ashwaiyyat*, the state and the middle and upper classes implicitly accused the more powerful (state as well as upper and middle classes) of perpetuating the humiliation and poverty of the disenfranchised. Youssef contended:

“*Heen Maysara* underpins the class discriminatory bases of such interdependency and the nature of exploitation of those people by turning them into thugs and criminals. The criminality in this case is deployed to empower the corrupt rulers and instate the rule of impunity and chaos.”⁸

1.2. Research Concerns and Questions

In this research, I examine the connections between such representations in contemporary Egyptian cinema and the sociopolitical reality which they document and of which they are part during 2002-2008. I focus on this time frame because of the expanding production of Egyptian films depicting *ashwaiyyat* and their dwellers. I argue that the systematic and repetitive focus on *ashwaiyyat* residents symbolizes an equivalent presence and influence of *ashwaiyyat* on the public sphere. In other words, the depictions in the films are the norm, rather than an anomaly. Representation in fiction, as Achille Mbembe⁹ claims, is part of the construction of “the normal” and thus endowed with creating a “true narrative.” Mbembe assumes that a true narrative is “the narrative that possesses an ability to get believed as true because it rests on a system of belief and

⁸ . Interview with Khaled Youssef. *Ehna* magazine (April 2009).

⁹ . Mbembe, Achille. 2001. “The Thing and Its Doubles” In *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Pp. 159- 160.

acquires a mimetic and allegorical relation to the reality in addition to the familiarity and plausibility between the narrative and the everyday experience.”¹⁰

In the 1980s and 1990s *ashwaiyyat* inhabitants, as Salwa Ismail argues, were systematically removed and excluded from the prevalent social discourses. According to Ismail, they were usually talked about as a “potential threat to the middle class either as religious extremists or criminal thugs.”¹¹ In the same vein, the state was represented as the guardian of the people and the nation working hard to eliminate the threat of *ashwaiyyat* from the public domain, and symbolically denying their presence in public discourse, particularly in official media¹². The increased representation of *ashwaiyyat* in cinema, I argue, signifies the inevitability of including them in realistic cinematic productions. Given the shifts in power relations, violence and chaotic conditions that permeate life in almost all the quarters in Egypt, excluding *ashwaiyyat* was no longer a possibility. My thesis examines the conditions that made this shift possible as well as the effect of these productions and reactions thereto on the construction of social order in Egypt.

In my ethnography, I contend that in the films the representation of vulgarity, authorized violence, and criminality as traits confined to *ashwayiyat* appealed to a fair number of middle class audience.¹³ I further argue that such a tolerance may indicate a serious change in the ways violence and force are practiced in Egypt by both the state and its subjects. It also refers to a different perception of the law institution and the regulations that govern the public sphere and the social interaction in the period 2002-2008. My argument in this respect is that the institutions entrusted and charged with the regulation of social interaction and the legitimate use of violence, have faced a drastic moral and structural collapse since the 1990s. This collapse, which hinders the performance of their roles, disseminates a generalized air of chaos. By the turn of the 21st century these conditions found articulation in cinema and other media productions.

¹⁰ . Ibid. P. 163.

¹¹ . Ismail, Salwa 2006. *Political Life in Cairo's New Quarters*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

¹² . Ibid, 2006.

¹³ . ‘El Lemby’ was the biggest box- office hit in Arab cinema in 2002 and continued to be shown in theatres for seventeen weeks with unprecedented revenues of twenty two million Egyptian pounds (Egyfilm.com).

The ruling regime (that took over since the military coup 1952) has undergone changes in its conception and its force deployment. Discourses perpetuated by ruling elites justify their repressive practices and legitimize the use of violence against its national subjects. This “police project of the government,”¹⁴ as Ismail refers to it, assumes the survival and security of state agents and allies as its first priority. Security, in this sense, is guaranteed by attacking freedom of expression and democratic processes of succession to and holding of power. However, guaranteeing “security” has not been always an easy task. Preserving despotic rule in Egypt for six successive decades required recourse to conventional and unconventional mechanisms of control and techniques of governance.

Michel- Rolph Trouillot¹⁵ distinguishes between a conventional dictatorship and an unconventional dictatorship that “deploys different mechanisms to bring its abuse of power to unprecedented limits.” Focusing on the way the Duvaliers in Haiti solidified their dictatorship 1957-1964, Trouillot identifies a set of processes that induced a qualitative change in the nature of Duvaliers’ authoritarianism. In my thesis, I build on his analysis in an attempt to examine transformations in state mechanisms in Egypt in the 2000s. To demonstrate such shifts in the nature of governance and violence, I rely on other studies, reports of international organizations and newspapers accounts which document these aggressive transformations.

Additionally, I unpack such transformations in power and violence by examining how they are depicted in the films, particularly in the way the state is represented in “*El Lemby*” and “*Heen Maysar,a*” and how state agents practice violence and deploy power viz. a viz. subordinated and marginalized subjects. In my analysis of media productions, I explore thus how *El Lemby* and *Heen Maysara* delve into the magnitude and effects of governance on people smashed by the relentless censorship of a coercive security apparatus. The people of *ashwaiyyat* as portrayed in the two movies are part and parcel of an entire social structure shaped by despotic rule and its concomitant effect of disorganization, violence and chaos. However, the two films stress the confinement of

¹⁴ . Ismail, Salwa 2006. *Political Life in Cairo’s New Quarters*. University of Minnesota Press. Pp. 63- 67.

¹⁵ . Trouillot, Michel- Rolph. 1990. “State against Nation” In *Haiti: State against Nation, the Origins and Legacy of Duvalierism*. New York: Monthly Review Press. Pp. 163- 185.

this disorganization to *ashwaiyyat* and thus reproduce the dominant discourses about *ashwaiyyat*'s potential threat to the established upper and middle classes. Such representations, I argue, produce the effect of a subconscious neutralization of the actual and daily violence practiced by the state against all its subjects regardless of their class positions. Ultimately, such productions legitimize 'class racism' and societal aggression against *ashwaiyyat* as an acceptable and normative reaction, displacing thuggery and criminality as inherent exclusively in *ashwaiyyat*.

1.3. Research Question: Is Chaos Reducible to the Imaginary Boundaries of Ashwaiyyat?

In this research project, I aim at presenting a cultural study that analyzes the phenomena of Egyptian commercial films which depicted *ashwaiyyat* and their dwellers as their main theme (2000- present), a focus that constitutes a remarkable subversion of the cinematic tradition in Egypt. With a special focus on two films "*El Lemby*" 2002 and "*Heen Maysara*" 2007, my research illuminates the sociopolitical context that influences the cinematic representation of the poor classes on the big screen. I argue that a substantial transformation in cinematic representation was influenced by the broader sociopolitical and economic context. Principally, I assess middle class sensibilities about the relation between the ruling elite, the state and its subjects as represented in the films. The focus on representing the poor and marginalized subjects who dwell in slum areas in the late media productions is underpinned, in my opinion, by a change in the way the Egyptian state produces its image as the guardian of the masses, legitimately using violence toward all undesirable and threatening elements of society.

Such a change can be attributed to an unprecedented tension in the state/citizen relationship in contemporary Egypt under the rule of Mubarak (1981- present). This relation is emphasized in the films by elaborating on the themes of social exclusion, societal (unauthorized) violence and the public brutalization of subjects by Egyptian state representatives. This thesis is questioning whether violence and social exclusion are confined to the boundaries of poor and informal localities or rather they represent experiences that extend way beyond the geographies of *ashwaiyyat*.

I chose to focus ethnographically on the middle class' reactions to the films. Given the theoretical limitations of a definitive definition and delineation of middle class in Egypt particularly at present, a theme I discuss later, my selection of interviewees included a diversified group of people that share and position themselves within the public sphere as "middle class" claiming a variety of class markers ranging from cultural background, education, income, profession and location. This choice is based on two fundamental assumptions. First, the Egyptian middle class has been part and parcel of all the dominant social discourses including cinema (particularly those produced by the postcolonial Egyptian state) that prevailed after the military coup in 1952. In such discourses the middle classes occupied the central role as the beholders as well as the main agents of modernization of the Egyptian nation¹⁶. The hegemony of these social discourses naturalized in the social imaginary the moralities, sensibilities and modes of practice of the middle class as the most appropriate and accepted/aspired to social comportment.

Second, this thesis offers a re-reading of the films depicting *ashwaiyyat* in relation to media discourses about the shrinkage of the middle class as a result of the implementation of neoliberal programs in Egypt starting from the 1990s. My research is principally concerned with how representations in media productions are both influential in the formulation of hegemonic public discourses and reflective of prevailing public debates. My aim is to delineate the complex relationship between the representation of *ashwaiyyat* inhabitants in the contemporary Egyptian commercial cinema and the sociopolitical reality that perpetuates their exclusion and further destruction.

In my analysis I map out two principal dimensions. First, how these representations capitalize on exposing the state/subjects relationship where violence and vulgarity are symptoms of the longevity of a postcolonial despotic system. Second, how the process of representation contributes to the reproduction and the perpetuation of inequitable class conditions in Egypt that ultimately reinforce the polarization of classes into an extravagantly rich class and an intolerably poor one. In this respect, my study

¹⁶ . Younis, Sherif. (2005). *Al Zahf al-Mouqads: Mothaharat al-Tanahyi wa Tashakoul 'Abadat Nasser* (The Sacred March: the Abdication Demonstrations and the Formulation of Nasser's Worship). Cairo: Dar Merit.

attempts to challenge the falsified perception of *ashwaiyyat* as the dwellings of marginalized groups of poor, vulgar and ignorant people who pursue their lives in a distant space disconnected from the rest of the refined areas of Cairo. In this respect, I intend to map out a blurring of boundaries between the middle and lower class ethos and practices in the actual contemporary context.

It is noticeable in the last decade that Egyptian cinema repetitively portrayed non-middle class heroes who inhabit *ashwaiyyat*.¹⁷ The heroes were shown as extremely poor and behaving in a vulgar manner that was considered striking yet appealing to the majority of the audience of movie theaters.¹⁸ My aim while writing the ethnography of the two films “*El Lemby*” and “*Heen Maysara*” is to provide a thick description of the films and unpack how members of the middle class relate to the chaotic and disorganized worlds exposed to them.

While attempting to bridge the gap between description and fieldwork in media studies,¹⁹ I will demonstrate how the politics of representation implied in the two films (as ethnographic sites) reproduce the harsh distinctions prevailing in the social imaginary about the middle and lower classes. Moreover, I will decipher how these films introduce the notions of violence and impunity both as a systematized state comportment and an internalized individual mode of behavior across classes.

¹⁷ . Hammond, Andrew 2007. *Popular Culture in the Arab World: Arts, Politics and the Media*. Cairo: American University Press in Cairo. Pp. 137-158.

¹⁸ . Different newspapers criticized “*El Lemby*” as part of the revival of the Egyptian cinema with ‘low-culture’ blockbuster comedies but that nevertheless had tapped into a desire among the burgeoning younger generation for new faces and films that deal with the realities of today’s youth (Hammond 2007: 139).

¹⁹ . See for instance Patrick D. Murphy and Marwan M. Kraidy (2003). “Towards an Ethnographic Approach to Global Media Studies” in Patrick D. Murphy and Marwan M. Kraidy (eds). *Global Media Studies: Ethnographic Perspectives*. Routledge Taylor 61 Francis Group NEW YORK AND LONDON. P.5- 19.

Chapter Two

Overview of Literature and Methodological Approach

2.1. Introduction

In this dissertation, I address contemporary Egyptian film productions during 2002-2008. I aspire to write an ethnography of the two films '*Heen Maysara*' (2007) and '*El Lemby*' (2002) by situating them first within the broad sociopolitical context of Egypt, and second, by focusing on readings by members of the middle classes of the two films. This endeavor is not based on a reception study of the entire middle class. Rather, I provide an ethnographic reading of the films relying on interviews with viewers and producers, content analysis of discourses published in newspapers and magazines covering the period 2002-2008, in addition to an analysis of the two films. My aim is to assess middle class sensibilities and discourses about *ashwayiyat* and their dwellers. I consider the two films as my principal ethnographic sites which offer an interpretation of *ashwaiyyat* and the sociopolitical relations in Egypt that I examine in relation to analyses of the time regarding the same theme. I consider the sociopolitical context of Egypt – particularly the presence of the ruling political regime in the everyday life of its citizens – as cornerstone in this research. Therefore, I examine how the films reflect on state/citizens relationship in *ashwaiyyat* spaces. I juxtapose such a representation in relation to how the middle class participants in my research reacted to it. My essential argument in this respect is that a similar relation of violence, chaos and precariousness already prevails between the state and its middle class subjects; however, members of the middle class deny such a relationship and displace it onto the dwellers of *ashwaiyyat*.

My argument is premised on and informed by theoretical frameworks that situate Egypt within postcolonial Africa. This classification is organically important to my research for two reasons. First, the ruling Egyptian regime shares essential criteria of the postcolonial regimes and adopts similar perception of power and authoritarianism as described in the analyses of postcolonial scholars in and about Africa, particularly with regard to state/citizen relationships. Second, I contend that the middle class shares a

position analogous to that of the lower classes to the state, given the despotic nature of governance that prevails. Both groups (i.e. middle and lower classes) are subjected to chaotic behavior instated and perpetuated by the state machinery, compounded by a rule of impunity on part of state functionaries and their allies. My argument is informed by the works of Achille Mbembe in Cameroon²⁰ and Johannes Fabian in Congo²¹, who produced ethnographic accounts of public culture and media productions while detailing the colonality of power in postcolonial formations, the chaotic nature of rule, and the erosion of legal recourse and rule of law.

My analysis attempts thus to synthesize two bodies of literature. The first is concerned with processes of representation, especially in mass media, and its integral role in producing and reproducing knowledge about social reality. The second is the conception of state formation and the techniques of its power and control on the everyday practice of its subjects. There I delineate the limitations of the frameworks classifying the Egyptian state as a Middle Eastern polity versus the frameworks I am using to understand the contemporary Egyptian state as a postcolonial formation in Africa. I argue in this thesis that the founding essences of the state legacy in Egypt imply dimensions that were better articulated in the academic discourse about the postcolonial African states and were ignored by Middle East theorists.

2.2. Representations as ‘Regimes of Truth’

Introduction

In this reading of two media productions as representations of the contemporary social reality in Egypt, my analysis is informed by a conception of representation as a process that cannot be simply considered as permutations that re-interpret and reproduce practices and ideas available in social institutions and cultural discourses. In contrast, representation contributes to the production of knowledge and the construction of new discourses about social reality. In other words, representation in artistic production

20 . Mbembe, Achille. 2001. *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

21 . Fabian, Johannes. 1998. *Moments of Freedom: Anthropology and Popular Culture*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.

possesses an agency in formulating knowledge about certain practices and structuring the social response and activities accordingly. Pierre Bourdieu elaborates on this dialectical process of production and reception of social knowledge through representation:

“... and in particular all knowledge of the social world, is an act of construction implementing schemes of thought and expression, and that between conditions of existence and practices or representations there intervenes the structuring activity of the agents, who, far from reacting mechanically to mechanical stimulations, respond to the invitations or threats of a world whose meaning they have helped to produce”²²

Building on this idea, I will focus on the theoretical frameworks highlighting the cultural and social backgrounds that nurture and inspire the actual practice and create an arena of representation to confer meaning on such practices. The relation between practices and representations cannot be studied separately from their socio- cultural context, language and discourse, social codes of behavior and power relations. In this respect, I find Michel Foucault’s identification of media images and representations as ‘regimes of truth’ crucial:

“Each society has its regimes of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true, the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each one is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true”²³

Social practice cannot be regarded as a closed circle of actions that possess an autonomous will and influence. Theorists like Stuart Hall view representation as the process that mediates the transition of social practice from the direct and limited space of occurrence to the broad universe of meanings and interpretations. It comprises a set of tools and vehicles that produce meaning and formulate cultural discourses, which in turn produce and influence practice²⁴. Stuart Hall defines representation as follows.;

²² . Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. P. 467.

²³ . Foucault, Michel. 1980. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972- 1977*, ed. Colin Gordon. New York: Pantheon.

²⁴ . Hall, S. 1997. ‘The work of representation’ in Hall, S, et al. (eds.) *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*. SAGE Publications in association with The Open University.

“Representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. It involves the use of language, signs and images which stand for or represent things”²⁵. He further stresses that there are two systems of representation. The first is a system by which all sorts of objects, people and events are correlated with a set of concepts or mental representations without which we cannot interpret the world meaningfully. This system operates mainly on a mental level and is not dependent on individual concepts, but on different ways of organizing, clustering, arranging and classifying concepts and of establishing complex relations between them. This system is closely related to the perception of culture as a constitutive process that implies a set of practices ingrained in a collective matrix of concepts and interpretations.

The second system of representation in Hall’s definition is language. Language, in his words, is not confined to words or phrases, but it is all the signs (visual, auditory, facial expressions, movements, and images) that translate sets of relations dwelling in the thought process into expressive meanings and ways of communication that people share. It is the practical element of representation that transforms objects in our minds into communicable experiences and practices which shape and affect identity. Hall explains the interrelation between these two systems of representation as follows:

“At the heart of the meaning process in culture, then, are two related systems of representation. The first enables us to give meaning to the world by constructing a set of correspondences or a chain of equivalences between things- people, objects, events, abstract ideas, etc. - and our system of concepts, our conceptual maps. The second depends on constructing a set of correspondences between our conceptual map and a set of signs, arranged or organized into various languages which stand for or represent those concepts. The relation between ‘things’, concepts and signs lies at the heart of the production of meaning in language. The process which links these three elements together is what we call representation”²⁶

In my ethnography, I explored how media productions get influenced while building the characters, the dialogue and the dramatic sequence by prevalent social structures and discourses. Analyzing the debates around both movies, I found Hall’s systems of representations (meaning and language) analytically useful in decoding the

²⁵ . Ibid, 14.

²⁶ . Ibid, 19.

signs inscribed in the drama from different positions of reception. For example, I found the receptive audience in my middle class sample of critics and viewers greatly influenced by the prevalent discourses about *ashwaiyyat* in the official media. In other instances, I identified reactions that critically engaged with these dominant structures and provided an unconventional reading of the drama in the movies. I also relied on the literature of cultural studies that tackled the relation between the audience and media productions, particularly British cultural studies and authors like John Fiske, Michelle Byers and Diana Fuss to interpret these diversified positions of interpretation. In their works, the former authors stress the active engagement of the audience in decoding the media representation. Yet, they affirm that such engagement happens in the very discursive patterns where the viewer and the text intersect dialectically all through the process of reception.

2.2.1. Viewers and Representations: Reading the Relationship?

In my thesis I analyze contemporary media productions in relation to the sociopolitical context to understand the dialectical relationship between them. I argue that the receptive audience is definitively part of this context/social reality and the agent through which the social practices and their representation keep feeding each other. I focus on media productions and analyze the positionality of the viewers while they consume mass media. Elizabeth Seymour depicts how the viewers relate to the ‘regimes of truth’ embedded in the media production texts:

“For example, some of these ‘regimes of truth’ within a given text would include the way that characters are created and portrayed, the moral issues that are raised within the storyline, the logic and sense of plausibility of the storyline and characters, and the social messages and critiques that are presented to the viewer”²⁷

Focusing on these dimensions while analyzing the reactions of a diversified middle class sample of viewers of *Heen Maysara* and *El Lemby*, I examine how the relation of the viewers to media representations conveys projections on their own lives

²⁷ . Seymour, Elizabeth M. 1999. *Imagining Modernity: Consuming Identities and Constructing the Ideal Nation on Egyptian Television*. PhD Dissertation. Binghamton University. P.14.

and the social world. Despite their belief that representations are not identical to reality, viewers engage with the discourses and connotations implied in the movies believing that these narratives negotiate their social reality and reproduce a 'truthful' statement about it.

Theorists of British cultural studies like Fiske²⁸ and Hall²⁹ essentialized the active engagement of the audience in encoding and decoding the message of the dramatic texts in the process of representation. They argue that it is impossible to separate messages from meanings, and hence re-situated 'audience' as a central focus of analysis in cultural studies. They claim that mass media provides audiences with ways of seeing and interpreting their world, helping them ultimately to shape their very existence and participation in society³⁰. However, there are no easy answers for the questions about the mechanisms through which viewers' mental structures operate in relation to the media representations. Positionality implies complex categories; gender, class, space, profession, self image and personal histories. Byers assumes that a certain amount of flexibility allows diversified reactions of rejection or acceptance: "I believe that the spectators exist in a relationship to the texts they view that is neither entirely open or entirely closed. Rather, the relationship between spectator and text is always situational, contingent and shifting"³¹.

I presume that the viewers approach media representations through three main trajectories that complement each other. The first is the reflective or mimetic approach which postulates that meaning is thought to lie in the object, person, idea or event in the real world. Representation, in this sense, functions like a mirror, to reflect the true meaning as it already exists in the world³². The reflective approach is influenced by the Marxist and Frankfurt school theorists, who stipulate that the message carried by media productions is the key unit of cultural meaning, which reflects society's dominant

²⁸ . Fiske, John. 1987. "British Cultural Studies and Television". In RC Allen (ed.) *Channels of Discourse: Television and Contemporary Criticism*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

²⁹ . Hall, S. (1980). "Encoding and Decoding" in Hall, S. et al. (eds.) *Culture, Media, Language*, London: Hutchinson.

³⁰ . Seymour, Elizabeth M. 1999. *Imagining Modernity: Consuming Identities and Constructing the Ideal Nation on Egyptian Television*. PhD Dissertation. Binghamton University. P.8.

³¹ . Byers, Michelle. 1998. "Gender/Sexuality/Desire: Subversion of Difference and Construction of Loss in the Adolescent Drama of My So- Called Life". *Signs* 23 (3): 711- 743.

³² . Hall, S. 1997. "The work of representation" in Hall, S, et al. (eds.) *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*. SAGE Publications in association with The Open University.

ideologies and that is delivered directly to the popular consciousness³³. Theodor Adorno postulates that capitalism is ‘an objective totality of social relations’ where a chain of intermediary social convictions intervene indirectly to produce the cultural superstructure³⁴. He alleges that the direct relation between the base and the superstructure that produces mass media productions only exists through complex relations where a set of social discourses are expressed. Art works, in this sense, are expected to reflect the nature of this totality of social relations not a single organ of it like a certain class for example.

The second approach is the intentional approach that presumes that it is the speaker, the author, who imposes his or her unique meaning on the world through language and that words mean what the author intends they should mean. However, the intentional approach is not enough to understand language and meaning as constantly related to their media of production and context of reception. This approach denies the possibility for the reception process to produce meaning. Based on my research, I argue that the production of meaning cannot be simplified and reduced to a single author. On contrary it is a complex process that includes several members sharing this communicative experience. The process of reception decodes the messages of the artistic productions from a certain position. According to Bourdieu, class position provides recipients of art with the codes of interpretation suitable to their inherited dispositions or ‘habitus’. Bourdieu argues habitus:

“... is constructed as the generative formula which makes it possible to account both for the classifiable practices and products and for the judgments, themselves classified, which make these practices and works into a system of distinctive signs”³⁵.

In this sense, the process of reception is part of the social construction and reproduction of class distinctions where the natural taste for artistic productions is previously appropriated according to class position.

³³ . Spitulnik, Debra. 1993. “Anthropology and the mass media”. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 22: 293-315.

³⁴ . Adorno, Theodor 1967. *Prisms*. P.30.

³⁵ . Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. “The Habitus and the Space of Life- Styles” In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. P. 170.

The third approach, the constructive approach, perceives representation from a constructionist position of analysis and asserts that meaning is not naturally existent, it is constructed. Using the representational systems identified by Hall, meaning is mobilized from its material world to a symbolic world of concepts and signs. Through the linguistic system, symbolic practices and processes operate to convey meaning to the material world and help social actors to communicate about that world meaningfully to others³⁶. The works of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes further investigated how these systems of representation operate and incarnate a dense body of meanings and connotations for the viewers to encode and decode.

De Saussure distinguished between two levels of operation of language as a system of signs, and divided the sign into two elements. The first is the signifier which is the 'form' or the actual practice that signifies (the image, the actual word, photo...). The second element is 'the signified' which is the idea or concept with which the form is associated. Both elements are essential in the production of meaning but marking the difference between them is crucial to allow for analysis that does not assume fixed meanings, rather open representation to the constant play or slippage of meaning. Jonathan Culler elaborates on Saussure's differentiation arguing:

"Language sets up an arbitrary relation between signifiers of its own choosing on one hand, and signifieds of its own choosing on the other. Not only does each language produce a different set of signifiers, articulating and dividing the continuum of sound (or writing or drawing or photography) in a distinctive way; each language produces a different set of signifieds; it has a distinctive and thus arbitrary way of organizing the world into concepts and categories"³⁷.

Asserting this arbitrariness, Culler emphasizes that there is no universal true meaning as the sign is constantly subjected to the history and the particular moment where the signifier and a certain signified combine and make meaning, i.e. it is always contingent shaped by the historical process³⁸. By emphasizing that meaning is changeable and contextual, interpretation becomes the focal point of analysis viewing it as the active

³⁶ . Hall, S. 1997. 'The work of representation' in Hall, S, et al. (eds.) *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*, SAGE Publications in association with The Open University. P. 25.

³⁷ . Culler, J. 1976. *Saussure*, London, Fontana. P.23.

³⁸ . Ibid, 36.

process by which meaning is given and taken. Hall elaborates: “Every signifier given or encoded with meaning has to be meaningfully interpreted or decoded by the receiver.”³⁹

Roland Barthes further develops the notion of ‘sign’ and links it to broader cultural thematics and concepts. He differentiates between a descriptive level ‘denotation’ of the material or the actual practice and a wider level ‘connotation’ where practice is decoded by connecting it to ‘wider realms of social ideology’. Barthes states:

“This second, wider meaning is no longer a descriptive level of obvious interpretation. This second level of significance is more general, global and diffuse. It deals with fragments of an ideology... These signifieds have a very close communication with culture, knowledge, history and it is through them, so to speak, that the environmental world (of the culture) invades the system (of representation).”⁴⁰

This connection that Barthes establishes by identifying connotation liberates the definitions of meaning and representation from language as a closed static system. Representation thus is viewed as a source of production of social knowledge, “a more open system, connected in more intimate ways with social practices and questions of power.”⁴¹ In the coming section, I will decipher the relation between media representations as agents in the formulation of social discourses and relations of power.

2. 2. 2. The Microphysics of Power and State Representation

One of the essential aspects of this research is analyzing the symbolic power that the media productions possess and the extent to which representations participate in the formulation of dominant discourses and the shaping of the social imaginary. The question of power, as deployed in my research, on the one hand refers to the nation state and to the power relations prevalent in the sociopolitical domain which influence the social practices and strategies of survival and/or resistance against the control of that state. I will elaborate in the coming paragraphs on the mechanisms through which the construct

³⁹. Hall, S. 1980. ‘Encoding and decoding’ in Hall, S. et al. (eds.) *Culture, Media, Language*, London: Hutchinson.

⁴⁰. Barthes, R. 1967. *The Elements of Semiology*, London, Cape.

⁴¹. Hall, S. 1997. ‘The work of representation’ in Hall, S, et al. (eds.) *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*, SAGE Publications in association with The Open University. P. 42.

of the state operates in the everyday life. I contend that media representations in *Heen Maysara* and *El Lemby* portrayed these mechanisms and micro-processes and provided a ground to engage critically with the issue of the powerful presence of the Egyptian state in the everyday life of its citizens. A large segment of the feedback I collected about the films related to the negotiation of the state imagery in the contemporary times and perceived the chaotic patterns of performance and expression in both films as a reproduction of the grotesque in and of state performance.

Michel Foucault argues that the techniques of governmentality are maximally invested in state institutions⁴². Yet, Foucault challenges the traditional postulates about power as a vertical axis radiating in a single direction from top to bottom and coming from a specific source (the sovereign, the state, the ruling class, etc...), he states: "Power does not function in the form of a chain- it circulates. It is never monopolized by one centre. It is deployed and exercised through a net- like organization"⁴³. Foucault also presumes that we are all caught in these networks, oppressors and oppressed:

"Power relations permeate all levels of social existence and are therefore to be found operating at every site of social life- in the private spheres of the family and sexuality as much as in the public spheres of politics, the economy and the law"⁴⁴.

Mitchell Dean, relying on Foucault's perspective, elaborates on the mechanism by which the state diffuses its power into the social body:

"Power is dispersed and in a sense has no center. It is inscribed in the social relations and operates by means of techniques and instruments that penetrate the social body. In analytical terms, the focus on microprocesses of power is designed to crystallize the dispersion and penetration mechanisms of power into the nooks and crannies of the social body"⁴⁵.

Through these micro-processes, the state deploys its techniques of governance to achieve control and instate its concrete presence in the social consciousness. Foucault maps out how power relations operate within the framework of minor practices exercised by larger structures like the state or the dominant classes. He claims that there are localized

⁴² . Foucault, Michel. 1994. "Governmentality" In *Power*. Paul Rabinow (ed.). New York: The New Press. P. 212

⁴³ . Foucault, M. 1980. *Power/ Knowledge*, Brighton, Harvester. P. 98.

⁴⁴ . Ibid, 119.

⁴⁵ . Dean, Mitchell. 1992. "A Genealogy of the Government of Poverty." *Economy and Society* 21, 3: 215-251.

circuits, tactics, mechanisms and effects through which power circulates- what Foucault calls the 'meticulous rituals' or the 'microphysics' of power⁴⁶.

The lower levels of social practices, for Foucault, should not be regarded as simple projections of the central power, but as the discursive practices produced in a certain historical and cultural context. The interpretation of these practices takes into consideration the historicity and the discourses that prevailed at their time of occurrence.

In Foucault's theoretical framework practices are organized and acquire meanings within respective discourses. Later, the practices inscribed in this discourse become objects of knowledge. Foucault identified six elements included in the process of construction of discourses around a certain topic: First, statements that provide knowledge about this topic. Second, rules that prescribe certain ways of talking and govern what is 'sayable' or 'thinkable' about this topic. Third, subjects that personify the discourse (for example, the madman in discourse about madness). Fourth, the way by which this knowledge about that topic acquires authority and a sense of embodying the truth. Fifth, the practice within institutions for dealing with the subjects whose conduct is regulated and organized according to this knowledge (e.g. punishment regimes for the guilty). Sixth, acknowledgement that a different discourse or episteme will arise at a different historical moment opening up a new 'discursive formation'⁴⁷. These elements provide us with a complex conception of knowledge as inextricably enmeshed in dominant power relations because knowledge is a technique in the regulation of social conduct and the imaginary that informs it. Foucault foregrounded the relation between discourse, knowledge and power as a fundamental nexus to understand processes of representation. His approach rescued representation from the clutches of a purely formal theory and gave it a historical, practical and worldly context of operation, as Hall depicts⁴⁸.

⁴⁶. Hall, S. 1997. 'The work of representation' in Hall, S, et al. (eds.) *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*, SAGE Publications in association with The Open University.

⁴⁷. Ibid. 45-46.

⁴⁸. Ibid, 47.

2. 3. Public Culture and the Choice of Ethnography

Introduction

“Hypertextuality of popular culture implicates what is conventionally known as high culture, as well as the officially (and academically) despised categories of non- metropolitan low culture. This does not, however, mean that the mad hypertextuality of popular culture is without structure”⁴⁹.

It seems to me that one of the basic difficulties is trying to situate public culture (as a category of analysis) in the contemporary Egyptian context, given the polarized theoretical paradigm that dichotomizes high and low culture. Seymour analyzes how such a distinction impeded the growth of mass media productions as subject of studies in anthropology:

“Another reason for the lack of attention that the mass media has received in anthropology is the broader bias in academia against those aspects of culture considered lowbrow. Within this broader cultural debate, art, literature and entertainment are often divided into high and low forms, with most televisual programming falling under the latter category. Folklore, most art, some music, most theatre and some film are regarded as a part of high culture, and therefore worthy of our attention and academic interest. There is a long tradition of devaluing certain forms of art and entertainment in the Western culture.”⁵⁰

Seymour claims that this tradition started to fade out when Debra Spitulnik published her book *Anthropology and mass media* in 1993. However, the limited view of public culture in Africa as a ‘premodern’ creation that conveys a primitive and isolated particularity of the African societies still affects cultural studies of mass media. Armbrust⁵¹ citing Talal Asad⁵² points out that anthropology has been more concerned with studying ‘non modern’ peoples, and so has historically rejected, as an object of study, those aspects of societies and cultures which are considered modern. This focus on the premodern in

⁴⁹. Armbrust, Walter. 1996. “Introduction” In *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt*. Cambridge University Press. P. 6.

⁵⁰. Seymour, Elizabeth M. 1999. *Imagining Modernity: Consuming Identities and Constructing the Ideal Nation on Egyptian Television*. PhD Dissertation. Binghamton University. P.14.

⁵¹. Armbrust, Walter. 1996. “The White Flag” In *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt*. Cambridge University Press. Pp. 11- 37.

⁵². Asad, Talal. 1993. *Genealogies of religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

anthropology has meant that orality is the main focus of analysis, while the written and the mediated have been neglected. This explains why anthropologists in a place such as Cairo have managed to do research on people's everyday lives without mentioning the fact that these lives are highly mediated.

In this thesis, I rely on an understanding of public culture as a socio- cultural construct that invokes a constellation of meanings and connotations derived from the collective social imaginary and the individual everyday interactions in particular sociopolitical context. This makes of public culture in Egypt an equivalent of 'culture' as a unitary construct if we traced an allegorical relation to Johannes Fabian's view of popular culture in Africa:

"Popular culture is not an entity; the term stands for certain discursive strategies. Popular culture signals a discourse that raises issues of power, if only because it tends to contest what is being affirmed about culture. Although the approach sketched here denies ontological status to culture, this does not mean that culture and popular culture are merely analytical categories or heuristic devices. They are real enough as practices of inquiry and writing, addressed to real practices of living and embroiled in political relations and interests"⁵³.

In his statement, Fabian challenges the pejorative approach that situates popular culture between locality and non-modernity on the one hand, and its victimization as being an indigent Westernized copy. He claims that popular culture is far more integrative and meaningful for the diverse functions and implications it holds. In his integrative approach to study popular culture in Africa, Fabian equated popular culture productions like painting, theatre, music to religion as discourses that make up a vast complex of thought, representations and performances. Fabian asks anthropologists to review the centrality of popular culture in the social reality of Africa and consequently reassess its categorical position in their theoretical frameworks. He thinks that reaching such a conviction will reposition the ethnographer towards his/ her subjects and free him/ her from the confining prejudices: "... To further our understanding of contemporary African culture by progressing from fixations on tribal traditions perishing under the

⁵³ . Fabian, Johannes. 1998. "Popular culture in Anthropology" In *Moments of Freedom: Anthropology and Popular Culture*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia. P. 5.

onslaught of Westernization to appreciating the vital, often exuberant expressions modern Africans give to their experiences”⁵⁴.

Informed by this understanding of popular culture, my research focuses on the media representations and metaphors in both films (*Heen Maysara* and *El Lemby*), as well as the social structures and power relations which shape the characters. The nexus of these two foci affords my analysis a rich subtext about social reality which I read against the background of larger context of Egypt. Unpacking the political and social connotations of a mainstream cultural production, as reflected in the two movies, offers me an angle to view the production and workings of a collective social imaginary and consciousness. Such an approach enables me to trace power relations and social hierarchy, venues of resistance, and the limitations of individual agency as constructed in the movies and the interpretations thereof.

Mass media in contemporary Africa cannot be assessed and analyzed solely according to aesthetic or entertainment parameters. It is their power of expression and giving voice to the silenced subjects that distinguishes their position as an artistic work: “Not mere exposure to power and oppression, but transformation of experience into communicable expressions, is at the origin of popular culture as resistance to colonial and postcolonial domination”⁵⁵. Building on this perspective, ethnographic fieldwork establishes the relation between the public culture experience and the historical moment of its occurrence. The notion of historicity, as deployed in my research, combines both the contextual particularity of the cultural practice in Egypt and the massive influence of Westernized modernization processes (particularly neoliberal programs) that influence social reality in the period 2002-2008.

⁵⁴ . Ibid, 2.

⁵⁵ . Ibid, 18.

2. 3. 1. Ethnography and Encompassing the Everyday

“To approach anything remotely like a ‘native’ ability to understand how Egyptians deploy their common stock of imagery and personalities requires a familiarity with popular texts that is more like what Orientalists do with medieval texts- relating them to each other, comparing them to each other, comparing them with other textual traditions, juxtaposing them, classifying them- than like the anthropologist’s fantasy of spending a year with ‘informants’, ‘picking up the language in the field’, and relying on ‘theory’ to do the rest”⁵⁶.

The call for an ethnographic study of media productions emerged from the need to broaden the analyses of mass media phenomena from the encoding- decoding model of Stuart Hall⁵⁷. Anthropologists deployed ethnography in research as a methodological strategy to witness and analyze reception as a practice that constitutes part of a total cultural framework. The gap that ethnography is able to bridge between a macrocosmic conception of culture and its microcosmic enactment in everyday lives is located in the reception processes. Ethnographic research about public culture implicates reception in intricate ways. As Lila Abu- Lughod argues:

“An enquiry into the audience should be an enquiry, not into a set of pre-constituted individuals or rigidly defined social groups, but into a set of daily practices and discourses within which the complex act of watching television is placed alongside others, and through which that complex act is itself constituted”⁵⁸.

Assessing reception is part of the methodological endeavor to interpret the social and political implications of a mass media production. To de- mystify the meanings and codes of a dramatic text can not happen according to the researcher’s own projections. It is the process of exploring individual dimensions of interpretation that allows possibilities to engage with the text from different perspectives. Ethnography in this

⁵⁶ . Armbrust, Walter. 1996. “Introduction” In *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P. 6.

⁵⁷ . Seymour, Elizabeth M. (1999). *Imagining Modernity: Consuming Identities and Constructing the Ideal Nation on Egyptian Television*. PhD. Dissertation. Binghamton University. P.14.

⁵⁸ . Abu- Lughod, L. 2005. “Part One: Anthropology and National Media” In *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press. P. 31.

sense gives the researcher the chance to embrace the discursiveness, contingency and unpredictability of the cultural phenomena. Seymour cites Valentin Volosinov⁵⁹:

“His work focuses on the sociohistorical dimensions of textual production and reception, arguing that the cultural competencies necessary for the interpretation of particular narratives are differentially distributed. Therefore, he argues that not everyone is situated identically in society, that their personal histories, social positions, as well as other aspects of their complex lives affect the ways in which they interpret, play with, consume, and/or are influenced by a given text”⁶⁰

In my thesis, I argue that ethnographic fieldwork, practiced with reflexivity, helps me re-examine my theoretical stance and my prejudiced assumptions about the social reality in Egypt by reaching out to the wide variety of receptive audience. This re-examination would be based on the ability to establish a set of relations that transcend the conventional research strategy to a more complex reading of the contexts and media of reception. Spitulnik elaborates on the questions that ethnography of mass media productions raises:

“However, by utilizing these methods and asking these questions, these researchers have moved to a ‘post- content’, ‘post- text’ era, raising serious questions about the production- consumption dichotomy itself. They question the utility of theorizing mass media’s relations to reality and the construction of social meaning, adding further complexity to the simple picture of media- message-transmission as a one way communication process”⁶¹

Ethnographic fieldwork would provide new insights to my previous awareness of the dominant discourses in the Egyptian society. By deciphering the mechanisms of reception and the correspondent discourses and meanings that stem from this interaction with the films *Heen Maysara* and *El Lemby*, the quality of change that shapes contemporary Egyptian public scenery is more tangible. Ethnography as a research tool allows me access to viewers, taking into consideration their class position, gender sensitivities and individual particularity.

⁵⁹. Volosinov, Valentin. 1973. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. New York: Seminar Press.

⁶⁰. Seymour, Elizabeth M. (1999). *Imagining Modernity: Consuming Identities and Constructing the Ideal Nation on Egyptian Television*. PhD Dissertation. Binghamton University. P.20.

⁶¹. Spitulnik, Debra. 1993. “Anthropology and the mass media”. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 22: 293-315.

2. 3. 2. Ethnography: Culture as Praxis

“Every society appears to bring to these ‘popular’ forms its own special history and traditions, its own cultural stamp, its own quirks and idiosyncrasies”⁶².

I tried to elaborate on my understandings about an ethnographic study of public culture in the Egyptian context. I highlighted the theoretical backgrounds and the fundamental assumptions that render ethnography the method of choice for my research. Below I detail the process of ethnographic research starting from collecting data and ending with writing my thesis. My ethnographic research was primarily based on two central notions that shaped ethnographic encounters.

The first one is related to time. Ethnographic study of contemporary media productions must be aware of its integration in the everyday as a contemporary expression and interaction. Such an awareness of the particularity of time of the community targeted by the study has two prospects. One is history and the second is the contemporary context of occurrence. Anthropological studies of public culture are, as Fabian states, part of the blurring of boundaries between ethnology/anthropology and history. An ethnographer must develop strategies to observe innovations and irregularities in and of the contemporary situation and follow spatial and temporal connections to continuously improve and refine his/ her participant observation and knowledge.

In this thesis, I paid specific attention to the historical moment of production of *Heen Maysara* and *El Lemby*. I contend that the sociopolitical conditions during 2002-2008 greatly influenced the imagery of the lower classes in Egypt and the dominant discourses adopted by the Egyptian middle class as well. Describing the critical position and the precariousness of the moment of release of the movies became fundamental to my research. Navigating through the published newspaper articles and the TV programs that talked about the threat of *Ashwaiyyat* and the aggressive attacks on the film makers were part of my analysis. Also, depicting the extremist portrayals of the poor in both films and highlighting the facility in narrating their suffering were part of tracing the link to the haphazardness of the historical moment of production and consumption. Moreover,

⁶². Appadurai, Arjun and Carol A. Breckenridge. 1988. “Why Public Culture?” *Public Culture* 1, No. 1: Fall 1988. P. 5.

I could not separate the contemporary moment and its precariousness from a continuous historical context that antedated 2002. I provided an analysis of preceding historical periods that structured the social imaginary of the middle class in Egypt and that propelled the emergence of the phenomena of *Ashwaiyyat*. From this position, I consider that in my ethnography of both films boundaries between description of representations and analysis of reality were eventually blurred.

The second parameter of ethnographic research is concerned with language and the writing of ethnography. Language in an ethnographic study is cornerstone that influences the study at two principal levels. The first level is the translated and interpreted local language that forms the body of the collected data and informants' commentaries and conversations. The second level is the language of writing ethnographic knowledge and communicating information, analysis and meaning. Language is therefore an instrument of power attributed to the ethnographer.

Through the process of transcribing and translating his/her observations, the researcher is re-articulating the contemporary context and situating everyday practices within his/ her framework of analysis. The inevitability of linguistic misinterpretation challenges the notion of objectivity in a hermeneutic study:

“Translating texts, often even merely transcribing them from recordings, can be a daunting task. Similarly, to perceive and interpret the richness of popular expression requires historically situated, shared knowledge that an ethnographer can never fully acquire. The study of ‘humble’ popular culture teaches us humility.”⁶³

In short, achieving a ‘thick description’ of the media representation is an extremely challenging experience. Lila Abu- Lughod proposes that as ethnographers informed by microscopic descriptions, we should profit from the careful contextualization of the small and the large facts and events, thereby allowing us to frame multiple texts and sites within a specific place⁶⁴. Lila Abu- Lughod identifies two modalities of ethnographic research: mobile and multi-sited ethnography. She elaborates:

⁶³ . Fabian, Johannes. 1998. “Popular culture in Anthropology” In *Moments of Freedom: Anthropology and Popular Culture*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia. P. 16.

⁶⁴ . Abu- Lughod, L. 2005. “Part One: Anthropology and National Media” In *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press.

“Mobile ethnography moves out from the single sites and local situations of conventional research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time- space. Second is multi- sited ethnography that depends on doing ethnographies of life- worlds in several locations- not haphazardly but with the intention of revealing the connections among them as the logic of larger systems within which particular lives unfold. The nation, it could be argued, is such a system.”⁶⁵

Abu- Lughod is expanding the space of ethnographic research by deploying the technique of thick description of the microcosmic practices to larger systems of meaning and operation. In my research about contemporary media productions in Egypt, I examine the performance of the state as a large system of power through the representation of its minor practices in everyday life. Media representations of *ashwaiyyat* and their dwellers convey the network of power relations that nurture and govern social interaction under the sovereignty of the Egyptian state. Ethnography of mass media in Egypt provides a methodological ability to interpret these representative instances according to broader circuits of power between the state and its subjects. Mobile ethnography and multi-sited ethnography as described by Abu- Lughod provide me as an ethnographer with an additional freedom while classifying, contextualizing and decoding knowledge gained through fieldwork.

2.3.3. Methods and Techniques of Research

To integrate the previous theoretical trajectories in a comprehensible ethnography about the contemporary Egyptian media productions, my work is informed by the ethnographies of Walter Armbrust⁶⁶ and Lila Abu- Lughod⁶⁷ of the contemporary artistic productions in Egypt, in addition to the film ethnography “Lawrence of Arabia” of Steve Caton⁶⁸. I pursued a thick description of the films and completed structured and semi-structured interviews with different agents under analytical categories of producers and

⁶⁵ . Ibid. 34.

⁶⁶ . Armbrust, Walter. 1996. *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁶⁷ . Abu- Lughod, L. 2005. “Part One: Anthropology and National Media” In *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press.

⁶⁸ . Caton, Steven C. 1999. “Lawrence of Arabia: A Film’s Anthropology”. Berkeley: University of California Press.

consumers of media. I supplemented these two methods with actual and contingent knowledge about the Egyptian sociopolitical context via multiple interlocutors, secondary literature, reports of organizations and newspapers. This approach is an attempt to redefine fieldwork in media studies and address the complexity of media reception, according to Patrick D. Murphy and Marwan M. Kraidy:

“Unlike the less closed- contexts and more performative- ritualized spaces that have been the customary sites for ethnographic inquiry throughout anthropology’s history, media technologies are creating increasingly intimate, microcosmic and virtual reception environments and practices. This makes of the notion of participant observation of media audiences extremely arduous in many cases, and suggests a rethinking of what constitutes “doing fieldwork”. Here we suggest that media ethnography be understood as a research process of forming communities and making conversations that underscore systematic and long- term investment in form, purpose and practice”⁶⁹.

In this thesis, I conducted fifteen to twenty interviews with viewers from Egyptian middle and poor classes. This sporadic sample is intended to reflect a multiplicity of positions of reception that I would classify as follows:

- 1- Producers (cinema makers): These included scriptwriters Belal Fadl and Nasser Abd Al Rahman who wrote lot of films about ashwaiyyat in 2002- 2008, and two young film makers working at the national institute of cinema and the director Khairy Bishara as a key figure in the production of films about poor classes before 2002.
- 2- Audience: I interviewed three middle class national university students and an American university student. Moreover, I interviewed two female domestic workers who dwell in *Al Marg* (considered *Ashwaiyy* quarter). Both women offered such different visions and interpretations of the films and further elaborated on the everyday life and practices in *ashwaiyyat* especially on the level of interaction with state officers and administrators. I also interviewed prominent

⁶⁹ . Patrick D. Murphy and Kraidy, Marwan M. (2003). “Towards an Ethnographic Approach to Global Media Studies” in *Global Media Studies: Ethnographic Perspectives*. Patrick D. Murphy and Marwan M.Kraidy (eds). Routledge Taylor 61 Francis Grnup NEW YORK AND LONDON. P.5.

critics that reviewed the films about *ashwaiyyat* like Tarek Al Shenawi and Safinaz Kazem.

- 3- Ethnography of film: I present a content analysis of the two films *Heen Maysara* and *El Lemby* to elaborate first on their relations to the sociopolitical context and to explicate the connotations and discourses within their scenes. I draw on and analyze a large number of newspapers articles, TV programs and international organizations reports to shed light on internal and external views and analyses of the current situation in Egypt on social and political levels. I pay particular attention to the treatment of the notion of chaos in these texts and how they correspond to incidents and events reported in newspapers and documented by interlocutors.

In my interviews with viewers and critics, I focused on various themes like how they received both movies and how they would connect (or not) the implied narratives to their everyday lives. I was interested in gathering their spontaneous reaction towards the characters as well as their intellectual contemplation about the position of poor and deprived subjects. Part of my questions were concentrating on mapping out the positionality of my subjects as middle class members and assessing the extent to which such position influenced their reception and tolerance of the characters and the storyline. I was concerned with following how my interlocutors established links between the social reality they live and survive, the state performance towards them as subjects and the media representations of the middle and lower classes in *Heen Maysara* and *El Lemby*. I also found it relevant, while interviewing critics and film producers, to collect technical data that would support my argument.

Chapter Three

The Egyptian Postcolonial State (1952- 2008): Producing the social imaginary of the subordinate subjects

3.1. Introduction

In this chapter I present an overview of the nature of power of the Egyptian postcolonial state since independence from the Ottoman Empire rule, signified by the military coup of 1952 and the withdrawal of the British colonizing forces in 1954. My focus primarily is on the mechanisms and the influences that configured the state/ citizens relationship during the rule of Gamal Abd El Nasser and Anwar Al Sadat, then following the structuring of this relationship under Mubarak (1980- present). Specifically, I emphasize how the projects and discourses adopted by the postcolonial state under each presidency affected the fields of artistic production particularly in the film industry. I argue that the postcolonial state in Egypt inherited the legacy of the colonial power thus reproducing colonizer/ colonized relationship as a model befitting its national subjects. The maintenance of such status of subordination of subjects has been a key priority of the political regime in Egypt since 1952, and continues until the present.

Given this history of the independent postcolonial state in Egypt, I broaden my analytical framework to theoretical approaches beyond those usually adopted within Middle East Studies. I argue that in addition to such framework, analyses of the postcolonial states in Africa offer a rich analytical perspective from which to examine the case of Egypt. I contend that the precariousness and uncertainty of the sociopolitical conditions in Egypt (2002- 2008) are quiet significant features in reading the contemporary media representations and the way they are consumed. In what follows I elaborate on the limitations of analysis of state in the Middle East. To address these limitations, I rely on Achille Mbembe's analysis of the postcolonial states in Africa which guides my ethnographic interpretations of the films *Heen Maysara* and *El Lemby*.

Then, I trace how the constitution and the social imaginary of the Egyptian middle class was shaped after independence, exploring the different strategies and techniques deployed in its relations to the state and the larger sociopolitical context. In this respect, I argue that scrutinizing the history of the postcolonial state in Egypt from the perspective of middle class reconfiguration and transformation is indispensable to understanding how middle class members consume contemporary media productions. In the last section of this chapter, I provide a historical background about the emergence of *ashwaiyyat* in Egypt and I elaborate on my theoretical position concerning the perception of their dwellers in the official media.

My concern in this chapter is thus to contextualize the two films *Heen Maysara* (2007) and *El Lemby* (2002), as contemporary media productions, within the historical and the present sociopolitical conditions of their production and consumption. This contextualization is necessary for my argument concerning the linkages between media representations and contemporary social realities in Egypt Mubarak's regime.

3.2. Middle Eastern 'Exceptionalism' versus Postcolonial 'Precariousness'

In this section, I propose to examine the Egyptian postcolonial state by situating it at the nexus of Middle East and sub-Saharan theorists of postcoloniality. I contend that narrowing my analysis to the geopolitical confines of Middle East engagements would produce yet another account of a modern state that gained independence after withdrawal of the colonizing British and Ottoman forces in 1954. Such an account fails short of illuminating the intricacies of the contemporary historical moment in Egypt, specifically the nature of power of the national political regime and its relations to colonial power on one hand and to its national subjects on the other.

I argue that Middle Eastern studies usually posit non-Western states in the Middle East as ones that adopted modern institutions of rule and hence are capable of functioning according to modern systems of governance. To account for the prevailing and varied forms of authoritarianism such studies resort to the analytical categories of 'cultural relativism' and 'Middle East exceptionalism'. Theorists of Middle Eastern

studies like Ellis Goldberg⁷⁰, Eberhard Kienle⁷¹ and Roger Owen⁷² view Islamic religion and culture as part of the Middle Eastern states' particularity and point out that they are partly responsible for the development of authoritarian rule in the Middle East. Owen stresses that an inherent cultural model is behind the incongruence between Middle Eastern states and the Western-type modern state:

“Matters become still more complex when we turn to non –European world in general, and to the Middle East in particular. By and large most of the political writing concerned with defining the state, together with an associated vocabulary involving such key terms as ‘legitimacy, ‘hegemony’ and ‘authority’, took place not only in Europe but also on the basis of an evaluation of a purely European experience. Some of this thinking was then transposed to a discussion of the state outside Europe without any great concern to whether it made sense in what was obviously a different historical and cultural environment. It follows that it also must be amenable to much the same analyses of their strengths and weaknesses as their European neighbors. And as always this helps to create a counter-position: The view that Western- type states are inappropriate for the Middle East, that they lack roots and cultural meaning, and therefore are bound to perform badly and, indeed, to make the difficulties of the government a great deal worse.”⁷³

And despite that Owen admits a Eurocentric academic discourse that creates a ‘counter-position’ concerning the Middle Eastern states’ classification, he could not distinguish between the distorted inheritance of a European state model and the inheritance of a Western colonial legacy that was transposed and replicated in the state/subjects relationship after independence. It seems as if those theorists are incarnating two historically separate theoretical paradigms and approaches to state building processes in the Middle East: one is of the model of Western modern state which is not applicable to Middle East (for lacking ‘cultural meaning’), and the other is a temporal and theoretical disconnected that undermines the effects of the lengthy eras of colonization on the contemporary modes of governance in the Middle East.

This tendency is best exemplified in Joel Migdal’s definition of non-European state model where he borrows the exact terminology and connotations of a European state

⁷⁰ . Goldberg, Ellis and Reşat Kasaba, Joel S. Migdal (eds.) (1993). *Rules and rights in the Middle East: Democracy, Law, and Society*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

⁷¹ . Kienle, Eberhard (2001). *A Grand Delusion: Democracy and Economic Reform in Egypt*. London: I.B.Tauris.

⁷² . Owen, Roger (2004). *State, Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East*. Edition: 3, illustrated. London: Routledge.

⁷³ . Ibid, P.2.

while excluding the signs of colonial influence, particularly the inheritance of a colonizer/ colonized relationship premised on the deployment of violence by the ruler on the ruled. Migdal identifies a non-European state as: “an organization, composed of numerous agencies led and coordinated by the state’s leadership (executive authority) that has the ability to make and implement the binding rules for all the people as well as the parameters of rule making for other social organizations in a given territory, using force of necessary to have its way”⁷⁴ Following this definition, Owen delineated the reasons behind the emergence of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East. He argues that borrowing an artificial modern state model from the colonial power (i.e. a centralized administration, a legal system, a flag, and internationally recognized boundaries) produced an exaggerated need for policing and achieving control over the boundaries and the subjects on the part of the state⁷⁵.

In contrast, Achille Mbembe theorized the complex structure of the postcolonial state in Africa within a framework that escaped the dichotomy between the local culture and the colonial power legacies. In his analysis of the postcolonial state in Cameroon, Mbembe described the process of the making of the ruling regimes in the postcolony. He postulated:

“And since, in Africa both before and after colonization, state power enhanced its value by establishing specific relations of subjection, something must be said about the relationships between subjection, the distribution of wealth and tribute, and the more general problem of the constitution of the postcolonial subject. The second factor is that postcolonial African regimes have not invented what they know of government from scratch. Their knowledge is the product of several cultures, heritages, and traditions of which the features have become entangled over time, to the point where something has emerged that has the look of ‘custom’ without being reducible to it, and partakes of ‘modernity’ without being wholly included in it. One part of this knowledge or rationality is *colonial rationality*.”⁷⁶

In my ethnography of the films *Heen Maysara* and *El Lemby*, I trace and unpack such relations of subjection as an essential feature of the performance of the Egyptian

⁷⁴ . Migdal, Joel S. 2001. *State in Society: Studying How States and Societies Constitute One Another*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁷⁵ . Owen, Roger 2004. *State, Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East*. Edition: 3, illustrated. London: Routledge. 2004. P.9.

⁷⁶ . Mbembe, Achille. 2001. “On commandment” In *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley: University of California Press. P. 24- 25.

state in the postcolonial era. I deploy the two axioms identified by Mbembe namely wealth and tribute distribution and the creation of the postcolonial subject, in interpreting first the gaze of a privileged middle class towards the dwellers of *ashwaiyyat*, second the police coercion and violence towards the national subjects. Such an approach allows me to critically examine multiple phenomena described in the Middle East, especially the emphasis on policing and control, the expansion of state apparatus and bureaucracy and the authoritarian modes of governance without reducing it to a dichotomy of cultural and historical disjuncture. Further, understanding the coloniality of power from Mbembe's perspective substantiates my argument concerning the relation between the longevity of the ruling regime in Egypt and the perpetuation of the rule of exception and unconditionality.

Mbembe outlines the following criteria of the ruling regimes in postcolonial Africa: Being based on a regime of exception that departed from the 'common law', lacking autonomous institutions, instating a system of privileges and immunities that enhanced the civil society stratification to inscribe the reality of inequality, providing no limits for state authority especially on the juridical system and deploying violence as the essence of the sovereignty of the state. The next section, I will use these criteria to highlight how the middle class imaginary was shaped by the postcolonial state in Egypt (1952- 2008). I will also trace how the behavior of the Egyptian state in different historical periods affected the position and constitution of this class and consequently its relation to the lower classes, and shaped the nature of social discourses produced by the middle class and are partly exemplified in media representations

3.3. The Social Imaginary of the Egyptian Middle Class (1952- 2008): A History of Ascension and Decline

It can be argued that the foundation of the first independent Egyptian state in modern history was officially declared in 1954 following the military coup led by Gamal Abdel Nasser⁷⁷ in 1952. However, the declaration of the independent postcolonial state

⁷⁷ . Nasser is the second Egyptian president (1952- 1970). He is known for his socialist project and his enthusiasm for a radical nationalist policy. However, during his ruling period, the Egyptian state

was preceded by a struggle for independence from British colonization of Egypt that persisted from 1882 until 1951. This prolonged struggle capitalized on including the educated sectors of the Egyptian populace under the umbrella of a nationalistic discourse that strives for independence as the only pathway to reform and renaissance⁷⁸. Conceiving an authentic Egyptian identity was one of the tasks that were carried out actively by many political and social leaders in Egypt, especially after the 1919 revolution under the leadership of Saad Zaghloul of the Wafd Party⁷⁹. The liberal Wafd party's intellectuals at the time contributed immensely to portraying the aspired independent nation as a potentially modern state with a remarkable influence of enlightenment ideals on their discourse.

According to Galal Amin, this mobilization of the educated professionals and bureaucrats in 1919 can be considered the primary stage in the conception of a well defined Egyptian middle class⁸⁰. Amin postulates that the Egyptian middle class achieved relative independence by 1922, thus drafting the first Egyptian constitution in 1923, and establishing the first Egyptian bank. Moreover, Amin asserts that this class was active and productive in both industrial and cultural fields. The Egyptian middle class founded Cairo University in 1908 and produced magnificent works of art, music and theatre and led a respectful struggle to reform the religious discourse and rejuvenate the literature and artistic domains⁸¹. When the Nasser regime came to power in 1954, it profited from the privileged middle class's achievements and deployed its hegemony on both the political and cultural realms in Egypt. The state then relied on the prevalent cultural and social discourse that consolidated the aspirations for a modern state on a "classical Western model" much as on an "independent" one with clear local and national identity fundamentals.

consolidated the rule of dictatorship and adopted strict security measures against free expression and democratic organization. Nasser died shortly after a humiliating defeat of the Egyptian army in 1967 that resulted in the occupation of Sinai by Israel.

⁷⁸ . Meijer, Roel. 2002. *The Quest for Modernity: Secular Liberal and Left-wing Political Thought in Egypt, 1945-1958*. London: Routledge. P.21.

⁷⁹ . Ibid. 25.

⁸⁰ . Amin, Galal. 2009. *Egypt and the Egyptians in Mubarak's era (1981- 2008)*. Cairo: Merit Publishing House. P.125.

⁸¹ . Ibid, 126.

The independent postcolonial state thus capitalized on this hybrid discourse to initiate its mode of rule⁸². However, the transition to postcoloniality followed a pathway that influenced the state/subjects relationship in many ways. Mbembe argues that a role exchange happens between the rulers of the postcolonial state and their precedent colonizers. This exchange implies two notions of commandment that prevail in a colony and are then transferred to the postcolony. The first is ‘founding violence’ which becomes the main determinant of the relation between colonizer/native (now state/citizen). This violence is meant to underpin the ‘right of conquest’, in Mbembe’s words, of the state as a sole power of judging and legitimating social practices. The second notion is using the power (“founding violence”) to structure activities and strategies of all social agents and shaping the public domain to tighten its control over its subjects. Mbembe contends that the state has to “help produce an imaginary capacity converting the founding violence into authorizing authority”⁸³. The merger between the state role as an absolute authoritarian power on one hand, and the state as the beholder of the independent nation’s renaissance project befits Nasser’s period in Egypt (1954-1970). The welfare project adopted by the state enormously affected the structuring process of the Egyptian middle class and consequently its imaginary and media productions.

3.3.1. The Welfare Project: Granting Privilege to Guarantee Subordination

The Nasser regime announced a project of reform and renaissance that gathered the aspirations of the independent nation and centralized the role of the state in the political structure as the sole agent to carry it out. Salwa Ismail defines this mission as the “project of the welfare state”:

“Since the 1952 revolution, the Egyptian state has defined itself as a welfare state concerned with its citizens’ social reproduction. Welfare provisions were fundamental to the ideological justifications of the ruling regime in post-revolutionary Egypt. Further, they have entered into the terms organizing

⁸² . Meijer, Roel. (2002). *The Quest for Modernity: Secular Liberal and Left-wing Political Thought in Egypt, 1945-1958*. Routledge. P122.

⁸³ . Mbembe, Achille. 2001. “Introduction: Time on the Move” and “Conclusion: The Final Manner” In *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Pp. 1- 18 and 235- 245.

state- society relations as embodied in the notion of the social contract. The policies and the laws that marked the outlines of this contract conveyed a populist bent reinforced by rhetoric on popular alliances and the elimination of class antagonism.”⁸⁴

The quest for modernization and progress served usually as the imaginary space through which the state emphasized its social domination and interference in all aspects of the public life⁸⁵. The police state during the Nasser era was masked by the ability of the state to provide the basic social and economic needs (free education, health insurance and work) and imbuing it with nationalistic socialist mottos (Ibid, 52). Nikloas Rose and Peter Miller affirm this relation: “The logic of the welfare programs involves the delineation of a sphere of government intervention separate from the political but networked with it and having as its broader purpose the governing of the population”⁸⁶.

During this time Egypt witnessed a huge expansion of the bureaucracy, the police and the army as well as the number of public enterprises. Owen claims that the need to maintain security after the departure of the colonial power, the drive to establish control over the whole of the new national territory and the desire to use the state to promote large programs of economic development and social welfare, were behind such an expansion⁸⁷. However, he also argues that the state guaranteed immunities and enormous power to individuals at the apex of the regime which ended in the creation of an authoritarian system where power is highly centralized and the state assumes monopoly on every kind of political activity. Simultaneously, the regime was taking radical steps to achieve land reform (1952), constructing the high dam of Aswan and inaugurating the Helwan steel and iron complex in 1954. The nationalization of Suez canal in 1956 stimulated further state-led developments culminating in the first five-year plan (1960-

⁸⁴ . Ismail, Salwa 2006. *Political Life in Cairo's New Quarters*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. P. 66.

⁸⁵ . Younis, Sherif. 2005. *Al Zahf al-Mouqads: Mothaharat al-Tanahyi wa Tashakoul 'Abadat Nasser* (The Sacred March: the Abdication Demonstrations and the Formulation of Nasser's Worship). Cairo: Dar Merit. Pp. 23- 26.

⁸⁶ . Rose, Nikolas and Peter Miller. 1992. “Political Power beyond the State: Problematics of Government”. *British Journal of Sociology* 43, 2: 173- 205.

⁸⁷ . Owen, Roger. 2004. *State, Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East*. London: Routledge. P.23.

1965) and the nationalization of the Egyptian private banks and other factories and enterprises in 1960-1961⁸⁸.

The state, under the rule of Nasser, increasingly acquired a wide base of supporters and accomplished its hegemony on the political and public domains through a series of service institutions (expansion of free education, providing employment in the public sector, subsidization of foodstuffs) and a 'clientalistic' political machinery that constituted the essence of its rule⁸⁹. This base was founded essentially on expanding the Egyptian middle class by embracing members from the lower classes who benefitted from free education and joined public professions as well as members from the Egyptian rural areas after the land reform and the consequential growth of the agricultural sector and land ownership⁹⁰. The obvious growth of the state apparatus due to the increase of general employment can be demonstrated by the rise of the number of Egyptian employed in bureaucracy and public enterprises from 350,000 in 1951/2 to over 1,000,000 in 1965/6 and the doubling of the number of state ministries from 15 to 29 during the same period⁹¹.

The artistic scenery in Egypt was greatly influenced by these transformations. The major institutions of art and media production were confiscated by the state and were deployed to propagate the slogans of the ruling elite and create a consensus on the fundamentals of the 1952 revolution. Inflamed lyrics of patriotic songs, imbued with nationalist sentiments and full support of the Egyptian political regime (usually reduced to become the persona of the Egyptian president) played important part in producing the nationalist image of the postcolonial Egyptian state during the time between 1952 and 1973. Abd El Halim Hafez, the well-known Egyptian legendary crooner, was honorably recognized for his contribution in mediating the nationalist socialist discourse of the Nasser state to his audience⁹². Halim's songs described in great detail the strategic

⁸⁸ . Ibid, 24.

⁸⁹ . Younis, Sherif. 2005. *Al Zahf al-Mouqads: Mothaharat al-Tanahyi wa Tashakoul 'Abadat Nasser* (The Sacred March: the Abdication Demonstrations and the Formulation of Nasser's Worship). Cairo: Dar Merit. P. 114.

⁹⁰ . Amin, Galal. 2009. *Egypt and the Egyptians in Mubarak's era (1981- 2008)*. Cairo: Merit Publishing House. P.126.

⁹¹ . Owen, Roger 2004. *State, Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East*. London: Routledge. P.27.

⁹² . Al Nagmy, Kamal. 1993. *The Egyptian singing: Singers and Listeners*. Cairo: Dar Al Hilal.

projects of Nasser, as well as his promises and ambitions for the renaissance of the independent Egyptian Republic. Artists and their productions were perceived by the state as national symbols who were assigned a patriotic mission to promote and reinforce a collective national emotion that unified the entire Egyptian nation at that time⁹³. Through artistic productions (songs, plays and movies), the social imaginary of a burgeoning middle class started to identify with media productions fashioned according to the nation-state agenda, reflecting state's ideology, glorifying its leader and disseminating his ideas to the populace above all other considerations.

The singers of the patriotic songs (Halim and Um Kulthum, for example) identified themselves as carriers of the nation's values and aspirations, additional soldiers in the nation's struggle for independence and progress. The artists were alleged to be proud being servants of the 'state' and 'representatives of the nation'⁹⁴. Egyptian media productions in this sense remained an expression of cooperation and acceptance of the general political themes propagated by the state for the welfare of the nation and its people. In this respect, it is important to clarify that venues of media productions such as television, cinema production companies, theatres and radio stations, were nationalized by the state and were run under meticulous supervision of the state bureaucracy.

Artistic productions were geared to attract the educated Egyptian middle class impatient to attune itself to the combined authenticity and modernism discourse of Nasser. To serve this purpose, the confiscated national cinema institutions produced Egyptian films that carved the image of the expanding middle class in the social imaginary. They focused on reproducing the dual state discourse on modernization and authenticity, emphasizing and hailing the middle class as the beholder of the Egyptian renaissance. The films featured the collapse of the feudal traditions and the extravagantly rich people under the pressures of the burgeoning educated middle class armed with knowledge and virtues of socialism and popular class alliances. Armbrust describes how the Egyptian cinema pre-1970s depicted the ambitions of the middle class to achieve a complex process of transition from the traditional to the modern society:

“The narratives of pre-1970 cinema were founded on the coupling of technique with authenticity, whether of the classicist or local variety; or conversely, on

⁹³ . Ibid. 112.

⁹⁴ . Ibid. 134.

calling attention to situations that contravened the joining of modernity with tradition. The synthesized modernity with tradition, often in the character of the educated bureaucrat or professional, was an important part of the narrative structure of many films from the period, and was often implicit in films that did not make such characters their central focus.”⁹⁵

It is significant in this respect to mention films like *Rod Qalbi* (Return my Heart) 1957, *Ana Horra* (I Am Free) 1959 and *Al Aidy al Naema* (The Soft Hands) 1963 that portrayed the ascension of lower classes to join the middle class after pursuing education and training (The hero becoming an army officer in *Rod Qalbi* or an editor in chief in *Ana Horra*). The characters asserted the value of hard work, equality, respect for the poor and social alliance (for instance the figure of the beloved poor father in *Rod Qalbi* and the repellent rich yet unemployed man in *Al Aidy al Naema*).

3. 3. 2. The Withdrawal of the State and Anti-modernist Discourse

Egypt’s political and artistic fields of production were dramatically affected by the 1967 military defeat of Egypt and the consequent Israeli occupation of Sinai. The death of Nasser in 1970 and the strategic political and economic shifts of his successor Anwar Al Sadat, especially his open-door economic policy and his visit to Jerusalem, marked the symbolic, and in many ways the actual, announcement of failure of the socialist Nasserite project⁹⁶. These developments compelled the Egyptian educated middle class to critically interrogate the nationalist short past. The depiction of oppressiveness and censorship as the major criteria of the Nasser state propelled primary claims for political and economic liberalism to emerge and gain recognition and appreciation. The indisputable ability of the rising Egyptian nation to achieve economic welfare, political independence and social justice were perceived with skepticism⁹⁷.

⁹⁵ . Armbrust, Walter. 1995. “New Cinema, Commercial Cinema, and the Modernist Tradition in Egypt”, in *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, No. 15, *Arab Cinematics: Toward the New and the Alternative*, P. 102.

⁹⁶ . Younis, Sherif. 2005. *Al Zahf al-Mouqads: Mothaharat al-Tanahyi wa Tashakoul ‘Abadat Nasser* (The Sacred March: the Abdication Demonstrations and the Formulation of Nasser’s Worship). Cairo: Dar Merit.

⁹⁷ . Ibid. 93.

The Egyptian and Arab peoples started to lose faith in the fundamental assumptions of the Arab nationalist project. On the other hand, the technological revolution that allowed the huge circulation of the video and cassette tapes in Egypt in the seventies provided new spaces for the once marginalized artists to articulate their artistic projects outside the domination of the state⁹⁸. Egyptian citizens for the first time were allowed to break free from a monolithic hegemonic discourse constructed to underpin the state project. The phenomenological success of the *shaabi* singer Ahmed Adaweya after the release of his own cassettes in the 1970s threatened the superstars of the official media, such as Halim, selling over one million copies of his first commercial release (1977). Aided by an increasingly cynical populace and a burgeoning cassette culture, Adaweya opened the gates for a chain of crooners to dump the Egyptian markets with *shaabi* music and films starred by heroes from the poor classes⁹⁹. By this time, the word *shaabi* would still be associated with vulgarity, backwardness and lower class chants in contradistinction to the 'authenticity' discourse that used to characterize the transformative discourse of modernist nationalism in the sixties.

The trend of representing the social alliance between a skillful and wise middle class and the uneducated yet virtuous and honest poor classes started to decline in the seventies. The sociopolitical context affected the media productions of the time. Armbrust states:

“It would not be an exaggeration to describe the new popular culture style as basically anti-modernist... Consequently, the most important change in the ‘mythic patterning’ of post-1970s Egyptian popular art is that the synthesizing ideal evident in earlier films is absent. The sort of middle class modernist hero so common in earlier films has, since the 1970s, been either beleaguered or humiliated. These anti-modernist films are part of a widespread discourse on popular art which encompasses media other than the cinema”¹⁰⁰.

The cinematic representation of the middle class and poor heroes became equivalent to their deteriorating symbolic value in the prevalent social discourse. The

⁹⁸ . Al Nagmy, Kamal. 1993. “The Monologist and the Singer” in “*The Egyptian Singing: Singers and Listeners*”. Cairo: Dar Al Hilal.

⁹⁹ . Grippo, James. 2006. "The Fool Sings a Hero's Song".

Website: *Transnational Broadcasting Studies*. <http://www.tbsjournal.com/Grippo.html>

¹⁰⁰ . Armbrust, Walter. 1995. “New Cinema, Commercial Cinema, and the Modernist Tradition in Egypt”, in *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, No. 15, *Arab Cinematics: Toward the New and the Alternative*, P. 103.

cinematic representation was greatly affected by the change in their social positioning and constraining economic situation. However, other authors like Galal Amin assume that the middle class kept growing after the inauguration of the open door policies in 1974 through the inclusion of bigger numbers of members of the lower classes who profited from the open door policies and the labor migration to the oil-rich gulf countries and Libya¹⁰¹. According to Amin, the opportunities for social mobility and ascension through non-productive economic activities, like brokerage or foreign currency exchange, introduced moral and ethical transformations of the growing middle class. An obsession with consumption and wealth acquisition characterized the behavior of a wide sector of the Egyptian people.

A significant portion of the cinematic production in late 1970s and 1980s¹⁰² focused on stories that depict the rapid ascent of a nouveaux riches businessmen class who deployed illegal means of wealth accumulation during the presidency of Anwar Al Sadat¹⁰³ (1970- 1981) as a direct consequence of the corrupt implementation of the open door policies. These cinematic productions increasingly represented the predicament of the middle class bureaucracy struggling with the economic imbalance between their salaries and the constantly rising cost of living. They also detailed the social deterioration of the middle class and mapped out the difficulties that professionals (especially doctors and engineers) face after losing the privileges they acquired under the socialist regime of Nasser.

In short, the political and economic conditions have been drastically altered in Egypt disturbing the classical class structures configured under Nasser. After the adoption of the open door policy in the seventies, the class hierarchy in Egypt took a

¹⁰¹ . Amin, Galal 1995. *Egypt's Economic Predicament: A Study in the Interaction of External Pressure, Political Folly and Social Tension in Egypt 1960- 1990*. BRILL.

¹⁰² . This phenomena was heavily stressed in the works of an entire generation of Egyptian directors and film makers like Atef Al Tayeb (1947- 1995), Khairy Beshara (1947- present), Mohamed Khan (1942- present) and Daod Abd Al Sayed (1946- present). In their movies, those directors mapped out the consequences of the open door policy and deployed the high representational value of their cinematic instruments to identify how the implementation of such policy led to a series of moral, political and economic deterioration in Egypt.

¹⁰³ . Mubarak is the third Egyptian president. He led the Egyptian victorious war against Israel in 1973 which resulted eventually in signing the peace treaty of 'Camp David' between both countries. He adopted an open door policy since 1976. His policies were heavily criticized as being the beginning step of the state disengagement from the social contract with its citizens. He was assassinated in 6 October 1981 by an Islamist army officer after executing the widest detention campaign in September 1981 where the most prominent Egyptian intellectuals and activists were brought to custody.

different trajectory. The middle class (as defined in the sixties; educated professionals and state's employees) started to lose its privileged positions within state policies and development projects. Under the rule of Al Sadat, there were marked deficiencies in providing basic subsidized services like education and health, which kept on deteriorating in a remarkable fashion over the following decades. The limitation of the social security policies started to increase the gaps in the Egyptian social safety net and confirmed state's withdrawal from its welfare project. This withdrawal undermined the ability of the Egyptian state to present itself as the provider for its citizens¹⁰⁴. The ideals of equality and just distribution of wealth were challenged by the neoliberal principles that sought a de-statization of the government¹⁰⁵. A state of mistrust started to emerge between the Egyptians and their "fatherly" state with its ambitious modernist discourse.

3. 3. 3. Mubarak: The Rule of Impunity and the Perception of the Poor

In the previous section, I tried to highlight how the postcolonial state in Egypt carved its image in the social imaginary as what Mbembe termed a "total cosmology for its subjects". This unremitting historical process was based on an assemblage of ideas, discourses and images that put emphasis on the grotesque and obscene nature of the state power into the collective consciousness thus inscribing the state as a fetish in the everyday practices of its people¹⁰⁶. Mbembe contends that a relationship of "conviviality" is the guarantee to preserve the subjection and submission of the postcolonial state subjects. This conviviality unifies the rulers and the ruled in a 'simulacrum' or a system of symbolic metaphors of mutual appreciation and apprehension that end up robbing both parties of their vitality creating ultimately an indigent environment of zombies¹⁰⁷. This description perfectly applies to the Egyptian state under Mubarak's regime.

Under the rule of Mubarak (1981-present), the performance of the government and the steps it took towards the adoption of neoliberal policies implicitly announced that

¹⁰⁴ . Ismail, Salwa 2006. "*Political Life in Cairo's New Quarters*". Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. P. 32.

¹⁰⁵ . Ibid. 45.

¹⁰⁶ . Mbembe, Achille. 2001. "The Aesthetics of Vulgarly" In *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley: University of California Press. P. 103.

¹⁰⁷ . Ibid, 111.

the state has given up the welfare project¹⁰⁸. Mubarak's regime promoted a rapid liberalization and implemented different measures to introduce free market policies and to privatize the public sector. The interference and influence of several transnational organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank under the rubric of 'structural adjustment' was extensively expanding¹⁰⁹.

This shift can be viewed as part of the neoliberal paradigm that aims at relocating programs of government from state institutions to non-state sites and actors¹¹⁰. This interference, sometimes viewed as a serious erosion of the sovereignty of the state¹¹¹, represented and ushered a new "given" in the relations of the postcolonial state to its international allies on the one hand and its local subjects on the other. The process of autonomization of local entities (such as grass-root NGOs) under global governmentality constituted a direct threat to the traditional system of governance that reigned in Egypt since 1954:

"It indicates a new modality of government, which works by creating mechanisms that work 'all by themselves' to bring about governmental results through the devolution of risk onto the enterprise or the individual and the responsabilization of subjects who are increasingly empowered to discipline themselves"¹¹².

The regime of Mubarak was compelled to allow relative freedom of expression and to permit political spaces that were formerly seized by the state, like independent newspapers and satellite channels¹¹³. Hegemonic global discourses about minority rights, human rights, personal freedoms and democracy increasingly invaded the social discourse in Egypt. Different religious minorities in Egypt were encouraged by the relative freedom of expression to protest religious persecution and to ask actively for their equal citizenship rights and freedom of belief. Orthodox Copts and Bahais spoke out either in the streets or in courtrooms demanding equal representation in society.

¹⁰⁸ . Amin, Galal. 1995. *Egypt's Economic Predicament: A Study in the Interaction of External Pressure, Political Folly and Social Tension in Egypt 1960- 1990*. BRILL.

¹⁰⁹ . Soliman, Samer. 2005. *Al- Nizam al-Qawi wal Dawla al Dha'ifa: Idaret al-Azma al Maliyya wal Taghiyeer al-Siyassi fi 'ahd Mubarak* (The Strong Regime and the Weak State: the Management of Fiscal Crisis and Political Change during Mubarak's Reign). Cairo: Dar Merit.

¹¹⁰ . Ferguson, J. and Akil Gupta. 2002. "Spatializing States: Toward an Ethnography of Neoliberal Governmentality" In *American Ethnologist* 29 (4): 981- 1002.

¹¹¹ . Ibid.

¹¹² . Ibid, 989.

¹¹³ . Sa'eed, Mohamed al-Sayed. 2006. *al-Intiqal al-Demuqrati al-Mohtajaz fi Misr* (The Restrained Democratic Transformation in Egypt). Cairo: Dar Merit. P.77.

Geographically marginalized social groups in Sinai, for example, engaged in bloody violent confrontations with the state police objecting to their marginalized indigent situation and their exclusion from state plans of development and reform (International Crisis Group, 2007). The economically marginalized also benefited from the political window of opportunity opened by the external discourse and pressure. In 2006 and 2007, a series of strikes and sit-ins were carried out by many workers and employees in the public sector who were demanding an increase in their wages and salaries¹¹⁴.

This set of 'spontaneous' protest movements began among the educated middle class as in the case of members of *Kefaya* (the Egyptian movement for change) in 2005¹¹⁵ as well as state employees suffering from diminishing values of their salaries compared to the rising costs of living. Eventually, workers and poor dwellers of *ashwaiyyat* invaded the scene and started for the first time their organized sit-ins in request for clean water, subsidized bread and dignified housing. It is becoming ordinary and routine subject of daily news in Egypt (2007- 2008), to read and hear about hundreds or thousands of Egyptians rioting in different governorates to fight for their basic needs like food and housing. Amani Kandil reports:

"The protests of the poor were witnessed in some regions of Cairo and the governorates (Portsaid and elsewhere) to demand housing. The real dimensions of this problem were revealed with *Kale'et Al Kabsh* accidents in *Al Sayeda Zeinab* quarter. The 'poor' had learned the act of demonstrating in front of the Council of Ministers, the Parliament, the Governor's headquarters. They now know the way to the satellite channels and the independent newspapers... The third aspect of the public protest movements is protesting to get loaf of bread from the bakeries of Egypt. Hundreds and thousands demonstrate in the Egyptian governorates (especially Southern Egypt) only to get the subsidized loaf of bread. In August 2007, people broke in a bakery in Southern Egypt to get their bread before it being stolen by the bread 'mafia'." ¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ . *Al Masry Al Youm*, daily Egyptian newspaper, 2007.

¹¹⁵ . The Egyptian Movement for Change (*Al-Haraka al-Masriyya min agli 'l-Taghyir*), widely known by its slogan, *Kifaya!* (Enough!). In January 2005, a group of political activists within the newly established political body declared the protest movement and presumed that it is only a matter of one year and 'Egypt's people will get rid of its long standing dictator [President] Hosni Mubarak'. *Kifaya* led extensive campaigns and demonstrations against the political regime in 2005 and 2006. However, the flamboyant movement's effect started to fade out in 2007 with claims that it inspired the rest of protests that took place in 2007 for stratified and detailed popular requests.

¹¹⁶ . Kandil, Amani. 2007. "The Protest Movements in Egypt 2007", *Al Masry Al Youm*, 28 August.

These sorts of protests that included for the first time ordinary non-politicized people, not led or previously planned by intellectual entities or political parties, reflect the degree of deterioration in the economic affairs in Egypt. It was obvious by then that Egyptian workers and employees, minorities and political activists had given up on their 'conviviality' with the state, and revolted against the subjection relationship. The deterioration of the economic situation, the suffocating political repression and the complete withdrawal of the state from the implicit social contract justified the shift. Moreover, the development and spread of consciousness of protest among the silent masses was facilitated by the active media coverage and pressures of the international and transnational agents mobilized the silenced strata. The media representation of the marginalized sectors (including cinema) bore eventually its effects. They finally came to perceive themselves as part of the social polity with rights which they pushed to insert within the crowded state agenda.

This mobility introduced new sets of meanings and symbols that permeated the social discourse and disentangled the ruled from the 'simulacrum'. The disengagement of the state from its social responsibility ignited a backlash among the neglected subjects. However, these oppositions and protests stimulated an unprecedented aggression on the part of the state. The political regime striving for the total encompassment of public affairs and prioritizing security purposes above all considerations had to react brutally to this threat. This violent reaction was intended to prolong the life of a deteriorating state which had lost its principal advantage viz a viz its subjects by abandoning the welfare project.

In this section, I paid exclusive attention to the mechanisms by which a sense of absurdity and a state incoherence were inscribed in the social consciousness in contemporary Egypt (2002-2008). These sensibilities, consequently, became almost an indispensable and essential component that influenced the actions of people and infused their daily comportment with impunity and violence, no matter what social class they belonged to. The media representations of the contemporary social reality as exemplified in *Heen Maysara* and *El Lemby* reflected this absurdity and incoherence. As I argue, the middle class produced cinema however confined such phenomena to *Ashwaiyyat* and

their residents in a desperate attempt to deny the expanse of chaos, violence, brutality and precariousness in the society at large. As I will detail in the next chapters analyzing the two movies, the predicament that encompassed a whole society struggling under the rule of the postcolonial state was projected on the poor classes. Additionally, the figure of the poor and *ashwaiyyat* dweller was constructed in such a manner as to render them the source of threat par excellence.

3.4. *Ashwaiyyat*: The Phenomena and the Discourse

One of the major consequences of the shift from the “welfare state project” to the “neoliberal state project”, as Ismail argues, was the decline in state provision of subsidized housing and the rising costs for real estate in planned areas of the city. This decline was behind the emergence of Cairo’s new popular quarters in the 1970s, as a result of the restless communal efforts to provide cheap housing and acquire residential spaces. Informal housing communities increased gradually during the last forty years¹¹⁷. Asef Bayat argues that the emergence of *ashwaiyyat* was a reaction to the stabilization and diffusion of urbanization outside of the cities and urban centers, primarily for economic reasons:

“The unaffordable prices of newly built formal housing exclude the low- income groups from the housing market. Thus, there remains no other option for young people, in particular those who intend to start a family, but to seek housing in the informal market. Hence, they venture out to join the “outsiders” who inhabit the large *ashwaiyyat*, the informal agglomerations surrounding metropolitan areas. Many of the inhabitants of these communities still depend on job opportunities within metropolitan areas, to which they commute daily. However, their residential communities are more than simply functional “dormitories”¹¹⁸.

Bayat’s argument presents urban expansion in *ashwaiyyat* as a reflection of the serious economic condition that renders informal urban spaces not only dwellings for the lower marginalized classes but also for the struggling lower middle class that may possess a fair educational level and a public profession. This fact challenges the classical conception in the dominant discourse about *ashwaiyyat* as spaces that breed lawlessness,

¹¹⁷ . Ismail, Salwa. 2006. *Political Life in Cairo’s New Quarters*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. P. 40.

¹¹⁸ . Bayat, Asef and Eric Denis. 2000. “Who is Afraid of *ashwaiyyat*? Urban Change and Politics in Egypt” in *Environment and Urbanization* 12; 185.

extremism, crime and poverty and re-situate them as integral part of the national economy and population. However, it sheds light on the nature of an internal dialogue swirling inside the Egyptian society about the transformations that occurred to the class hierarchy and the threats of decline and collapse preoccupying the minds of the Egyptian middle class.

3. 4. 1. *Ashwaiyyat* in social imaginary and discourse

Within a short span of time, the *ashwaiyy* quarters increased, acquiring new forms that reflected their informal infiltration of agricultural land, the unplanned construction and the illegal acquisition of the basic services like water, sewage and electricity¹¹⁹. One of the consequences of the neglect by the state is that the dwellers of these quarters acquired relative autonomy in establishing their houses on agricultural lands and providing living services like water and electricity illegally. These informal communities however escaped the regulatory power of the state and urban planning departments of the government. Discipline and organization of daily life became internal responsibilities carried out by the dwellers themselves ignoring the legal procedures and the role of state professionals. The continuous exclusion of *ashwaiyyat* from urban participation, primarily on the part of the state, encouraged the development of a social discourse that defined *ashwaiyyat* as ‘non-modern’ and ‘abnormal’ spaces and synthesized their dwellers as ‘outsiders’:

“Thus, those neighborhoods where buildings have no permits, where streets have no formal name, where men wear the traditional *galabiyya*, where women sit and socialize in front of their homes in the alleyways and where adults are largely active in the informal economy are considered as ‘non- modern’ and thus ‘abnormal’. Moreover, these settlements are not even thought of as part of the modern city since their inhabitants, mainly migrants, are seen to have, in effect, ‘ruralized’ their settlements”¹²⁰.

In the 1980s and 1990s, and due to the concentration of the terrorist Islamist groups in *ashwaiyyat* (particularly in *Imbaba*), the public discourse about *ashwaiyyat*

¹¹⁹ . Ismail, Salwa. 2006. *Political Life in Cairo's New Quarters*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. P.23.

¹²⁰ . Bayat, Asef and Eric Denis. 2000. “Who is Afraid of *ashwaiyyat*? Urban Change and Politics in Egypt” in *Environment and Urbanization* 12; 197.

turned from indifference to hostility¹²¹. Stressing the chaotic nature of these quarters and the vulgar and disorganized mannerisms of their inhabitants, the Egyptian media portrayed *ashwaiyyat* as an incubatory medium for terrorists, criminals and fanatics. Ismail describes how the confrontation between the Islamists and the Egyptian government influenced the public discourse about *ashwaiyyat*:

“Hence, state authorities started to see these communities not only as an urban management challenge but also as a security threat. In dealing with the Islamists and with the informal housing communities, the state-in particular its security apparatus and urban planning directorates - constructed the challenge in terms of an urban pathology. The communities and their residents were represented as problematic, marginal; disintegrate elements of the urban setting”¹²².

The official state media supported this hostile tone and played a positive role in coupling *ashwaiyyat* with terrorism and vulgarity in the consciousness of middle class recipients. The television series “*Al Aela*” (the family) 1994 and the film “*Al Erhaby*” (the terrorist) 1995 presented two similar characters of terrorists that grew up in *ashwaiyyat* and committed horrible crimes against innocent middle class people. However, after 2002, this discourse began to face problems due to the overlapping discourse in the independent media about injustice and inhumane lives of people in these quarters. Moreover, the Egyptian cinema integrated *ashwaiyyat* in its matrix and represented the issues and concerns of their dwellers in its recent productions.

In the last decade, *ashwaiyy quarters* (as they are usually labeled in the Egyptian media) reached one thousand and two hundred regions according to the latest statistics of the housing ministry. Fifteen millions of the Egyptian population (77 millions in 2008) are claimed to dwell in these communities¹²³. The growth and increase of *ashwaiyy* quarters stands as a counter-phenomena to the rising numbers of the recently emerging private compounds with lavish properties and luxurious equipments that express an urban polarization and social cleavage taking place in Egyptian society at present. The upper classes are intentionally distancing their private life from the sight and severity of poverty

¹²¹ . Ghannam, Farha 2002. *Remaking the Modern: Space, Relocation, and the Politics of Identity in a Global Cairo*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 2002.Pp. 4- 5.

¹²² . Ismail, Salwa. 2006. *Political Life in Cairo's New Quarters*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. P. 66.

¹²³ . *Al Youm Al Sabee* newspaper, November 2008.

and from the anticipated violence of the marginalized and impoverished groups dwelling in *ashwaiyyat*.

Chapter Four

Heen Maysara and *El Lemby*: The hidden fears of a threatened class

4.1. Introduction

In this chapter I outline the ideas and social debates surrounding the production and the big success of *Heen Maysara* and *El Lemby* in the Egyptian box office. I aspire to present different views that convey a general image of how the middle class imagines and constitutes its relation to the poor and how such imaginary reflects the precarious positionality I detailed in chapter 3. I rely on comments of regular viewers, critics and film makers and on the published literature about the films and the current situation of the Egyptian middle class.

4.2. “*Heen Maysara*”: The Debate and the Predicament

“From the very beginning of *Heen Maysara* (Whenever it is possible), I knew that no sympathetic relationship could be established between me and this film”, Ahmed Awny, a mechanical engineering young student argues in a personal interview. Awny (21 years old) was speaking about the *avant-titre* of the film in the form of a photomontage of several Egyptian newspapers’ headlines announcing the danger of the growing *ashwaiyyat* in Egypt. Khaled Youssef, the director of the film, collected captions like ‘The tumor of *ashwaiyyat* is spreading all over Egypt’ ‘Tombs turned into haphazard houses’, and ‘Enough disasters’ that were laid against a bloody red background. In contrast to what the images exposed, a rhythmic introductory song by a *shaabi*¹²⁴ voice complaining:

¹²⁴ . The term *shaabi* is a “loaded cultural trope that demarcates people, places, and things, as well as modes of dress, behavior, and communication commonly associated with traditional or popular class locales. Moreover, *shaabi* recalls several associations with vulgarity, backwardness and lower class chants”. Grippo, James. 2006. "The Fool Sings a Hero's Song" *Website: Transnational Broadcasting Studies*. <http://www.tbsjournal.com/Grippo.html>

“I am not lucky enough. And it doesn’t fit me to fall in love. They say even the blessing of sight is too much for us. And if we tried to find happiness they will destroy our universe”

From the very first minutes, contradictory messages about the film were revealed; slogans about the threat of *ashwaiyyat* to the rest of society, yet the lyrics spoke about the deep pains of the people dwelling in them. Khaled Youssef and Nasser Abd Al Rahman, director and scriptwriter, decided to address a popular half-hazard quarter and deliver a shocking image of its reality to the middle class from which comes the majority of the audience of contemporary Egyptian cinema. Khaled Youssef asserted this intention:

“*Heen Maysara* is a warning message for the whole society, government and people, that the *ashwaiyy* quarters surrounding Cairo are occult bombs that may explode anytime and for the weakest reasons in the face of the sophisticated neighborhoods. The film also stresses that these areas became centers that provide incubation for the destructive fanatics, homeless street children and unemployed people who threaten those people around them by every means.”¹²⁵

“He is expressing the anxiety of his class; he makes a film about poor people to avoid their explosion in the face of the middle class to which he belongs. He even said that he directs his film to the government which is totally unthinkable, I couldn’t believe this...” Awny resumed in our interview with remarkable irony. Youssef, though not hiding the targeted audience and the ideological frame he is working within, always claimed that he possessed a natural inclination to advocate for the poor classes and their rights which is reflected in his movies. He also said that his film is speaking about the completely disorganized society we all live in, where the political decisions, success, failure and death are controlled by totally haphazard factors¹²⁶.

Youssef narrated in his film a tragedy based on three main stories occurring in and around an informal poor quarter in Cairo. The first one was the story of *Adel Hashisha* (a nickname related to hash) the principal male character in the film, who struggles with his extremely constraining economic conditions. Compelled to afford the expenses of living for his mother and sister’s numerous children, Hashisha finds himself

¹²⁵ . Al Sharq Al Awsat newspaper, December 2007. P.12.

¹²⁶ . Ibid, 2007.

involved in some illegal activities including drug dealing and thuggery as a means of earning money and acquiring notability and relative authority inside his district. Hashisha partly cooperates with the official security apparatus in reporting information about Islamist groups working undercover in the locality. Security officers, in return, approve of his position as an authority figure, thug and drug dealer. The film portrayed the relationship between Hashisha and the senior security officer (responsible for his district) that goes through ups and downs throughout the film.

The second story was that of Nahed, a poor girl that got involved in a sexual relationship with Hashisha and became pregnant. When Hashisha rejected Nahed, her lovechild using the keyword ‘Come back *heen maysara*’ or ‘whenever I have means to afford our living’, Nahed escaped the house of her mother and her step father that keeps harassing her relentlessly. She abandoned her son and fled to Alexandria in an attempt to start living on her own. Given her status of poverty and illiteracy, Nahed worked as a peddler until an old lady has pity on her when she saw her sleeping in the street, and took her into her apartment which had a sea view in Alexandria. After the sudden death of the lady, Nahed had to go back to the street, when the lady’s cruel sons accused her of stealing their mother’s properties. During her constant attempts to find an alternative, Nahed was subjected to rape and sexual abuse by almost all the people she encountered in her journey (a young gambler and his friends, some drug addicts and a rich homosexual woman who offered her to work as her maid). Eventually, Nahed became more submissive to practice a sort of masked prostitution and worked for a businessman who exploited her body for his business interests.

The sex scenes in the film were received with an intense hostility from the conservative and religious members of the Egyptian society, particularly those depicting a homosexual relationship between two women, rape scene, and sexual promiscuity among *ashwaiyyat* inhabitants and street children. Islamic preachers in *Al Azhar*’s Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs¹²⁷ and members of the Egyptian parliament

¹²⁷ . *Al Azhar* was founded in 975 as a mosque and university. It is the chief centre of Arabic literature and Sunni Islamic learning. It is associated with *Al-Azhar* supreme council of Islamic affairs. The university's mission includes the propagation of Islamic religion and culture. To this end, its Islamic scholars (*Ulama*) have the right to render edicts (*fatwas*) on disputes submitted to them from all over the Sunni Islamic world

demanding the film banned and that Khaled Youssef be charged of 'assaulting the general belief and value system in the Egyptian society after performing a scene of 'lesbianism' between the actresses Ghada Abd Al Razik and Somayya Al Khashab'¹²⁸.

In the TV program "Al Kahira el youm" (Cairo Today), directly after the public screening of *Heen Maysara*, the prominent Egyptian anchor Amr Adib interviewed Youssef and the actors in the film. Amr introduced the episode with the following speech:

"Prostitution, incest, adultery, illegal pregnancy, rape, hash and cocaine, homosexuality among women, all in one place. This film lacks only an earthquake, a flood and a volcano. It is a black document, no, it is sheer blackness. And mark that, every five minutes the police attacks a certain site of prostitution, gambling or drug dealing. It is a very exaggerated representation of reality. In addition, this film was supposed to be classified 'to watch with parental guidance'. The head of the censorship apparatus on artistic productions should quit his work. I am a liberal man, but I wouldn't allow my son to watch two women sleeping together with twenty pounds"¹²⁹

Similarly, in her TV program "The Difficult Choice"¹³⁰ on the official state TV, the journalist Lamis Al Hadidy (the wife of Amr Adib) attacked Youssef aggressively asking him: "Would you dare taking your son to watch this movie and see promiscuity, homosexuality and *ashwaiyyat*?!! ... " Youssef answered: "Definitely, I took him already, these scenes are essential because the main story is about how those people capitalize on their body to earn their living as they have nothing else." Youssef was referring to the scene between the two actresses when Nahed said: "Don't you have but my body to take advantage of, men and women?" The lady replied: "And do you have something else to be desired dear?" It is noteworthy that the scene was quite short (40 seconds) and did not contain any explicit exposure of the actresses' bodies.

regarding proper conduct for Muslim individuals or societies. Al-Azhar also trains Egyptian government appointed preachers in proselytization (da'wa). However, in the recent years, the council scholars interfered heavily in judging and evaluating artistic productions especially in cinema.

¹²⁸ . The website "Aks El Seir":

http://www.aksalser.com/?page=view_news&id=24793128973a465f1930eed64f4ed57b&ar=491652793
Accessed in December 2008.

¹²⁹ . "Cairo today", a daily talk show, presented on Orbit satellite network, an Arab TV station.

¹³⁰ . "The difficult choice", TV program presented on the Egyptian official television by the journalist Lamis Al Hadidy, Channel One, in September 27th, 2008.

The way Adib and Al Hadidy ironically phrased their argument on the one hand, and the adoption of such an extremist hostile discourse by religious and juridical institutions on the other reflected facets of the intense debate raised by *Heen Maysara* when screened in Egyptian theatres. Moreover, they exposed a deeper level of aversion and anxiety towards the issues disclosed by the film and represented as part of the social reality in *ashwaiyyat*.

It is noteworthy that the third plot line in the film was the story of Nahed and Hashisha's lovechild that was sold to a well-to-do upper middle class family where the woman was unable to get pregnant. The family got rid of the boy as soon as the lady became pregnant. The boy grew up as a homeless street child living with a big group of children in the dusky foul corners of the immense city of Cairo. One of the hot points of the debate about *Heen Maysara* was its scrutiny of the details of life of the group of adult homeless boys and girls mapping out a picture of sexual promiscuity and beggary usually met with disgust and rejection by members of upper classes. Ayman (the name given to the boy) was claimed to be the father of another love child of one of the girls in the group. After a quarrel about the real father, Ayman accepts the responsibility and decides to take his new family and leave Cairo to try earning his living in a more merciful place. *Heen Maysara* ends with Hashisha, Nahed and Ayman taking the same train, without meeting or knowing each other, heading towards a gloomy future that awaits them after escaping the pitiless capital. Khaled Youssef wrote the following apology on the final titer: "I apologize for the people if I could not present their life as I saw it... Actually I found the reality too cruel to be presented on the screen."

However, this tragic view of the reality survived in *ashwaiyyat* did not appeal to a wide range of critics and audience. Tarek Mosbah, critic and journalist, viewed the film as based on a 'totalitarian' idea that dominated the whole plot and its diverse stories: poverty and coercion results in hero necessarily becoming a religious extremist and the heroin choosing moral deviation: "The film guides the viewer to one vision which is the

director's, and deploys the human suffering of those people in a vulgar commercial context (referring to sex scenes and homosexual relationships).”¹³¹

In one of the collective gatherings I held to examine people's interpretations after watching the film, Sherif Amer, an Egyptian engineer (26 years old), commented: “I don't like this dramatization by Khaled Youssef, I do agree that those people are really poor and that the police is brutal. Yet, I would not believe this homeless boy admitting being the father of the baby and refusing to repeat the cycle as his parents did.” Sherif's impression about the idealization of some characters in the film and the exaggerated victimization of them is not understandable for May El Sayed (25 years old engineer), another member of the group who reacted promptly: “But we cannot deny a feeling of shame after watching the film, this is the reality, naked and painful, and we do nothing for them.” In *Al Riyad* newspaper, the critic Samir Farid stated: “This is one of the best films of Youssef, and this is the real status in Egypt”¹³². The famous director, Daod Abd El Sayed, who previously presented *ashwaiyyat* and poor classes in two masterpieces *Al Kit Kat* (1991) and *Sarek El Farah* (The Thief of Happiness- 1994), agreed with Farid: “Regardless of the artistic quality, it is important to see again films that treat such critical causes and crises survived by the Egyptian society instead of films without any value”¹³³.

From another perspective, the film may have gained such sympathy because it tackled a topic that in recent years already pervaded Egyptian media stories and articles. Many writers and researchers described a certain commonality between the reality that the middle and upper classes survive in their localities and that of *ashwaiyy* quarters. The scenes of chaotic practices and the informal law and thuggery were part of lived reality in contemporary Egyptian society regardless of the class position or the economic situation. Diaa Rashwan¹³⁴ argued:

“Tracing the current accidents of the business upper class in Egypt in recent years, demonstrate that we are facing a quiet similar behavioral model to that in *ashwaiyyat*. The only difference is the amount of wealth and the places and

¹³¹ . *Al Riyad* newspaper, January 8th, 2008.

¹³² . Ibid, 2008.

¹³³ . A. F. P. (Agence France- presse), January 7th, 2008.

¹³⁴ . P. H. D. Diaa Rashwan, researcher in Al Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies.

relations involved in those incidents. Drug trade, drug consumption, hiring *baltaggiya* (thugs) or bodyguards, illegal acquisition of state properties, sexual violations and perversions, polygamy and physical aggression not ending by killing for vengeance and other 'ghastly' scenes. They all look analogous are common to those who lie at the bottom of the society and those who monopolize the top. The difference between what happens in the bottom and what happens on the top is that the former looks primitive and crude without make-up or beautification, all the illegal or criminal behaviors are obvious, while the latter is always bound by secrecy behind the fences of the closed areas inhabited by upper class members"¹³⁵.

What Rashwan identified is consistent with a vague sense of fear that prevails among some Egyptian intellectuals and lay people about the shrinkage of the middle class and the widening gap between classes. In one of my interviews, Ahmed Fawzy, a young Egyptian film maker (31 years old), admitted this fear:

"The middle class nowadays is living a nightmare, a man works in a bank for twenty hours to be able to buy an apartment and improve his social status, yet the chaotic rules of the market make him always insecure no matter what his capabilities are, he wants to escape his present conditions, it's decomposing and you have to choose, to ascend or descend, this insecurity is now preoccupying middle class minds".

Galal Amin postulates different reasons rendering the Egyptian middle class less distinguishable from the lower classes. Among these reasons, as Amin argued, are the high unemployment rates, diminishing numbers of Egyptian labor in Gulf countries since 1986, vanishing state subsidization and expenditure following agreements with the World Bank in 1991 and increased rates of consumption among classes¹³⁶. Amin describes the middle class predicament as follows:

"One walks the streets, uses the various transport means, goes to cafes and restaurants and universities, sees young boys and girls in their schools and walking by the Nile, and one sees nothing but 'middle class'. No one looks distinguished from the other from a class perspective, except for poor exhausted peddlers, skinny security officers, or poor farmers. Except for these examples, all the rest look 'middle class'. The question is whether this class disappeared or dissolved in the lower classes that both of them form a big amalgamated mass struggling with the same problems and having the same hopes (or rather having

¹³⁵ . Rashwan, Diaa. 2008. "The Swinging Egypt between *ashwaiyyat* of The Bottom and *ashwaiyyat* of The Top", *Al Masry Al Youm*, 16 August. P 15.

¹³⁶ . Amin, Galal. 1995. *Egypt's Economic Predicament: A Study in the Interaction of External Pressure, Political Folly and Social Tension in Egypt 1960- 1990*. Published by BRILL, 1995

lost the same hopes). It is now very difficult to categorize them according to the old classification”.¹³⁷

Amin with such a sorrowful article adopts a classical middle class discourse that has dominated the Egyptian media over the last ten years. This discourse links the crumbling of a threatened middle class to the broader collapse of the ambitions of the national welfare project and modernity (see chapter three). However, while stressing the importance of the middle class and glorifying its achievements, middle class intellectuals cannot hide an envious appreciation of the upper classes and a deeply seated despise for the poor people dwelling in *ashwaiyyat*. Rashwan’s language is but one illustration:

“The traditional view is that such a pervert and disfigured social model reins the *Ashwaiyyat* at the bottom of society, but when it prevails at the top of it, this means that the whole society is moving towards a tremendous disaster. However, the rapidity and danger of this disaster increase when the middle class (always the guardian of the stability of the society) had reached a complete decline in all the economic, social, cultural and moral dimensions of the word. This decline happened after the transformations carried out by the political regime under the leadership of the business class due to a set of powerful knock outs that dismantled its internal coherence”¹³⁸.

Farha Ghannam, in her fieldwork in *Zawiyya*¹³⁹, maps out how the middle and upper classes view the newly constructed urban expansions of Cairo and their inhabitants. She describes how they perceive them as remote places housing drug dealers, criminals and trouble makers. *Ashwaiyyat* in Ghannam’s work, are publicly seen as places lacking the authenticity of the old Cairo quarters and the luxury of its rich ones. They are considered outcasts on the urban landscape and rather representing as she depicts extensions of the ‘*rifi* (rural) subculture’ that bears attachments to the local custom in the first place.

Loathe for *ashwaiyyat* residents was tackled by *Heen Maysara* in a climactic point where the anxiety of the educated and supposedly privileged middle class is extensively provoked by the economic difficulties. Their reactions, whether positive or

¹³⁷ . Galal Amin’s article in *Al Masry Al Youm* newspaper, in August 19th, 2008.

¹³⁸ . Rashwan, Diaa. 2008. “The Swinging Egypt between *Ashwai’iyat* of The Bottom and *Ashwai’iyat* of The Top”, *Al Masry Al Youm*, 16 August.

¹³⁹ . Ghannam, Farha. 2002. *Remaking the Modern: Space, Relocation, and the Politics of Identity in a Global Cairo*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

negative, can be read as expressive of how they see themselves and how they relate to the 'others' dwelling in *ashwaiyyat*, while haunted by obsessions of ascension and decline.

A conversation between Adib in "Cairo today" and Wafaa Amer, one of the actresses in *Heen Maysara*, bespeaks the distance between the representation and the venture of the public gaze of the middle class towards the poor:

Wafaa: I exposed myself to the sun, I acted without make-up, to look like 'those people'. I cut my nails for my hands to look like their hands in reality.

Amr (*mocking*): Anyways, we could 'smell' the reality on our seats in cinema theatres.

Wafaa: No, smell is not part of my performance, I used perfumes though...

4.3. "El Lemby": Against the rhetoric

Unlike *Heen Maysara*, the film makers of *El Lemby* announced from the very first scenes that they will make fun of the rhetoric of the traditional middle class movies¹⁴⁰. After a long cynical chat with a police officer asking to see his ID, El Lemby gets back to his district, stoned as usual, singing with apparent incoherence: "All the people stood up witnessing how I found the bases of glory by my own... ", the famous verse of the poem "Egypt speaks about herself" by acclaimed poet Hafez Ibrahim. The Egyptian legendary singer Um Kulthum sang this poem in October 30th 1952, marking the beginning of a new era of independence of the Egyptian state. Since then, this song has been played in all national celebrations signifying the values of independence and liberation while referencing to a glorious past and a promising future.

Regardless of the impossibility in real life of choosing this song as one to reiterate while going back home stoned at night (given its difficult classical Arabic poetry, character of the subject, and El Lemby's impaired pronunciation), the film-makers insisted on invoking the song directly after the humiliating chat with the officer who kicked El Lemby out of the street of a descent quarter. "The emergence of *El Lemby* was against the moralities of the middle class who worships superman and positive heroes"

¹⁴⁰ . See Walter Armbrust description of the main themes about middle class in Egyptian cinema in chapter three.

wrote Wael Abd Elfattah in ‘*Soot El Ummah*’ newspaper¹⁴¹ analyzing the phenomena of new cinema stars in the contemporary Egyptian cinema. Abd Elfattah was referring to the simple story about a frustrated man trying desperately to earn his living through minor jobs (renting bicycles for tourists in Sharm El Sheikh and selling lamb liver sandwiches in the street) and never succeeding. The perpetual failure of El Lemby was the main theme that substituted the conventional theme of ascension that dominates the stories of the Egyptian cinema and particularly those films starred by middle and upper class heroes. Ahmed Fawzy (29 years old, film-maker) thinks that Mohamed Saad had a class consciousness that disappeared soon after *El Lemby* (part 1). Fawzy argues: “He ended up becoming rich at the end of his movies and having a nice house and a beautiful wife, like 80- 90% of the movies nowadays, the ascension theme is indispensable. The remaining 10% used to present the absurdity theme like *El Lemby*”

In 2002, the actor Mohamed Saad (1965- present) starred *El Lemby* in which he presented a caricaturist profile of a poor *ashwaiyy* quarter resident who cannot find appropriate work and keeps searching for a venue to make money and pay a debt of another resident. The film was the biggest box- office of the year and continued to be shown in movie theatres for seventeen consecutive weeks with unprecedented revenues of twenty two million Egyptian pounds¹⁴². *El Lemby* had a distorted linguistic structure and a creepy pronunciation of words in addition to the constantly stoned mannerisms due to his continuous consumption of hash (always available in his quarter). All these features were deployed to present a heavily sarcastic comedy that set new records in the number of its cinema viewers.

Safinaz Kazem¹⁴³ writing in *Al Hilal* magazine in September 2002 described *El Lemby* as a popular hero who used a language that expressed his relation to the difficult circumstances and the daily oppression that he faced by bureaucrats and police officers in his continuous attempts to find a job. *El Lemby*’s language had an unusual logic where the words are detached from their original contexts to get allocated in totally different

¹⁴¹ . Wael Abd Al Fattah’s article: “The making of stars in Egypt”. Published in *Soot Al Ummah* newspaper. August 5th, 2002. P12.

¹⁴² . Hammond, Andrew 2007. *Popular Culture in the Arab World: Arts, Politics and the Media*. Cairo: American University Press in Cairo. Pp. 137- 158.

¹⁴³ . An Egyptian journalist and critique. She wrote in *Al Hilal* magazine issue in September 2002 an article about “*El Lemby*” claiming it is one of the best Egyptian movies along history!!.

context for sarcastic purposes. The same phenomenon was described in Togo by C. Toulabor in his study about 'political derision' in 1986¹⁴⁴. Mbembe cites Toulabor explaining the phenomenon:

“He shows how, under one- party rule, citizens developed ways of separating words or phrases from their conventional meanings and using them in quite other sense. He illustrates how they thus built a whole vocabulary, equivocal and ambiguous, parallel to the official discourse”¹⁴⁵

According to Kazem, *El Lemby* talked incoherently and uses vague sounds to deal with the fragmentation of his reality. Incoherence and vagueness of language were not only symbolic of a cynical attitude but also verbalized the high sense of bitterness and absurdity dominating the dramatic situations. The hero in the film was living a messy life devoid of meaning and achievement inside his impoverished hectic quarter. Deprived from the basic needs of housing, work and dignified life, *El Lemby*, in Kazem's view, symbolized the hurtful case of a majority of the poor and marginalized Egyptians imbued with resentment and repressed anger.

However, *El Lemby* succeeded in all movie theatres including those in Cairo's huge and glamorous shopping malls where viewers are mostly upper middle class youngsters who probably never had been to slums and *ashwaiyy* quarters before. The majority of Egyptian intellectuals, artists and media professionals heavily criticized the film and accused Saad and the director of the film Wael Ehsan of spoiling young generations, corrupting the Arabic language and misrepresenting social moralities and ideals¹⁴⁶. Tarek Al Shenawi¹⁴⁷ the well known cinema critic asserts:

“From my experience and my very intimate connection and loyalty to the art of cinema, I feel guilty calling '*El Lemby*' a film, and despite that I can see the societal need that brought this character to stardom, However, I would not merge both things and admit that it is a good film”

¹⁴⁴ . Toulabor, C. 1986. “LE TOGO SOUS ÉYADÉMA”. KARTHALA.

¹⁴⁵ . Mbembe, Achille. 2001. “The Aesthetics of Vulgarly” In *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley: University of California Press. P. 105.

¹⁴⁶ . Different newspapers' writings criticized “El Lemby” as part of the revival of the Egyptian cinema with ‘low- culture’ blockbuster comedies but that nevertheless had tapped into a desire among the burgeoning younger generation for new faces and films that deal with the realities of today's youth (Hammond 2007: 139).

¹⁴⁷ . Personal interview with Al Shenawi, October 2008.

Interviews and conversations of viewers produced similar reactions: “There is no film, it is a sequence of disconnected scenes meant only to make the audience laugh” commented Myvel Seddik¹⁴⁸ (27 years old) in a personal interview, refusing any considerate descriptions about the film as representing a bitter social reality. Saif Salah (31 years old) disagrees totally with this opinion during an accidental conversation about the movie:

“*El Lemby* may be a bad movie from technical point of view, but I am definitely with that, it is impossible to be dramatically logical in such a film, he was rebelling against everything even the idea of the dramatic sequence itself, his idea was that all these clichés are nonsense, we cannot judge *El Lemby* from this perspective, it has other aesthetic values. I think that this vision happened unconsciously and if it was planned consciously it would be a great film that theorizes the absurdity of our reality, characters who behave without logic, the soundtrack that does not relate to the scenes; but it is more likely to believe that it is a mere commercial exploitation of the previous success of *El Lemby* character in *Al Nazer*.”¹⁴⁹

If we contemplate the set of opinions and reactions to *Heen Maysara* and *El Lemby*, we can deduce that most part of the debate was related to their conformity to the social reality in contemporary Egypt, not only in poor quarters but also in the supposedly well-off ones. And though media productions are usually received as imaginary representation of the reality not reality itself, the provoked public opinion could not help getting engaged with the assumptions implied in both films. The receptive audience (in my sample) spontaneously tended to sum up their reactions to the films by stating to what extent they are real and to what degree such precariousness is prevalent in the Egyptian society altogether. The researcher Amr El Shboky¹⁵⁰ goes further in affirming that the whole society is facing decline always pointing out *ashwaiyyat* as the bad model that all society joins:

“When an entire country turns to be a meeting point of *ashwaiyyat*, no distinction between rich and poor, educated and illiterate, a refined or a poor quarter, the whole people lives in mobile *ashwaiyyat*; in houses, streets, work and even beaches, it becomes difficult for this *ashwaiyy* (disorganized) country to escape any sort of crises, especially that its capability of contrivance is fed up since we

¹⁴⁸ . Myvel Seddik, hardware engineer in a multinational corporate, in a structured interview in September 2007.

¹⁴⁹ . Conversation with Saif Salah, Egyptian bank accountant, in November 2007.

¹⁵⁰ .. Amr Al Shboky. Researcher in Al Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies.

are very close- much more than the state imagines- to the end of a phase of the affirmation of chaos and the absence of law”¹⁵¹.

This anxious tone of Al Shobky affirms again the fears that prevailed among the Egyptian middle class. My argument is that films like *El Lemby* and *Heen Maysara* could be viewed as a reaction to these fears. The middle class – represented in both producers and consumers – tries to reset the distance that separates them from *ashwaiyyat* through this fear. Egyptian middle class viewers project their obsessions about decline and joining poor classes on the *ashwaiyyat* characters presented in cinema. The ritual of watching cinema as evidenced in this case implies processes of classification and exclusion. The middle class re-defines the poor people as something to which it does not belong. The de-humanization of the poor in *ashwaiyyat* by turning them into ‘creatures’ that behave, move and talk in a completely different way than ‘ours’ affirms their claimed threat (see Khaled Youssef’s caption p. 60) and legitimizes the social exclusion practiced against them.

I also argue that the hegemony of the state in contemporary Egypt, under the current rule of Hosni Mubarak (1981-present), propels the internal dialogue of fear among the middle class and enhances its rush to rearrange the class map in Egypt. The social subconscious, eager to achieve this rearrangement, is translated on cinema screens. Characterizing and synthesizing the poor as the rejected ‘other’ in *El Lemby* and *Heen Maysara*, sensitizes the middle class against the naturalization of the threat of poverty and collapse. Moreover, it guards the levels of social denial of the prevalent violence and the disorganization that infiltrate the comportment of the middle and upper classes in a very similar fashion to *ashwaiyyat* (see Rashwan and Shobky observations detailed earlier). In what follows, I investigate how these arguments are realized in both films and how the influence of the sociopolitical context and the middle class predicament contributed to their making and reception.

¹⁵¹ . Al Shobky, Amr. 2008. “Egyptian Observations”, *Al Masry Al Youm*, 14 August.

4.4. Social Exclusion and Representing the De-politicized

“In the old days, a very big battle occurred in the country, during the central security forces rebel, the tanks (*Dababat* said the wrong way *Dabdabat*) were in the streets, and they announced a curfew (*Hazr tagawwol* said *Haz’ tagawwol* to mean ‘straining’), your brother didn’t care and went down the street, me too went to watch this *haz’ tagawwol*, we walked in the streets in the middle of *dabdabat*, nobody asked us who you are or even felt our presence, your brother said: What is this? We don’t exist or we are invisible? It seems *Adel* that we came to this world and we’ll leave it unnoticed. I don’t know why I had this urge to have children, I swear (to divorce my wife) I am a donkey, thanks god the doctor told me I am infertile, Would I have children to come to the world and leave it unnoticed?! Forget about it... “

Fathi, the friend of Adel Hashisha in *Heen Maysara*, was narrating his story to Hashisha by the Nile after making sure that his infertility disorder is untreatable. Fathi kept denying this fact for a long time, living for years with his wife and accusing her of being the reason behind not having kids. Fathi even married another younger wife claiming that he is going to have a ‘twin’. Fathi who smokes hash unremittingly and has a distorted pronunciation resembles *El Lemby* in many features. The tonal shift that Fathi makes in his pronunciation of the complicated terms used in the official discourse (like *Hazr Tagawwol*) to change their meanings to metaphors, always obsessed with body orifices, ignites popular laughter for their implicit criticism of the commandment as Mbembe states:

“Beyond specifically the mouth, belly and phallus, the body is the principal locale of the idioms and fantasies used in depicting power. If indeed it is the festivities and celebrations that are the vehicles for giving expression to the commandment and for staging its displays of magnificence and prodigality, then the body in question is first a body that eats and drinks, and second a body that is open in both ways: hence the significance given to the orifices, and the central part they play in people’s political humor”¹⁵²

¹⁵² . Mbembe, Achille. 2001. “The Aesthetics of Vulgarly” In *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley: University of California Press. P. 107.

The similarity in language between *Fathi* and *El Lemby* is one of the features of a profound sentiment of meaninglessness and disintegration. Wael Abd Elfattah describes *El Lemby* as a defeated hero:

“Nothing makes him a hero but his repetitive defeats in life. Not an ‘anti- hero’ like Robert De Nero in “Taxi driver”, *El Lemby* and his resemblances are heroes without heroism, they would not support fake moralities, their values are harsh, everyday without big ideas, sensual without heavy mentality”¹⁵³

Abd Elfattah presumes that this is the theme that the audience liked much: “Seeing themselves in a mirror and rediscovering the image lost in media representations that do not usually admit but ‘cultivated’ images about the poor”. Many writers and analysts were preoccupied with the secret of the huge success of both characters and their great appeal to the audience. And like Abd Elfattah, many of them admitted that audience sympathy is due to a mysterious feeling that these representations could grasp the core of this audience’s behavior: “You know what, I feel *El Lemby* is not like real life, he’s too naïve and kind, and the film is very abstract, his incoherence and disorganization is more of a simulation of the mental status of the whole country”, commented Saif Salah after the collective group watching of *El Lemby* (part 1). In his scrutiny of caricaturist representations in Cameroon, Achille Mbembe explains how the audience experiences such a moment of empathy with characters in representations:

“He manages to abolish and maintain distance at one and the same time, since he is both remote and close, the obverse and the reverse, that ‘something’ that is *present for us* not only because it is displayed and we experience it- *we experience the thing*- but, more decisively, because it is the very thing of our experience: tangible, palpable, and visible, but at the same time secret and distant- in short, a ‘non- localized universal presence’”.¹⁵⁴

The feelings of being marginalized and unaccountable described by Fathi in the scene by the Nile are very common with *El Lemby*. After one of the attacks when the police crushed his cart for selling lamb liver sandwiches, *El Lemby* told his friends while smoking hash:

¹⁵³ . Wael Abd Al Fattah. 2002. “The making of stars in Egypt”. *Soot Al Ummah* newspaper. August 5th, 2002.

¹⁵⁴ . Mbembe, Achille. 2001. “The Thing and its Doubles” In *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley: University of California Press. P. 153.

“Why I wasn’t born a chicken? At least I would only lay eggs, but you know what, even if I was a hen there still will be an unbearable cock who gives me hard time, like this one who smashed my cart today, I kept screaming and begging him ‘please sir, I will lose everything, and he didn’t even reply”

El Lemby and Fathi in many respects were a prototype of the ‘common person’ in Egypt; vulgarly carved from day to day by the harshness of the situation, humiliated by the police, haunted by the search for subsistence and the fear of having nothing. This prototype is not necessarily related to being in *ashwaiyyat*, poor, or uneducated as the public discourse tends to correlate them. Farha Ghannam denies this correlation in her account about *Al Zawiyya*¹⁵⁵ in Egypt:

“There are families with relatively high income, especially those whose members are skilled workers or who work in oil- producing countries, and there are unskilled workers with little income who can hardly sustain their families. A man may, for example, work during the day as a teacher in a professional school where he earns around one hundred Egyptian pounds per month and work as house painter in the evening, which earns him more than two hundred pounds”¹⁵⁶.

This description of the locality considered an *ashwaiyyat* befits many traditional middle class families in old Cairo like *Mounira* and *Sayyeda Zeinab*. Similarly, the level of education does not guarantee that the educated middle class would not speak or behave like *El Lemby*: “My friend with a bachelor of commerce from the University of Alexandria speaks exactly like *El Lemby*”, said Sherif Amer (in the gathering to watch the movie). Bryan Bary¹⁵⁷ asserts that social exclusion cannot only be premised on income or education levels but is also related to several parameters of inclusion within the public frameworks of approval and participation:

“Social exclusion is a distinguishable phenomenon from poverty and economic inequality. However, there is a correlation between the distribution of income and social exclusion though not a direct one, because this relation emerges through surviving a common fate and participating in the public institutions. The individual income’s relation to his/ her ability of participation is dependent on the extent to

¹⁵⁵ . *Al Zawiyya* was established in the seventies to reallocate people from *Bulaq* occurred. *Al Zawiyya* was claimed to be a *Ashwai’y* zone where fanatics formed militant groups which resulted finally into series of sectarian clashes in 1976.

¹⁵⁶ . Ghannam, Farha 2002. *Remaking the Modern: Space, Relocation, and the Politics of Identity in a Global Cairo*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 2002.

¹⁵⁷ . Bary, Bryan. 2002. “Social exclusion and social isolation and the distribution of income” In *Understanding Social Exclusion*. Hills, John, Julian Le Grand and David Piachaud (eds.). Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2002.

which all people profit from these institutions for free and with big support from the part of the state”¹⁵⁸.

Bary’s analysis challenges us to perceive social exclusion of certain social strata as more general phenomenon, where state policies and government practices are at stake. Bary identifies social exclusion as “the case of an individual in the society dwelling in a certain region but for reasons beyond his/ her control cannot participate in the everyday activities of citizens in his society while he/she is positive in the desire to participate”¹⁵⁹. Assef Bayat asserts that in the Egyptian context, *ashwaiyyat* cannot be simply classified as spaces that harbor only the poor:

“The *ashwaiyyat* are not simply exclusive poverty belts but the home of many middle-class urbanites, professionals and civil servants. What perhaps may breed lawlessness is not the cultural essentials of residents, but, rather, the consequences of their being perceived as outsiders and of the density and lack of spatial clarities of the communities. An outsider community, even if located in the heart of a city, by definition lacks street names, house numbers, maps, a police presence, paved roads for police cars and, thus, state control”¹⁶⁰

In her study about the film “*Salam Bombay*”¹⁶¹ Salwa Bakr argues that the implementation of the capitalist modes of production in third world countries in particular, neglects planning for connecting economic production to people’s actual needs. This discrepancy results in the social exclusion and marginalization of the human resources that exceed the requirements of the production system. This group of people, as Bakr states, “does not possess any skills or expertise that qualifies them to participate in public affairs or public decisions or even in the individual daily affairs that matter for them”.

This argument may partly interpret how the representation of the *ashwaiyyat* residents in *El Lemby* and *Heen Maysara* tackled the issue of social exclusion that encompassed not only the lower classes who suffer from the lack of education and skills, but also the middle class that struggles with the implementation of the neoliberal

¹⁵⁸ . Ibid, P.102.

¹⁵⁹ . Ibid, P. 46.

¹⁶⁰ . Bayat, Asef and Eric Denis 2000. “Who is Afraid of Ashwaiyyat? Urban Change and Politics in Egypt” in *Environment and Urbanization*. 12; 185.

¹⁶¹ . Bakr, Salwa. 1998. “Salam Bombay: On underdevelopment and desultoriness” in *Alif (Journal of Comparative Poetics)*. No 18. P. 125.

economic programs in Egypt (See Chapter 3). This representation of the marginalized stimulated the audience to re-think the traits of the *ashwaiyyat* residents, as presented in the films, within the framework of social exclusion. These characteristics could be summed up in the following: lack of skills and expertise in any of the fields of production or social services, absence from all sorts of economic activity, being invisibly on the national/public income charts, and disengagement from all public institutions like education and law. These criteria, in my view, reduce the relation between this group of people and the state to the limited boundaries of the policing and disciplining institutions as criminality turns to be the only linkage left between “those people” and the civic arena surrounding them

4.5. The Egyptian State and Disseminating the Discourse of Absurdity

When we contemplate some changes in state/citizen relation under Mubarak we can better grasp mechanisms of exclusion from the social and political public spheres. This exclusion can be interpreted as part of techniques of the state aiming at maintaining its hegemony on the political life in Egypt and excluding its opponents from the circles of power that influence the decision-making processes. In this respect, it would be important to follow the study of Michel-Rolph Trouillot¹⁶² about the way the Duvaliers in Haiti solidified their dictatorship between 1957- 1964. Trouillot distinguishes between a conventional dictatorship and an unconventional dictatorship that deploys different mechanisms that escalate its abuse of power to unprecedented limits. He identifies a set of processes that induced a qualitative change in the nature of authoritarianism. I rely on his analysis to interpret transformations in the state mechanisms of action in Egypt (2002-2008):

“Put thus, it becomes immediately apparent that the differences that distinguished the regimes of the two Duvaliers from those that preceded them were not merely quantitative. Sometime around 1961- 1965, the accumulation of these differences and the extent of their growth transformed differences of degree into structural

¹⁶² . Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. 1990. “State against Nation” In *Haiti: State against Nation, the Origins and Legacy of Duvalierism*. New York: Monthly Review Press. Pp. 163- 185.

innovations. The state had broken through the culturally specific limits of authoritarianism.”¹⁶³

By “the culturally specific limits of authoritarianism” Trouillot means a set of implicit social codes that influence and control state’s decision to use its power or legitimate violence in a traditional dictatorship. Violating these codes bears a symbolic value indicating that the state is going beyond the limits by its dictators. This misuse of power in contemporary Egypt was intentionally planned and carried out, in my view, through two main procedures.

The first procedure is the intentional destruction of civil society institutions that achieved a certain amount of credibility and independence before 2005, a process I discussed in chapter three. The Egyptian regime following the emergence of some active and influential social movements in 2005 embarked on a series of measures of hostility and aggression towards the civil society institutions like political parties, independent social movements, NGOs, human rights activists, media channels and personnel and even independent intellectuals. The Egyptian regime also managed to act on the symbolic level by disseminating an unsympathetic tone about its opponents, claiming they were agents of the US or were dependent on Western funding and agenda¹⁶⁴. The regime benefited as well from its heritage of a privileged autocratic class and its bureaucratic agents who were distributed to combat the growing influence of civil society. The Egyptian state succeeded in propagating a sense of despair about potential reform, as it proved an indisputable ability to polarize the nation into allies and enemies of the regime. Trouillot scrutinizes a similar process in Haiti:

“The formalization of the crisis implied the institutionalization of the split between political and civil society: The chief of the state swallowed up the entire executive branch, the executive engulfed the state and the state engulfed the nation. Each process occurred in part because of the weakness of the national institutions and the lack of vision of the so- called political elites”¹⁶⁵.

Such polarization processes were regularly carried out by attracting the political and intellectual elite in Egypt to join the ruling NDP (National Democratic Party) and

¹⁶³ . Ibid, 165.

¹⁶⁴ . International Crisis Group 2005. *Reforming Egypt: in Search of a Strategy*.

¹⁶⁵ . Ibid, 178.

portraying the opposition parties as weak and non-influential opponents.¹⁶⁶ The state autocrats and the security apparatus were allowed to commit violent acts of detention and physical torture towards prominent symbols of the Egyptian opposition like *Ayman Nour*¹⁶⁷ and *Abd Elhalim Kandil*¹⁶⁸.

This behavior, in my judgment, intensified the internal social conflict between members of the civil society on the one hand, and state agents distributed in several sectors and in innumerable institutions on the other. The Egyptian state turned its monopoly of the use of legitimate violence to a quotidian practice that state representatives in their respective sites were allowed to use against other citizens. The legitimization of violence as non-political action on part of the state, but rather accepting violence as social and as occurring on daily basis, created conflicting social groups and nurtured a one-to-one violent behavior in daily life. Trouillot explains that the maintenance of such a state of generalized violence requires a massive mobilization of the regime's allies in the different sectors:

“The principal organizers came from the parasitic strata attached to the dominant alliance: Professionals, artisans, petty bureaucrats. But the ranks of the *ton-ton makeout*, as well as those of the civil militia, included members from all social classes. The active participation of wide range of the population won at least a minimum of social acceptance for the totalitarian code of state violence. Few people may have been ready to proclaim their willingness to commit any crime on behalf of the regime, but there were enough to act as if they were- and enough to replace them when they themselves disappeared”¹⁶⁹.

The process of separating the social from the political authorized individual violence and jeopardized the burgeoning democratic steps of the Egyptian civil society. Moreover, it consolidated the transformation of state-citizen relationship into one that is

¹⁶⁶ . International Crisis Group 2005. *Reforming Egypt: in Search of a Strategy*.

¹⁶⁷ . Nour is an Egyptian liberal political activist, lawyer and journalist. In 2000, he founded *Al Ghad* (tomorrow) oppositional party and was one of the prominent competitors of president Mubarak in the presidential elections 2005. He was sentenced five years in a case of forgery of the official papers of his party. The verdict raised a strong public debate with suspicions of being an act of vengeance and humiliation from the part of the regime.

¹⁶⁸ . Kandil is an Egyptian nationalist journalist and a member of the Egyptian Movement for change (*Kefaya*). He is known as the first journalist to criticize the president Mubarak and his son Gamal in person and to raise the debate about the succession of Gamal to his father. In 2006, He was kidnapped, beaten and left in the desert until rescued accidentally by an army car.

¹⁶⁹ . Trouillot, Michel- Rolph. 1990. “State against Nation” In *Haiti: State against Nation, the Origins and Legacy of Duvalierism*. New York: Monthly Review Press. P. 170.

premised on citizens being merely subordinate subjects to the state. Subjects became depoliticized and disintegrated within the political domain.

This sort of exclusion encompassed those involved in the political sphere whether as activists or subjects affected by decision-making processes. These strata, no matter to what class they belonged, struggled with their marginalization from the public sphere even though they might not be economically marginalized. Ahmed Awany in a personal interview explained:

“There are many issues more pressing than food, water and income, there is an actual crisis and suffocating conditions for all the upper class members who live an everyday contradiction between their ambitions about an open society and the brutally repressive political context, even the American University students who are supposedly allowed relative freedom of expression discovered that the security forces are awaiting them outside the fences when they were detained and beaten during the April 6th strike demonstrations in 2008.”

4.6. Inefficiency and Hopelessness

The second mechanism that the Mubarak regime deployed to achieve its dominance and perpetuate the subordination of its subjects was institutionalizing the sense of absurdity in public discourse and the reign of inefficiency in public institutions. Horrible accidents proved a substantial failure of the executive and administrative sectors. Many examples could be provided to substantiate the state's failure in managing the severe crises that hit the country lately, the worst of them were the water crises of 2007 where dwellers of thousands of Egyptian villages and towns were suddenly cut of water supply (*Al Masry Al Youm*, 2007). *Al Doweka* catastrophe of 2008 was another instance, when a cliff collapsed on the eastern edge of Cairo hurling giant boulders on top of poor slum dwellings that had been illegally erected, in defiance of constant warnings that the site was unsafe. The rock's slide buried dozens, perhaps hundreds, of residents alive. Locals complained that long-promised alternative housing had been given to friends and relations of government officials, rather than the needy (The Economist, 2008). Focusing on Haiti's Duvalier's dictatorship Trouillot's words find resonance in the case of Egypt:

“The Duvalierist state had to tolerate inefficiency, irrespective of the intentions or competence of individual members of the administration. Inefficiency (not incompetence) became the structural precondition for the maintenance of the Duvalier’s power”¹⁷⁰.

Perpetuating inefficiency gradually pervaded the Egyptian public domain culminating in apathy and indifference. Poverty and the widening gap between social classes became more and more palpable within Cairo’s popular quarters and throughout Egypt, despite government pronouncements about the positive progress of economic reform:

“Then, as now, the gap between a very rich few and the teeming mass of have-nots seemed to yawn ever wider. Then, 2,000 vast estates occupied half of Egypt’s fertile land, while millions of illiterate peasants toiled as sharecroppers. Today, 44% of Egyptians still count as poor or extremely poor, with some 2.6m people so destitute that their entire income cannot cover basic food needs, let alone other expenses. Yet ranks of private jets clutter Cairo’s airport. The flower arrangements at a recent posh wedding, where whisky flowed and the gowns fluttered in from Paris and Milan, were reputed to have cost \$60,000 in a country where the average wage is less than \$100 a month” (*The Economist* 2008).

Disseminating a general feeling of hopelessness and frustration was an important tool to make people surrender to the ruling regime and to accept its absolute domination over social and political life. This submissiveness weakened the collective belief in the political mechanisms of social change (like democratic elections) and provided the regime with prerogative to even survive for longer periods.

Fathi and El Lemby, in my opinion, could verbalize the state of ‘collective marginalization’ that fills the hearts of the Egyptians who watched the films. Khairy Bishara elaborates:

“*El Lemby* and other films of the sort can all be put in the context of ‘looking for absurdity’ that dominates the cinema nowadays; characters who say vague words yet understandable by the audience, ideas that nobody want to concentrate in, crazy acts, funny walks and slap- stick exaggerated voices. These are the real films expressing youth views of today. Other silly commercial films that portray a falsified bias for causes like patriotism and Arab unity are mere nonsense”¹⁷¹

¹⁷⁰ . Ibid, 175.

¹⁷¹ . Personal Interview with Bishara in February 2009.

What appeared liberating in the depiction of the daily life of *El Lemby* is his withdrawal and even mockery of all patriotic belonging or nationalistic affiliation, tropes usually imposed on the dramatic context in the majority of the Egyptian films. This absence of belonging brilliantly grasps the status of non-civic citizens/subjects who have no space within public institutions. *Heen Maysara* and *El Lemby* provided a representation where all the attempts of joining the approved modern state institutions seem fake and falsified. The *ashwaiyyat* resident, in many aspects like the rest of Egypt's residents, deals predominantly with one state institution namely the police. Beside this institution, the films portrayed the emptiness of the social space from other venues of public participation, a point on which Tarek Al Shinawi elaborates:

“This cinema can be easily tied to the contemporary political context that announces all the time that there is no collective project for the nation, we had socialism then liberalization of economy then nothing, no collective thoughts and no collective targets. It is not the cinema that created absurdity and exclusion; it is the political situation that created them. All the people need to get rid of any meaning to be able to survive and absurdity must prevail in such circumstances”¹⁷²

¹⁷² . Personal Interview with Al Shinawi in October 2008.

Chapter Five

Behind Viewership and Consumption: Class Racism and the ‘Othering’ of the Poor

5.1. Introduction

In the last chapter I outlined diverse readings of *Heen Maysara* and *El Lemby* which contended that the big success they achieved was reflective of a true empathy with the characters’ marginalized position. Lack of education and poverty were interpreted as symptoms of a more serious social condition where different social strata suffer from the haphazardness of the system and the ‘rule of impunity’, in various degrees. The films portrayed the societal disintegration and exclusion from the domains that create the ‘collective sentiment’ and enhance active participation in the public sphere. The sense of ‘absurdity’ pervading broader sectors beyond the ones represented in the films was behind the wide reception and the commotion that accompanied the films’ screenings.

However, this sense of absurdity produces different reactions than passive empathy. The debates accompanying the films demonstrate that despite consensus on the systemic nature of disorganization and deterioration on many levels, middle class producers and audience reproduce the distinctive boundaries between classes. The cultural bourgeoisie establishes a double standard position of reception through which it is able to sympathize yet reproduce a ‘class racist’ view of the poor classes. Pierre Bourdieu highlights the notion of ‘class racism’ that characterizes the cultural bourgeoisie’s practices to distinguish itself from what is perceived as congenitally primitive, coarse and vulgar lower classes. In this chapter, I will decipher this duality of reception and how the cultural bourgeoisie’s applause or attack on *Heen Maysara* and *El Lemby* implies dimensions of violence and class racism.

I rely on Bourdieu’s framework on class position within his analysis of taste and how it relates to cultural production. He argues that the social position and authority guaranteed to a certain member of society is related to the amount of capital he/she holds. This capital is mainly an ‘economic capital’ represented in a ‘cultural capital’ which

conveys the share and impact of this person on the dominant culture. Bourdieu postulates that the dominant cultural discourses and art reflect the taste of the dominant social classes:

“Taste is a practical mastery of distributions which make it possible to sense or intuit what is likely (or not likely) to befall- and therefore to befit- an individual occupying a given position in social space. It functions as a sort of social orientation, a sense of one’s place”¹⁷³.

Building on this conception of taste, Bourdieu argues that the cultural bourgeoisie commands, thanks to its economic capital and its natural disposition (*habitus*)¹⁷⁴, symbolic power that determines what sort of art is refined and beautiful according to its tendencies and preferences. Gradually, the taste of the cultural bourgeoisie is naturalized and infused in the social imaginary as the appropriate form of art regardless of the original classification and class categories it represents. According to Bourdieu, such naturalization intends to confer legacy and normalcy to the political and economic hegemony of the bourgeois classes through asserting their cultural privilege and sanctioning their opinion about the appropriated forms of art¹⁷⁵.

Yet, the Egyptian film productions after 1970 exposed a deep contradiction in the reception process of this hegemonic cultural bourgeoisie in Egypt. Since 1970 Egyptian cinema started to portray the lower classes in films whose viewers are mostly from the middle and upper classes. The upper and middle classes were represented as less powerful and dominant. In contrast, the vulgar mannerisms and expressions of the lower classes were represented as prevalent and more appealing. The cinematic characters of the lower classes embodied by the comedian Adel Emam¹⁷⁶ (1940- present) in the 1970s

¹⁷³ . Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. P. 466.

¹⁷⁴ . *Habitus* in Bourdieu’s framework generates a system of meanings that spread consciously and unconsciously to set general dispositions of body and mind prepared to accept the dominant structures and function according to their limitations. Bourdieu claims that the social actions and practices are predetermined by their economic and social conditions of existence. These conditions structure their correspondent ‘*habitus*’ within which the social agents’ practices are codified and classified.

¹⁷⁵ . Bourdieu, Pierre. 1991. *Language and Symbolic Power*, Harvard University Press P. 110.

¹⁷⁶ . Adel Emam is one of the most famous and glamorous Egyptian comedians (1940- present). He led a long and successful career acting light comedy films that topped the Egyptian movie charts and were biggest box-office movies for nearly four successive decades. In the seventies and eighties, he portrayed the middle class personages struggling with their deteriorating economic situation and the moral and social implications of their predicament. He depicted the superior position acquired by lower classes after the open door policies (See Armbrust, Walter. 1995. “New Cinema, Commercial Cinema, and the Modernist

and 1980s achieved a great success among the middle and upper class audience. Many comic quotes from Emam's movies are still remembered and deployed in everyday life situations by many Egyptians regardless of their class position¹⁷⁷. These media productions were still aggressively criticized in the official media as a kind of 'bad art', at the same time they were collecting high revenues in the box-office placing *Emam* on the top of the Egyptian cinema charts as the most popular star in the entire modern history of Egypt¹⁷⁸.

I argue in this chapter that this contradiction (featuring lower classes and being successfully received by upper classes) is governing the reception of *Heen Maysara* and *El Lemby* as well, but in a more aggressive way. The rituals of viewership of the two films combines violence and laughter and makes of sympathy with the poor a formal façade behind which the upper classes establish more distance from the poor. Moreover, I assume that this contradictory relation to the films reflects dynamic of state/subjects relations in many dimensions. Class racism and violence disclosed in the films and partly in their reception reproduce in many respects the relation between the ruling power and the subordinate subjects. The middle class viewers judge *Heen Maysara* and *El Lemby* from a higher position that enable them to distance their practices from these representations. Their depiction of the vulgarity of the characters in both films implies a defensive strategy against the possible merger of their world with that of *ashwaiyyat*.

5.2. Acquiring Simultaneous Disgust and Appeal

In 2002 the representation of the lower classes began to take a different pathway where vulgar mannerisms, language and pronunciation disorders, and a focus on formalities were stressed as the main features of the lower class image in cinema. This

Tradition in Egypt'', in *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, No. 15, *Arab Cinematics: Toward the New and the Alternative*, pp. 81- 129).

¹⁷⁷ . Many works of Emam portrayed low class paupers where their way of speaking and the prominent idiotic manners ignited laughter and brought him fame. These included for example, *Ragab Fuk Safih Sakhen* (Ragab on top of a hot tank 1979), *Shaaban Taht Al Sifr* (Shaaban subzero 1980), *El Halfot* (The pauper 1985). These films focused on the rapid ascension of nouveaux riches after the implementation of the open door policies and the exploitation of the poor characters embodied by Emam.

¹⁷⁸ . See Tarek El Shenawi's article in *Al Dustur* newspaper in February 2008 criticizing Emam for presenting artificial kind of art that supports the dominant discourses of the state and capitalize on a shallow concept of laughter and comedy.

kind of representation is an inversion of a tradition that was established in the 1980s and 1990s thanks to the young generation of film makers that appeared in Egypt at the time¹⁷⁹. The films of this group of film makers presented the poor classes' life from a humanistic and more realistic point of view. Khairy Bishara claims:

“We had a different concern, I wanted to say that all this ascension is fake, and these acquisitions that the poor get are not for real and will be robbed from them, and this is an infinite cycle and a game that is bigger than what you think, you will not be one of them so be yourself, this was my understanding of a progressive thought...”

I presume that the repetitive representation of the lower classes in the Egyptian cinema after 2002, symbolizes a disjuncture of the classical class hierarchy and taste that used to influence film production in Egypt. The environment that gave rise to Bishara and his generation's films in the 1980s and 1990s was quite different. Bishara explains:

“In this period, we saw ourselves as the avant-garde that appreciates ‘culture’. We were making movies of the cultural elite speaking about the poor classes. Nowadays, the film makers are closer to the everyday life of their audience, consumers like them and struggling with the same problems, so if they were making my film ‘Kaboria’ (Crab)¹⁸⁰ today they would make my hero succeed to marry the wealthy lady and become rich.”

Bishara's comment affirms the difference in how media representations of the poor after 2002 established a shallow relation with the social reality. Representation is much closer to reality and adopting its rough facets, yet it does not address the underlying complexities of poverty and marginality. Heroism of the marginalized in films after 2002 became a necessity even if it lacks substance. The audience is less tolerant of a human character that lives a multi-layered reality imbued with frustration and disintegration. The absurdity that El Lemby, Hashisha and Fathi survive is harsh yet it still fills the dramatic text with laughter and jokes. The heroes, always victorious at the end, tell infinite jokes and a lot of wisdom with the same impaired pronunciation and incoherence. Their jokes

¹⁷⁹ . The generation of the directors Daod Abd El Sayed, Khairy Bishara, Mohamed Khan, Radwan El Kashef, Magdi Ahmed Ali and Atef El Tayeb were concerned with presenting films about the marginalized strata and the poor classes through the eighties and nineties. Among these films were: “Al Kit Kat- 1991”, “The thief of happiness- 1994” (Daod Abd El Sayed), “The dates liquor- 1999” and “The magician- 2002” (Radwan El Kashef), “Life, my passion- 1996” (Magdi Ahmed Ali) and “The skillful- 1983” (Mohamed Khan).

¹⁸⁰ . “Kaboria” (Crab) 1990, a film directed by Khairy Bishara portraying an encounter between a poor popular boxer and an extremely rich bourgeois married couple.

ignite laughter of their audience and their wisdom and victory asserts their heroism and declares their success to substitute the old 'middle class' superman. Wael Abd El Fattah sums up the difference between the 'marginalized' in the 1980s and 2002:

“Even the idea of the ‘marginalized’ that the critics announced as the heroes of the 1980s cinema (Mohamed Khan, Khairy Bishara, Daod Abd El Sayed and Radwan El Kashif...), did not present the wretched in its harsh form. It was the director’s vision for a world that is close to the real world and it cherishes heroes that are not heroes in the traditional perspective. But *El Lemby* and his fellows are the creation of one man: Mohamed Saad. The character eats the film. And its image is presented exactly as it is, without any external vision”¹⁸¹

Despite the increasingly unequal realities that the poor classes in Egypt struggle with, the systemic deterioration of the political and socioeconomic conditions in Egypt created a common language that a broader range of social classes share. Without substantial changes in the economic situation of the poor in Egypt, that may be even worsening¹⁸², their participation in the political sphere relatively increased after several sit-ins were carried out and were covered by the Egyptian media. From another angle, the constantly nurtured sense of threat by the *ashwaiyyat*, drowning in poverty and chaos, propelled a collective keenness among the upper classes to call for a fair resolution of their inhumane life conditions. Media professionals had to find a more appealing formula to profit from this invasion of the media by *ashwaiyyat* residents. The noble cause of delivering the suffering of those people to the circles of decision-makers was not the only reason behind the increased representation. Tarek Al Shinawi elaborates:

“It is not only about art, there is a mere commercial dimension in making such films, the middle class created characters from *ashwaiyyat* instead of making middle class characters to say ‘we have those weird creatures’, the audience wants to see them transformed into ‘creatures’ and you (as producer) want to please them more than speak about real problems”¹⁸³

My interest in the following paragraphs is to analyze how *Heen Maysara* and *El Lemby* achieved such a big success and appealed to the middle and upper classes in Egypt. In addition to the analysis I presented in chapter four for the commonalities shared by the middle class and *ashwaiyyat* residents, this chapter focuses on the simultaneous

¹⁸¹ . Wael Abd Al Fattah. 2002. “The making of stars in Egypt”. *Soot Al Ummah* newspaper. August 5th, 2002. P12.

¹⁸² . Refer to 3.2. 3. Mubarak: The rule of impunity and the perception of the poor.

¹⁸³ . Interview with Al Shinawi in October 2008.

disgust and appeal that surrounded the two films. The reasons for such contradictory stances are explicable through highlighting how the film makers in both movies created a stage against which the seemingly shocking scenes were presented, what I refer to below as the “necessary balances.” I then offer an interpretation of the reactions (through my ethnographic sample) of the audience to provide the reader with more insights about the socio-cultural roots of the films’ success.

5.3. Necessary Balances

In 2004, Kanaan Makiya wrote his account on artistic representation in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. There he analyzes the difficult situation that governs artistic production under despotic rule:

“Quentin Bell¹⁸⁴ says that ‘bad’ art is a form of insincerity, which results from ‘social pressure in favor of that which society at large calls beauty’. In the last one hundred years, he claims, the good artist has always fought against the popular conception of beauty while the bad artist has worked within its constraints. Naturally, the president thinks of himself as the creator of a great work of art, not a bad one, to this Bell retorts: ‘The damnable thing about bad art is that the insincerity which lies at its roots is not perceived by the artist himself’¹⁸⁵.

Makiya maps out in his work the pressures and determinants under a despotic repressive regime that influence artistic production and transform its nature even subconsciously without the artist’s awareness of them. In *Heen Maysara*, the director Khaled Youssef claims a total responsibility and moreover finds necessary to present his film, which embodies a harsh criticism of the ruling regime:

“Definitely the regime is to behold responsible for the status of chaos we live in Egypt and the present rule is illegitimate and is not product of real democratic elections. And whether this is apparent in my film or not I do imagine it that way, and even away from the film, my opinion is that the government of NDP (National Democratic Party) is the reason behind all the disasters of the country. It is an authority that gives nothing and speaks since the eighties on the employment of 5 million citizens and this did not happen. And also speaks about providing housing and small projects and achieves nothing of this. In contrast, people are

¹⁸⁴ . Bell, Quentin. 1989. *Bad Art*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. P. 13.

¹⁸⁵ . Makiya, Kanaan. 2004. *The Monument: Art and Vulgarity in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

turning poorer and unemployed and we live in a society that made bribery a legacy for living, bribes run the country”¹⁸⁶.

However, Youssef and Nasser Abd Alrahman were cautious while hitting at the sensitive issues that would not appeal to their targeted audience (middle class and government!!) or would cross the political red lines defined by the political regime. This caution pushed them to compromises that pervaded their text with contradictory signs. These contradictions rendered the singling out of *ashwaiyyat* residents’ as the only marginal and excluded lot in society doubtful. In two principal axes of the film, this caution is most clear. The first concerns situations of direct encounter with the Egyptian security apparatus which will be discussed in details in the coming chapter. The second is the representation of the upper and middle class characters in the film in their encounters with the residents of *ashwaiyyat*.

Bearing in mind the receptive audience’ sensitivities, Youssef and Abd Al Rahman presented a sharply polarized image of the upper class characters. The latter were slotted either in extremely idealistic or evil models of representation. Although Youssef emphasizes the despising public gaze towards homeless street adults, for instance in the scene where Ayman and his wife are trying to sell flowers to two upper class lovers, he did stress the tears of the woman who brought Ayman up when her husband forced her to get rid of him after she got pregnant. Similarly, Youssef presented the example of the old lady helping Nahed and embracing her warmly inside her house as if it was a natural and expected behavior. Leila Abo Zeid¹⁸⁷ (53 years old) commented on this scene: “I wouldn’t ever do it, and I don’t think anyone would, I can’t deal with them to that extent; adopt a homeless child or take a homeless lady into my house, this is very unrealistic. I was touched by the film but it is the role of the government to handle their problems, what can I do?” May El Sayed in another interview agrees: “I think neither *El Lemby* or *Heen Maysara* gave a realistic account of the middle class, or ‘us’ (with slight mockery), it’s either very angelic view or very monstrous. The reaction of the sons after

¹⁸⁶ . Youssef’s interview in *Al Wafd* newspaper, December 2007.

¹⁸⁷ . Personal interview with Leila Abo Zeid who is an Egyptian female teacher working at the Ministry of Education, January 2008.

the old lady dies is more expectable, they will suspect the girl immediately and kick her out.”

El Lemby producers, who had a better chance to hide behind the comic performance of Saad and the light comedy plots, ended their film nevertheless with a scene that appeared out of context. *El Lemby* appeared wearing his *robe du chambre* and teaching his son the English alphabet on a blackboard. Borrowing only his body moves and way of pronunciation from the original character, the scene (12 seconds) delivered a sense of security to its audience: “Can we argue that this scene is also rebellious?!” argued Myvel Seddik when I asked her whether she thinks that the film criticizes the middle class traditions. The scene cannot be accepted as part and parcel of the film. It is rather part, may be, of the wishful thinking of the film-makers who aspire that *El Lemby*’s vulgarity is to be disciplined and refined. Belal Fadl¹⁸⁸ the famous scriptwriter asserts:

“Wael Ehsan, the director, was a poor guy from Ismailia, and he has this simplistic conviction that things would go very well when one makes some effort, poverty can be easily overcome. *Saad* also comes from ‘*Aleet El Kabsh*’, also *ashwaiyyat*, and he says that he lived with people exactly like *El Lemby* and wanted to express how they long for a descent ‘normal’ life.”

In my judgment, the audience was not in need for such “balances” to confer desirability on both films. In fact, the main point about both movies was the powerfulness of their representation of the vulgarity that characterizes the behavior of all figures including middle class characters. It is this storm of violence, offensiveness and aggression seen in every detail of both movies – whether in the comic use of *El Lemby* of his knife to threaten people who are certain he will never dare to hurt them, or how simply a big fight is ignited from nothing in *Heen Maysara* – that was both shocking and appealing. Tarek El Shenawi confirms this assumption:

“We all see variations of *El Lemby* in the Egyptian street, in schools and universities and in the state employees, may be not that exaggerated but all of them have inside something from *El Lemby*, there is a dangerous social impact that we should be alert to; success this time was not a momentary identification with a ‘character’ that has an expiry date, what *Saad* presented is not within a frame of absurdity, *El Lemby* reached out to the most important sectors of the

¹⁸⁸ . Interview with Belal Fadl in *Al Shark Al Awsat* newspaper, July 2005.

society because they wanted him, and if this is not true for those who pay the tickets, it would have only been a moderate hit.”¹⁸⁹

5.4. Watching the decay of the ‘Modern’

The similarity or the common language that Al Shinawi assumes between *El Lemby* and the audience can be interpreted as signs and signifieds that indicate a subtle mockery of the failed or distorted modernity project of the Egyptian nation-state. The audience presumably identified with a narrative that makes ‘truer’ the decay and precariousness of the modern institutions that once were the most desired of ambitions of the middle class. For example, the films announce news that Egyptians confront everyday in their encounter with the institutions of law and education. El Lemby’s mother warns him before getting to the exam of ‘erasing illiteracy’: “Your studying in your head, your sandwiches in your bag and your knife in your pocket, if somebody asked to cheat cut him into pieces”. The combination she made between acquiring a superficial education (later we see her dictating the answers to her son in the microphone), guaranteeing food and means of protection structures the everyday priorities in the Egyptian society nowadays. Mohamed Samir (university student, 22 years old) states: “I am not sure if I had a quarrel with a police officer who wants to detain me for no reason, arguing that these are my constitutional rights as a citizen it will work, you can never be sure”. Mohamed resumes: “A large number of my friends hold knives, they are wealthy and potent, they have connections, but they want to guarantee maximum safety and they know nobody can arrest them for this, in *Heen Maysara* they could arrest and torture people because they are poor.”

El Lemby and *Heen Maysara* delineated this insecurity and absence of the modern institutions that regulate this violence or that guarantee a minimum of respect and humanity for the common person no matter what his/her class is. Making fun of the notion of education, the brutalization by the police in *El Lemby* and demonstrating the atrocities and torture in the police stations in *Heen Maysara* attracted the subordinated audience. As Mbembe explains:

¹⁸⁹ . Tarek Al Shinawi, Al Dustour daily newspaper, April 2008.

“Enjoyment and need for assuagement are thus complementary and take various forms: excess and intemperance, extravagance and dereliction, the capacity to set limits (arbitrariness) and to breach them (transgression) - in short, apparent facility with which, with a simple fiat, one can decide to set up anything or abolish anything. So impunity reigns. One lets it all hang out. One eats what there is, with no care for the morrow”¹⁹⁰.

The “reign of impunity” is articulated in many areas of both films. Not only in the series of events in *Heen Maysara*, starting from selling the child of Nahed and Hashisha to a wealthy infertile family by a bus driver until the internal governance of the locality by Hashisha (the notable thug that collects money to instate order and protection), but also the easiness (or facility) and the settled tolerance for their occurrence. For example, the number of times when Hashisha gets in and out of prison after the fabrication of false or true minor crimes (by the police officer), were easily accepted by the rest of inhabitants as part of the price of this relationship and becoming one of the notable persons dealing with the security apparatus. On the other hand, giving birth to the love child in the streets, homeless children excavating parking cars and stealing the laundry from houses, Fathi who threatens to kill another resident if he does not agree to let him marry his sister, the step-father who keeps harassing Nahed in front of her mother and the frank and masked rape, all happened in *Heen Maysara* without any sort of interference from the law institution with its visible executive branch (security apparatus) or its abstract moral presence. Similarly in *El Lemby*, we could notice that drug trade and usage of knives were presented as regular practices that hurt nobody. On the other hand, the police officers (representatives of the state authority’s regulations) were constantly provoked to prove all the attempts by El Lemby to earn a living as illegal requiring detention.

In other scenes and plots in *El Lemby* an alternative discourse started to substitute the dominant discourse of modernization that has been adopted by the state throughout contemporary Egyptian history. Modernization that bears usually connotations of progress, refinement, and the superiority of the educated or the cultural elite of the society was the subject of many sarcastic scenes in *El Lemby*. The film portrayed El Lemby in two different situations showing his despise for classical music (Western or

¹⁹⁰ . Mbembe, Achille. 2001. “The Thing and its Doubles” In “*On the Postcolony*”. University of California Press. P.167

Egyptian) and 'modern' dance as forms of 'refined art'. Uncle Bach, a violin player in El Lemby's district, appears in one of the scenes trying persistently to force El Lemby to listen to him playing a part of a violin concerto telling him: "I am cleaning your ears". El Lemby with utter confidence starts to listen and commented (always in his stoned tone): "It is disgusting, I can't stand." El Lemby decides to leave the house and Bach keeps tracking him with his violin to bring the scene to a point where El Lemby reverses the common rhetoric from respect to Uncle Bach's music as a form of refinement while he is escaping the nauseating repellent music. El Lemby was declaring that such a respect is also decaying.

In contrast, the film depicted El Lemby at his wedding (with all his quarter neighbors invited, with everybody drinking beer and smoking hash) singing: "Go away cock, this chick is not yours" (teasing the ex-fiancée of his wife) and dancing hilariously with his typical belly and butt moves. The song used the melody of a famous song of Um Kulthum "*Hob Eih?*" (What love?), but changed the lyrics to invoke cynical and sensational meanings. It announces another form of music that the hero likes and sings with ecstasy and enchantment. El Lemby used these lyrics instead of *Um Kulthum*'s and danced at his wedding, instead of a 'modern' dance professional that is supposed to dance for his invitees.

The character of the modern dancer hired to dance at weddings taking place in a popular quarter is another representation, in my view, of the decline of the modernization discourse. El Lemby had this chat with the dancer where they were shown clearly speaking two different languages as if coming from totally different worlds. El Lemby asks her about the belly dancing suit that she is supposed to wear and 'seduce' all the invitees (as he said). The dancer, wearing glasses, black blouse and trousers, tells El Lemby that she feels she cannot make a modern dance performance for those 'weird' people as 'she doubts that any of them has an email address or an ICQ account!!'. Two people were represented as not belonging to the same rhetoric, as possessing opposing histories and referential points. El Lemby and Uncle Bach or El Lemby and the dancer were coupled in those scenes as two opposite discourses or two contradictory currents of thought; yet in both scenes only the hero has an upper hand. For the audience who praised El Lemby's cynicism, the refinement claimed by the modern social institutions is

more of a formality that did not inscribe itself in their practices. Their disgust of the belly and butt moves of El Lemby hides a deeper level of desire to transgress this discourse and admit its limited influence on their lives.

5.5. Vulgarity, Violence and Laughter

While the mockery of the failed modernity project that once stood on the shoulders of a burgeoning middle class is one pillar of the big success of *Heen Maysara* and *El Lemby*, the transgression of this middle class' appropriated behavior and moral discourse would be the second pillar. The physical performance of Saad in *El Lemby* and the sex scenes in *Heen Maysara* would be a good example of how the audience met such a violation of its moral code with a mixture of desire and disgust.

Saad's performance presents an image of an exorbitantly transgressive material (given his movements of belly and the excessive use of his butt). This trend of 'male' movements (which makes it even more intolerable in common Egyptian culture) spread lately among some *shaabi* singers like *Saad Al Saghir* and *Emad Baarour*¹⁹¹ and positioned the body as "the principal locale of the idioms and fantasies used in depicting power" as Mbembe claims¹⁹². Such transgression is necessarily attractive to the subject (in this case cinema audience) that realizes through Saad's bodily movements the possibility of exceeding the norm. Trouillot argues:

"If the magnetism of the grotesque indeed generates conflict between attraction and disgust it is exactly because attraction and disgust are driven here by the same force: ego's recognition that a scene otherwise familiar has been pushed to the extremes of abnormality."¹⁹³

Saad's vulgar body movements speak to the implicit desires of exceeding appropriate behavior and challenging the essential assumptions that institutionalize its

¹⁹¹. Saad Al Saghir and Emad Baarour are the *shaabi* singers famous for their obscene video clips in the last six years. Saad's performance and dancing style that borrows techniques of belly dancing stood out as a striking phenomena when his video clip *El Enab* (the grapes) was screened on Melody satellite music channel 2005. Saad faced a storm of criticism accusing him of offending the public sentiments and presenting obscene dance and singing, incompatible with the social moralities and the religious legacies. Calls for banning Saad from TV became part of the public discourse in newspapers, parliament and the media.

¹⁹². Mbembe, A. (2002). "On the Power of the False." *Public Culture* 14 (3): 629.

¹⁹³. Trouillot, Michel- Rolph. 1992. "The vulgarity of power" *Public Culture* 5(1): P. 77.

domination. Nurturing the rival fantasies of vulgarity inside the souls of the Egyptian audience watching *El Lemby* can be regarded as the other side of the coin of the assumed power of the modernization discourse which is, allegorically, the power of the state. The character in *El Lemby* embodies other features of the ruling power aside from its adoption of the modernity slogans, namely its obscenity and vulgarity. The ability of such power to exceed and transcend the limits of the social restrictions is the clearest evidence of its omnipotence and sovereignty. As Trouillot argues, “The imagery of power is excess. Excess, in turn, breeds vulgarity”¹⁹⁴. Saad, who extravagantly simulated the Egyptian social reality where power abuse and violence are essential features, unconsciously reinstates this discourse of vulgar deployment of power through his transgressive body movements. The middle class viewers who created the icon of *El Lemby* participate, in one way or another, in reproducing a simulation of the power relations between different classes in Egypt.

Mbembe traces the correlation between the banality of power and the aesthetics of vulgarity in the postcolonial state of Cameroon. He presumes that there is no clear distinction between the producers and the receivers of the dominant public discourse. He further argues that the dominant forces together with the dominated ones “reproduce the de facto power relations through the continuous processes of simulation”. Mbembe considers not only the way in which power lays claim to its subjects through coercion and violence, but also how that “coercive power compels its subjects to rearticulate that power, to confer grandeur on that power, and to do this through a convivial participation in simulation of that power.”¹⁹⁵ Mbembe identifies this ‘conviviality’ as the guarantee to preserve the subjection and submission of the postcolonial state subjects. This conviviality unifies the rulers and the ruled under a practical system of signs and metaphors of mutual appreciation and apprehension (simulacrum) that end up by robbing both parties of their vitality. These vulgar practices of the subordinated subjects become a node in the chain of the official world’s obscenity where the dominant and the dominated are inscribed within the same episteme¹⁹⁶.

¹⁹⁴ . Ibid. 211.

¹⁹⁵ . Mbembe, Achille. 2001. “The Aesthetics of Vulgarity” In *On the Postcolony*. University of California Press. Pp. 102- 142.

¹⁹⁶ . Ibid. 102- 142.

It is within the space of representation that the traditional subjects of the state were allowed a chance to simulate the power agents and reproduce their discourse and their violent practices and even to make fun of all that. Mbembe viewed the post-colony as the ‘chaotically pluralistic’ space where the dominated inscribe and reproduce the patterns of violence and coercion by the state power.

This would be the case with the claimed powerfulness of Hashisha in *Heen Maysara* and of El Lemby in *El Lemby*. Despite all his sufferings and repeated failures, El Lemby preserves a sense of dignity and an unexplained self confidence. After coming back from Sharm El Sheikh and the failure of his project to rent bicycles for tourists (illegal as usual), El Lemby says to his mother: “I am still El Lemby, the man which an earthquake that shakes entire Egypt do not dare shake him”. However, El Lemby combined this sense of powerfulness (always artificial and exaggerated) with a corresponding modesty and low self-esteem that surge up in all the situations of his frustration: “In the bottom of his heart he feels he is great, for no reason, he is illiterate, ignorant and a complete loser, yet he thinks he can handle everything with the knife”, comments Mohamed Samir, 21 years old, faculty of commerce student.

This defensive attitude of El Lemby speaks on behalf of his audience and represents its “neurotic ego” that Anna Freud describes in her account of the mechanisms of defense:

“When the ego is young and plastic, its withdrawal from one field of activity is sometimes compensated for by excellence in another, upon which it concentrates. But, when it has become rigid or has already acquired an intolerance of ‘pain’ and so is obsessively fixated to a method of flight, such withdrawal is punished by impaired development. By abandoning one position after another, it becomes one sided, loses too many interests and can show but a meager achievement.”¹⁹⁷

The defensive accent of El Lemby assuming unlimited power and capacity (‘I would destroy the world and burn the whole district’) is probably his own way to negotiate his submissiveness to incredible levels of exclusion and violence. The grandeur that he preserves in all the humiliating situations he encounters (‘you want *El Lemby* work as a peddler and sell sandwiches?’) is part of the image of heroism that he survives in an imaginary trajectory against the classicist arrogant discourse of upper classes and

¹⁹⁷ . Freud, Anna. 1946. *The Ego and the Mechanism of Defense*. New York: International Universities Press. P. 111.

the brutality of the state. The fantasy of heroism is the compensatory mechanism that *El Lemby* presented to the whole society facing the same brutality. The psychoanalyst Khalil Fadel argues:

“Mohamed Saad or *El Lemby* is not a real psychopath, he is a hazy image of him, the criminal psychopath is those who fled with the billions of the country, the authority abusers and the cruel corrupt whales who eat everything, those who sexually harass all bodies and souls while struggling for earning their living. *El Lemby* is a social ‘homosapien’ present among us, inside and around us. He has a network of relations with people in *ashwaiyyat*, in the country and in the city.

From his figure, voice and way of pronunciation, he constitutes an independent structure that can be called ‘the *Lemby* structure’. It is present all over Egypt and has its tools and environment and its way in sneaking into the social life of all classes, starting from the poor that Saad represents not ending by those who see him disgusting but love his harshness and irony full heartedly.

El Lemby grasps in his dirty hands the smell of our violent animalistic social behavior that we practice against each other. The behavior that extends from body movements to sexual harassment in the streets which makes us like animals that appreciate vulgar behaviors... While all of us suffering from emotional austerity and the unjustifiably swollen ego, Saad and Wael Ehsan succeed to synthesize that disenfranchised sad psychopath and fail to actualize a real human being with assimilated emotions and moralities”¹⁹⁸

Fadel points out how *El Lemby* presented a weak character that borrows only the superficial features of grotesque power. His weakness is probably behind the empathy and identification of his audience with his case that may simulate theirs too. However, *El Lemby* represents an easy remedy for the inability to express or resist the violence they confront. While the upper classes are stuck with their predicament between decline and ascension, crackling with laughter on the ‘social homosapien’ seems a way to displace the fears from the dissemination of ‘*El Lemby* structure’ in all the institutions that used to guarantee their privileged position. This extreme polarization, obvious in Fadel’s analysis, of the society between those who acquire animalistic behavior and those who acquire a human one conveys the worries that infuse the social imaginary with loathe to *El Lemby*. Such a violent radical metaphor (animalistic) is meant to protect the middle class hegemony on the vocabulary of the cultural discourse and ensure a safe position under the umbrella of grotesque power. The producers of *El Lemby* helped the audience

¹⁹⁸ . Dr. Khalil Fadel’s article: URL: <http://drfadel.net/content/view/23/35/>

to laugh at one's demoralized ego and forget about their subordination to the state, while excited with a temporary victory in the contest between classes.

Chapter Six

The Security Apparatus: Only in *Ashwaiyyat*?

6.1. Introduction

One of the remarkable elements in the representation of social reality in *Heen Maysara* and *El Lemby* was essentializing the role of the police institution in structuring both the public and private lives of the characters. In both films police officers and stations materialize as the primary site where state presence and control are articulated and manifested. It is also the police institution that interferes in all matters of daily life in *ashwaiyyat* to ensure a minimum of security and order, thus guarding the status quo. The assertion of such a presence can be better viewed within the framework of the maximized power and authoritarianism of the official security apparatus in Egypt over the last decades. Saif Nasrawi¹⁹⁹ points out that the security apparatus, especially those establishments which are politically-oriented such as *Mabahith Aman al-Dawla* (State Security Investigation Apparatus, SSIA), *al-Aman al-Markazi* (the Central Security Forces), *al-Mukhabarat al-'Aama* (the Intelligence), and *Maglis al-Amn al-Qawmi* (the National Security Council) have assumed an increasing role during Mubarak's reign. The Egyptian security apparatuses, according to Nasrawi, exercise their hegemony, control and discipline on almost all domains of public sphere: institutional and un-institutional, formal and informal, and governmental and societal:

“These apparatuses control and manipulate the bureaucracy, the judiciary, and the parliament, the economy, universities, political parties, professional syndicates, trade unions, NGOs, the press, churches, mosques, the Internet and public morality. Their influence also extends to foreign policy, diplomacy and international trade. Occupying such a pivotal role within the regime, the security apparatus is the largest entity in terms of membership in the state's bureaucracy. Their membership has been estimated between 950,000 and 1,100,000 persons. And their share in the annual budget comes only second to that of the army and by far larger than the government's expenditure on health and education”²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁹ . Nasrawi, Saif. 2006. *The Egyptian Movement for Change (Kefaya): An Apolitical Struggle for Democracy*. MA Thesis, Specify Department, The American University in Cairo.

²⁰⁰ . Ibid. 64.

Nasrawi describes how the politics of fear became more essential to establish an absolute domination of the security apparatus over public life under Mubarak's rule:

“Capitalizing on a radical notion of nationalism, the security apparatus projects itself beyond the scope of class politics; thus, it positions itself as keeping a distance from any social group by representing a neutral and rational façade. This role is further enhanced by continuous dissemination of conspiracy theories about imaginary enemies, domestic and foreign who are trying to “tarnish the image of Egypt”, “revoke external intervention” and so on. Consequently, a state of fear must be always fed continuously to strengthen the grip of the security apparatuses over the Egyptians' bodies and souls. The politics of fear can be felt directly through police's abuse, harassment and torture in streets, demonstrations, detention centers and prisoners and indirectly by nurturing a state of uncertainty and unpredictability about so many affairs in life such as appointments in the bureaucracy, the judiciary and the army, getting different licenses to start a business, to establish a voluntary association, to found a newspaper and even to install an electricity meter in your house”²⁰¹.

Lately, the Egyptian media disclosed the processes of regular torture of lay persons, including females, in the police stations. The most widely covered torture incident in Egypt recently was the case of *Eimad El-Kabir*, a mini-bus driver who was brutally and sexually assaulted in a police station after quarrelling with a police officer. Such a blunt declaration of torture heightened national and international awareness of the immensity and brutality of the Egyptian security apparatus. Yet, we have no data to confirm whether this disclosure assisted in the propagation or the resistance to the politics of fear deployed by the political regime. Disseminating such information is one of the most prominent indicators of the state violating the social codes of legitimate violence and exceeding the previous limits to its authoritarianism. This pattern of authoritarianism was stressed many times in *El Lemby* and *Heen Maysara* which presented the scene of torture of Hashisha's family in the police station including sexually harassing his mother and Fathi's wife to oblige him to admit a connection to the Islamist militant groups in his district and to Al Qaeda as well!!

However, this presence of the state remains incomplete if it was not for a network of relations with notables from the *ashwaiyy* district, whose task is to monitor and facilitate the everyday activities inside the district without direct interference of the

²⁰¹ . Ibid. 67.

police. Salwa Ismail identifies the emerging alternative of local governance created by the inclusion of the notables (like Hashisha in his district) and promoting them as figures of authority:

“Through state authorities’ incorporation of the lesser notables and through the farming out of positions of authority, an urban regime of government is actualized. Politics in the sense of action is taken to affect the conduct of government as a form of mediation rather than representation. This image of the state and such incorporation into the system of government underscores a mode of operation characterized by improvisation. It would be difficult to prescribe a unitary logic to how local government is managed on daily basis”²⁰²

Such an improvised model of governance was presented in *Heen Maysara* as the form that suits the half hazard space with all the disorganization that characterizes its system. Similarly, the violent practices and the prejudiced judgments of police officers were justified as mechanisms to reduce the potential hazards and crimes of the residents and prevent their expansion outside the boundaries of that locality. Again, the representation of the behavior of the police in the films (especially *Heen Maysara*) affirms the common assumptions about the *ashwaiyyat* as spaces that incubate criminals, thugs and Islamist fanatics, threatening to disturb the peace of the middle class neighborhoods.

The films induce another sort of submissiveness to the prevalent discourses about *ashwaiyyat* when it restricts such a brutal behavior of the police to the *ashwaiyyat* and their residents. In *Heen Maysara*, the police actions are all represented as reactionary to the massive violence and thuggery that prevail in the district. Detention and the deployment of exceptional laws (in torture for example) are justified as prophylactic measures that guard the safety of the whole society from *Baltaggiya* (thugs) and fanatics dwelling in *ashwaiyyat*. The police officers were always looking at Hashisha as the despised agent that they use only to reach for the fanatics hiding in “*ashwaiyy* mazes” they cannot invade.

²⁰² . Ismail, Salwa 2006. *Political Life in Cairo’s New Quarters*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. P. 64.

The discourse articulated by the head officers to express why they rely on Hashisha as a *murshid* (guide) for the police reproduces the spatial frameworks of classification that do not perceive *ashwaiyyat* as recognizable urban spaces. In a scene where the senior officer yells at the junior officer after his arrest of Hashisha, he ties the presence of the state inside the district to the role of Hashisha because without ‘one like him’ (in his words), the officer would lose his track and be unable to reach the terrorists hiding inside *ashwaiyyat*. Assef Bayat explores how such a spatial perception of *ashwaiyyat* contributes to the political discourse around them as non-modern ‘abnormal’ sites which provide housing for ‘abnormal’ people:

“Indeed, the strict official definition of what consists an urban unit and the invention of the concept of *ahswaiyyat* as a political category tend to produce new spatial divisions which excludes many citizens from urban participation. The *ashwaiyyat* are perceived as ‘abnormal’ places where, in modern conventional wisdom, the ‘non- modern’ and thus ‘non- urban’ people, that is, the villagers, the traditionalists, the non- conformists and the unintegrated live. It is indeed puzzling that over 20 percent of all Egypt’s and half of greater Cairo’s populations, who reside in *ashwaiyyat*, are considered outsiders, living in ‘abnormal’ conditions”²⁰³

6.2. Eliminating Danger or Institutionalizing *Baltaga*?

The sequence of events in Hashisha’s life put him in direct interface with security forces. The situations differed as did his position: from drug dealer to police guide and notable of the district ending eventually to work against the police after the atrocious torture of his family at the police station. These encounters reflect in different situations the structures of thought behind the behavior of the security forces when dealing with *ashwaiyyat*. Hashisha’s life is long journey trying to acquire money and notability. He started by joining a big drug dealer’s network but failed to keep the amount of drugs he had to distribute (after smoking some of it with his friend Fathi). The head of the drug group ordered his followers to beat Hashisha and report him to the security forces. The police officer made a deal with Hashisha to provide him protection in return for

²⁰³ . Bayat, Asef and Eric Denis. 2000. “Who is Afraid of Ashwaiyyat? Urban Change and Politics in Egypt” in *Environment and Urbanization* 12; No 2. Pp. 185- 199. P.197

monitoring and reporting all the activities of the drug dealers and Islamist fanatics in the area. Based on that agreement, Hashisha was released from the prison to engage in a bloody battle with swords and knives against the followers of the big drug dealer. The battle ended with Hashisha being declared as the local governor of his district that practices a mixed role between *Futtuwah* and *Baltagi*²⁰⁴ (thug). This role implies, as Salwa Ismail explains, agency for the state, interference in fights and monitoring the moral conduct of the residents.

Such an incorporation of the thugs in the security apparatus became part of institutionalizing the customary rule of force instead of the rule of law. This substitution is based on a set of emergency laws that guarantee an absolute power for the security apparatus to instate the rule of exception. Acquiring such an absolute power went through phases in the last decades of Mubarak's rule. In the following section, I will explain these phases.

It is well known that after the assassination of Anwar Al Sadat in 1981, the ruling regime under the leadership of Mubarak declared the implementation of the emergency law that still governs the Egyptian public and political life until now. The emergency rule provides the regime with the legal right to control every level of political activity. As a result, the government is entitled to censor activities including freedom of expression and freedom of assembly which include the right to censor, seize, or confiscate letters, newspapers, newsletters, publications, and all other means of expression and advertising before they are published. President Mubarak argues that the renewal of the emergency law is necessary in order to confront terrorism and protect democracy and stability. Yet, the law is used to contain and control not just terrorism but also legitimate political activities.

Before he started his fifth term in office in 2005 Mubarak promised more democracy. But despite some changes, for instance allowing a more critical, privately

²⁰⁴ . *Futtuwah* is an old local term used to be applied on the notables of the popular slum areas who combine wisdom and force as tools of sovereignty and instating order and justice. Dr. Ahmed Al Magdoub, professor of criminal law in the national center for sociological and criminological research defines *Baltagi* as 'a young, unemployed, poor illiterate man who lives in a shanty or slum area, but he usually works in middle and upper class districts where people need his services to replace the rule of law'.

owned press to flourish, his regime has systematically whittled away civic freedoms²⁰⁵. In May 2008, for instance, the government abruptly extended for two years the official state of emergency, saying that new antiterrorism laws were not yet ready. The emergency laws, which are meant to be applied only against violent threats to the state, have in fact been wielded against every manner of dissent. In one form or another they have been in force for all but three of the past 50 years. Furthermore, the state has surveilled and carried out a series of structural constitutional amendments that enforce the government's control and pave the way for a complete hegemony of the ruling National Democratic Party. The most prominent of these amendments was article 76 concerning the regulation of future presidential elections which set harsh terms planned to exclude any potential opposition candidate from running to the post²⁰⁶.

In addition to the constitutional amendments and the oppressive emergency laws, the Egyptian juridical system since 1952 was designed to guarantee unlimited authority for the executive branch of the state especially the president. Nasrawi claims:

“The 1971 constitution, for instance, allows the president to control the bureaucracy, the government, the judiciary and the army through both legislation and appointment. In this context, the security officers always recommend specific people who are loyal to the regime to fill in the important positions within the state. Simultaneously, the regulations of any state's institutes were engineered to provide its power holders with unlimited authorities. Thus, the president appoints the minister of justice, who in turn, is responsible for appointing and dismissing judges, allowing bonuses and promotions and tens of different powers. The same applies for universities, governorates, local governments and almost every organization within the state. Eventually, these power holders, who have been largely appointed in their positions according to security recommendation reports, have acted as the invisible hand of the regime and its security apparatus. In this sense, certain judges, for example, are positioned in the sensitive electoral centers to ensure the chances of government's candidate to win, or referring sensitive lawsuits to specific loyal judges, and so on”²⁰⁷

The unlimited authority given to state administrators encouraged them to transcend the official regulations and resort to exceptional laws, implementing them in

²⁰⁵ . “Will the Dam Burst”, *The Economist*, 11 September.2008.

²⁰⁶ . International Crisis Group ICG report 2005.

²⁰⁷ . Nasrawi, Saif. 2006. “The Egyptian Movement for Change (*Kefaya*): A political Struggle for Democracy”. MA Thesis. The American University in Cairo. P.65.

non-exceptional situations. Instating the rule of exception consequently legitimized the prevalence of an informal law that perpetuates chaos and impunity.

6. 3. Becoming Notable... Becoming Hero

Becoming ‘notables’ of the half-hazard district is part of the heroism that the main characters in *Heen Maysara* and *El Lemby* claim, thus signaling a new form of self-actualization that emerged under violent and bare conditions of life. It is a window of opportunity that allowed the paupers relative control on their private lives that are too trivial, yet complex, for the state to interfere to manage. *Heen Maysara* and *El Lemby* represented a society that possesses a mechanism of internal governance unbound by the modern institutions. Hence, the films embodied a criticism of the hegemonic discourse about the full control of the state over the everyday life of *ashwaiyyat* residents. The way Hashisha continued in his relationship with the police officer is telling about the role of minor agents in formulating the state’s moral presence despite of its disengagement from running the daily life matters deploying laws and regulations.

Gradually Hashisha starts to acquire importance for the bosses of the junior police officer. They order him to work on monitoring the Islamist groups in the district (‘Drugs are not important, those people with beards should be controlled’). This acquired importance provoked the young officer who noticed that Hashisha is becoming more arrogant and manipulative in their man-to-man encounters. The officer fabricated a drug dealing case for Hashisha and arrested him. He was sentenced five years in prison which raised the rage of the senior officer who gave a long speech about how the arrogance and jealousy of the junior officer made him commit a fatal mistake and lose an important eye of the police in the district.

After the release of Hashisha the police officer goes further in persecuting Hashisha and receives information that his brother is a member of Al Qaeda. The officer detained Hashisha’s mother and all of his acquaintances like Fathi and his wives and tortured them using dogs, electricity and sexual harassment to force them to admit that membership. Hashisha, affected by the humiliating scene of torture, swears to take

revenge from the officer. He arranges with the leader of the Islamist group in the district to make an ambush of the police forces for a big sum of money. The security forces reach the district after the militants placed explosives everywhere. Hashisha succeeds to kidnap the officer and threaten to kill him. The officer surrenders and begs Hashisha to let him live and handed him his gun with his head down. Hashisha says: “Now, I took my revenge”. Additional security forces reached the district and ordered the residents to evacuate the place because there is a ‘political decision’ to remove it with bulldozers. The leader of the Islamist group give orders to explode the district and escapes at the end of the film.

The story of Hashisha demonstrates partly the precariousness of the state’s image as it identifies the haphazardness and the utter violence used in managing dangerous situations. The film also shows how the unlimited authority given to state officers encouraged them to transcend the formal regulations and resort to exceptional laws, implementing them in non-exceptional situations. Instating the rule of exception consequently legitimized the prevalence of an informal law that perpetuates chaos and impunity. Mohamed Said argues:

“They are not laws in the real meaning of the word; a general statement that regulates similar cases or phenomena. They are political orders aiming at granting the political system an advantage in every single subject, denying the opponents the chance to get any plus even by using force, banning any sort of political activity and bridging every gap in the schema of ironic control on the public field. That is why all the legislations of the despotic system are extremely punishing, very long and badly formulated to ease the criminalization of ordinary comportments if needed. This kinky philosophy legitimized chaos and made it impossible for state employees to use their minds or depend on a juridical reference, because the legislative authority is even more ignorant than the executive one, and their cooperation produces a real catastrophe”²⁰⁸

²⁰⁸ . Said, Mohamed. 2008. “The state and the chaos” in *Al Badeel* newspaper, April 2008.

6.4. The Fragmented State Presence and Resistance

Mapping out the brutality and uncertainty that characterize the behavior of the security apparatus in Egypt was also part of *El Lemby*'s subtext. The representatives of the apparatus are provoked, in a selective fashion, to arrest poor peddlers and impede the accomplishment of any simple dream of El Lemby. However, they never show up in the violent battles among residents with knives or in the drug smoking spaces. The apparatus was portrayed as part of the fragmented state that is not practicing violence towards its subjects to instate order and security. In contrast, the apparatus delivers a contradictory message that make of the absolute state control more of an elusive discourse deployed only to apply more violence and exclusion towards the disenfranchised.

It is noticeable in *El Lemby* and *Heen Maysara* that the united construct of the state never exists, it is rather represented. The effect that the state agents produce on daily basis is the only proof on the existence of such power (detention, fabricated crimes, torture...). Timothy Mitchell²⁰⁹ studies 'the state as effect' and stresses the elusive character of the state's existence. Joel S. Migdal²¹⁰ goes further when he suggests that some counterpractices and contradictory processes can destabilize this construct in a similar fashion. Ismail elaborates on this idea in relation to the Egyptian context:

“We should pay attention not only to the practices that produce the image of the state as an all powerful agent, but also to those that undermine this image. In this sense, I suggest that while certain rituals of state power bring citizens up to the state's majesty others bring them around to see its broken nature. As such, I analyze the citizens' encounters with the everyday state as rituals of power that bring the state down to the people and, in so doing, may occasion ridicule, contempt and derision”²¹¹.

In my opinion, media representations are part of this process of deconstruction of the public gaze of the unitary construct of the state. On the one hand, they confer a specific significance (appreciation, apprehension, conviviality, etc...) in the dramatic

²⁰⁹ . Mitchell, Timothy. 1989. *Colonizing Egypt*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press.

²¹⁰ . Migdal, Joel S. 2001. *State in Society: Studying How States and Societies Constitute One Another*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

²¹¹ . Ismail, Salwa 2006. *Political Life in Cairo's New Quarters*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. P.32

plots of daily micro-processes where subjects encounter state officials and administrators. Also, they expose the fragmentation of the mythical power of the state and propose different alternatives to the dominant script. Hence, the symbolic power of representation is the ability to challenge the hegemonic discourse and assimilating the minor counterpractices of the daily life into an awareness of the processes of control and dominance on the social activity exerted by the state.

However, we should not rush to conclude that this assimilation process that happens when viewers watch a film or a documentary empower their resistance strategies. We should even think about the contrary that such a representation may invoke, in my opinion, a temporary response like laughter or anger which may impede the conscious acts of resistance that may happen in reality. Mbembe contends:

“The question of whether humor in the ‘postcolony’ is an expression of ‘resistance’ or not, whether it is, a priori, opposition, or simply manifestation of hostility toward authority, is thus of secondary importance. For the most part, those who laugh are only reading the signs left, like rubbish, in the wake of the commandment.”²¹²

6.5. Romanticizing subordination: We hate you... we'll keep serving you

Infusing the social imaginary with representations where the powerful state is fragmented and deconstructed may perpetuate the inability of the subordinates to resist. In my opinion *Heen Maysara* and *El Lemby* made of the repressive measures and grotesque control of the state over the daily minor practices of its subjects a naturalized fact of life. Representing the subjects in their everyday as working around the institutions of domination rather than questioning their brutality (like *Hashisha*) reproduces the imagery of the state as the ‘total cosmology’ that even the counterpractices (claimed by Migdal) occur under its umbrella. Fitting in the matrix of the corrupt ruler and engaging in survival strategies can hardly qualify as resistance, as Salwa Ismail states²¹³.

From this perspective, it is hard to imagine through the representation of the police institution in both films that the uncertainty and shakiness of the state imagery is

²¹² . Mbembe, Achille. 2001. “The Aesthetics of Vulgarly” In *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley: University of California Press. P. 108.

²¹³ . Ismail, Salwa. 2006. *Political Life in Cairo's New Quarters*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. P. xxiii.

consistent and that the narratives of resistance embedded in the texts can become 'true'. Finding a unifying logic for the performance of the state and the subordinates turns to be an unattainable endeavor. All the signs, signifiers and signifieds in these representations should be read versus a background of the 'chaotically pluralistic' space of their formation. According to Mbembe:

"It is in practice impossible to create a single, permanently stable out of all the signs, images, and markers current in the postcolony; this is why they are constantly being shaped and reshaped, as much by the rulers as by the ruled, in attempts to rewrite the mythologies of power. This is why; too, the postcolony is, per excellence, a hollow pretense, a regime of unreality (regime du simulacra). By making it possible to play and have fun outside the limits set by officialdom, the very fact that the regime is a sham allows ordinary people to simulate adherence to the innumerable official rituals that life in the postcolony requires"²¹⁴

The finale of *Heen Maysara* makes a good example of the disturbed system of signifieds in the representation of the official institution and its incorporated subjects. The rebellious hero succeeds to challenge the institution in a very strong symbolic metaphor in the scene with the officer begging for his life and handling his gun (here symbolic of giving up control and a subversion of the power relations). There are even claims that the Ministry of Interior interfered to shorten this scene and remove the part where the officer falls on his knees, which Youssef interprets as follows:

"I would cut the hands that censor any scene in my movies or any other sort of artistic creativity product, the censorship apparatus had some logical remarks on the film, like when the officer falls on his knees to not create a problem with the police institution, then I agreed to write a thankful note on the final titer for the police because I do really appreciate their role and do not want the situation to become a chaos. Eventually, we resort to the police in situations of disorganization even if this institution oppresses and punishes its 'sons' when they exceed the limits..."²¹⁵

Youssef keeps sending contradictory messages about his challenge of the authorities, while positioning himself within its boundaries and hence admits the necessity of the deployment of oppression and violence selectively. Youssef says that we are the 'sons' of the security apparatus that engulfs the state and this father consequently

²¹⁴ . Mbembe, Achille. 2001. "The Aesthetics of Vulgarly" In *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley: University of California Press. P. 108.

²¹⁵ . Interview with Youssef. *Al Wafd* newspaper, December 2007.

has the right to discipline its sons no matter what way he uses. In the final titer, Youssef did not only thank the apparatus that exploded the *ashwaiyy* district and its people one minute ago, but also put the following song imbued with metaphors of submissiveness disguised under the noble romantic love of homeland:

*We are the ones who protect her in hard times,
And we are the forgotten in times of joy,
When it sinks, only us who save her,
And when it's safe, we bent under its heaviness,
We are the victims of love and duty,
The eye will never be above the eyebrows,
It is her love that inhabits our blood...*

The song romanticizes the subordination of the poor under slogans of patriotism (usually 'her' is interpreted as Egypt in many artistic metaphors). It sums up the message of Youssef: "the threat of *ashwaiyyat* can be overcome when the state/the father have some 'intelligence' to contain the repressed anger before it explodes."²¹⁶

²¹⁶ . Ibid, 2007.

Conclusion

I argue in this thesis that *Heen Maysara* and *El Lemby* provided me a tool to read how contemporary Egyptian middle class perceive their social reality. Gazing through the different parts of both films was rather similar to having a journey in the social imaginary of this class with all the nuances and diversity it holds. It was also part of examining the deep reasons behind shifts in the relationship, on the level of social discourse, between the poor classes and the well-off ones, a shift from tolerance and sympathy in the last decades to hostility and aggression in the 2000s. Considering myself a member of the middle class, I had the urge to further interrogate the violence, which I catch myself practicing sometimes, and which had become part and parcel of daily life in contemporary Egypt. And when I contemplated the arenas where this violence is most explicit and grotesque, I could not detach the state policies from the picture and I reviewed what appears like an implicit class conflict within a larger sociopolitical framework that invokes the most aggressive formulae of coexistence and social interaction between people in the Egyptian society.

I followed media productions that gradually pulled the causes of the poor and *ashwaiyyat* into the circle of light and adopted a well-determined discourse about finding solutions for them. I kept observing how this discourse took different forms starting from a populist political debate in talk shows and newspapers and rearticulated in both tragic and comic film treatments like *Heen Maysara* and *El Lemby*. I found that in both films the construction of the character of the poor took it to the most extreme of views and imaginations. Regardless of whether the depiction was meant to ignite laughter or tears, both films presented being poor or living in *ashwaiyyat* as the most distorting and destructive living experience. In both films, the plots essentialized class position and location as the only perspective according to which the characters and their comportment could be judged. Consequently, a set of distinctive and class racist signs and signifieds were disguised behind a shallow moralistic justification always relying on poverty and dwelling in *ashwaiyyat*.

Hence, I started to wonder whether this representation of the “catastrophe” of being poor or living in *ashwaiyyat* is exclusive to these groups of people or it is more of a mirror image of the anxiety of the middle class producers and consumers entangled in a complex predicament. The features of the predicament were also obvious in the media discourse that ran in parallel to defending the rights of the poor and talking about the horrors in *ashwaiyyat*. The themes of the shrinkage of middle class, the chaos infiltrating social institutions and the absence of the rule of law also dominated the social debate and the headlines of newspapers.

I aimed at disclosing the nexus of relations embedded in these cinematic treatments where the characters from upper and lower classes are coercively situated in a chaotic context. At this nexus, the performance of the ruling regime and the sociopolitical history of the postcolonial state in Egypt were highlighted as cornerstone in the formation of the precarious moment Egyptians survive nowadays. I meant to refer to the backgrounds that reinforced the sense of absurdity and founded the social and political discourses that underpinned violence from the state against its citizens and paved the way for an absolute subordination of the state subjects from 1952 till now.

Reviewing the films and the reactions of the audience I explored how processes of social exclusion and societal violence have been intimately related to the reality of deprivation from political freedoms and citizenship rights for successive decades (1952-2008). I could also see as a more tangible fact the connection between creating an indigent and repressive political environment and distorting the very basic human features. In my opinion, El Lemby or Hashisha were not fundamentally lacking money or education, they rather lacked the conception of all relations and regulations through which money or education become valuable and functional tools for survival and social interaction. Reaching such a level of absurdity is an abstract representation not a complex realistic treatment; however, it looked like the easiest and effortless way to represent the reality of impunity that rendered the characters simultaneously powerless and careless in both films.

With an extremist representation of the poor, the producers of both movies targeted the middle class groups who face a serious existential challenge due to the re-arrangement of their position in the contemporary economic and sociopolitical condition. And by stimulating a temporary shallow empathy, the targeted audience was guided to realize the impossibility of a safe coexistence with the marginalized disintegrated groups dwelling in *ashwaiyyat*. Such empathy masked a deeper level of hostility that I tackled in my interviews and analysis. In different parts of this ethnography, I depicted the underlying disgust and aggression towards the poor on the part of audience, cultural elite, and critics of the Egyptian middle class.

I also focused on how the producers of the middle class social imaginary in Egypt succeed in diverting and displacing the state/citizen relationship model to become applicable to the relation between upper and lower classes. In many situations in the films the storyline justified the brutal and grotesque interference of the police and state administrators in structuring the daily life of the poor dwellers of *ashwaiyyat*. Juxtaposing such interference to the utter dominance of the state security apparatus on the public life of the upper classes, we come to notice that it never made the hot topic of media productions or talk shows in the 2000s as *ashwaiyyat* and their hazardous impact on society did.

I attempted to be impartial in presenting the diversified stances of the audience and critics of the films, especially with regard to their impressions about the representation of the poor. I highlighted the reactions of individuals from different positions expressing sometimes opposing points of view. However, I was obviously inclined to criticize and interrogate the “class racist” discourse that surged every now and then in my ethnography. My criticism was based on reviewing these racist tendencies and statements within the context of their construction and reinforcement. To achieve this, I interrogated the history of the postcolonial state in Egypt and linked this history to the academic literature about postcolonial state in Africa, which I consider a challenging argument in this text.

My contribution in this respect was essentially combining the academic frameworks that described the anomalous state/citizens relationship in Egypt as a Middle Eastern state particularity with those frameworks viewing it as one of the numerous drawbacks of the “coloniality” of power in Africa. Emphasizing this combination in my analytical framework, I presented my interpretation to the current sociopolitical conditions and the widely controversial discourse about “chaos” in Egypt. Hence, I tried to challenge the traditional categories that “interpretations of chaos” fall under and aimed at presenting a more complex picture of social agents in their encounters and negotiations of and with state power.

Eventually, I aspire that future academic projects can build on this contribution in two principal ways. First, one contribution relates to the importance of reading widely consumed media representations in relationship to contemporary social reality, in an attempt to explore further the nexus between power and everyday life. The second contribution concerns the necessity of finding new and creative perspectives to interpret state/citizen relationships and dynamics in Egypt. The aim is to challenge traditional assumptions about the reasons behind stagnation and disorder. I presume that presenting an analysis of social reality in Egypt is greatly in need of an academic effort to unpack the complexity it encounters with the hope of understanding the challenging phenomena that is unfolding.

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