

Chapter 9

Desiring the Nation: Masculinity, Marriage, and Futurity in Lebanon

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Introduction

The fictive and imprecise category of the “Arab man” has been documented as effeminate (Najmabadi 2005), violent (Accad 1992; Aghacy 2009; Ghannam 2013; Ghossoub and Sinclair-Webb 2000), and emotionally inferior (Massad 2008; Allouche 2015). Recent scholarship on Arab masculinities has sought to examine them beyond the lens of security, Islam, and negative representations in Western media, by bringing forth novel conceptualizations focused on Arab men’s emotional investment in family life and by drawing our attention to further under-researched masculinities.

Conversely, this chapter goes beyond ethnographic delineations, bridging the gap between anthropological writing and political analysis in order to show how invocations of masculine ideals, illustrated by my interlocutors’ narratives about masculinity and marriage, are constantly shifting. These perceptions emerge at the intersection of perceptions about the nation’s “other”—namely, Syrian refugees—and ongoing economic precarity. To this end, the chapter introduces the concept of the *m’attar*, understood as the “lesser man,” in the context of contemporary Lebanon in order to showcase the enmeshment of nationalistic ideologies with gendered affects.

The discourse surrounding the *m’attar* is almost entirely absent from the literature on masculinity or on gender in the Middle East. This omission reveals how certain knowledges are deemed more important and are therefore more likely to be exported than others. Moreover, and by virtue of its very ontology, the *m’attar* directly challenges the globally produced and consumed stereotype of the Arab man as inherently violent.

The m'attar is often contrasted with and constructed in opposition to the *shāṭer* (pl. *shātara*). The *shāṭer* is astute inasmuch as he is cunning, ingenious, sharp and streetwise. Contrariwise, the m'attar is pitiful and piteous. The production of polarized attributes in relation to hegemonic and subordinate masculinities is far from new. Nonetheless, this chapter shows how the nation reproduces itself through the concomitance of affective attachments with gender. Precisely, it illustrates how the relocation of the m'attar to the realm of the Syrian Other works towards reinforcing Lebanese-ness, understood as sophistication, reciprocity, and empathy as ideal masculine attributes.

The data related in this chapter pertain largely to my female interlocutors. This fact ought not to be seen as outside the aim or scope of this edited work, which places masculinity at its forefront, center, and margins. As Scott (1986, 1074) reminded us, to think about gender analytically is “to treat the opposition between male and female as problematic rather than known, as something contextually defined, repeatedly constructed.” A similar view can be found two decades later in Najmabadi (2005, 1) to whom an analytical use of gender means that “sources about men are also sources about women” and vice versa.

Based on fieldwork I conducted over ten months between 2015 and 2016, I discern a shift in the discourse of marriage in Lebanon from “becoming parents” to “becoming partners.” Similar findings have been documented in contemporary Jordan (Adely 2016), Turkey (Hart 2007) or Iran (Afary 2009). More emphasis is placed on “partnership” and “empathy” than on fulfilling one’s marital duties, to name husbands as “breadwinners” and wives as “good wives/mothers.” This shift challenges traditional household dynamics and could easily be misconstrued as gender equality. Whereas traditional expectations associated with marriage still exist, emotional investment and joint decision-making is equally important. At the same time, my fieldwork informed me that the ideal Lebanese husband is constructed along highly nationalistic lines defined in opposition to a/the Syrian Other. Such

findings are troubling seeing the long history of kin alliances and transnational links between Lebanese and Syrians citizens, which pushes me to conceive of hope as a highly gendered trope that reproduces gender inequality. I thus argue that current articulations of masculine ideals produce marriage as an illusionary space of equality between husband and wife since the shift toward “becoming partners” still reproduces pre-existing masculine societal privileges, albeit in an increasingly precarious economy and anti-Syrian context. Furthermore, and under an increasingly virulent neoliberal economy, the elevation of the Lebanese man “above all other men” emerges from the broader realization that traditional gendered household responsibilities--husbands as “breadwinners” and wives as “good wives/mothers”--have become unattainable. All throughout the chapter, I draw directly on my interlocutors’ narratives and the major themes that saturated my fieldwork in support of my argument.

This chapter first reflects on the fieldwork that informed my work. It then draws upon my data in order to showcase the relocation of the m‘attar to the Syrian Other. The chapter concludes by pondering the conflation of hope with nationalistic attachments in order to conceive of hope as a gendered affect that works toward the production of the nation through exclusionary processes.

Notes on Fieldwork

The fieldwork took place between January and September 2015 and further shorter periods in 2016. It was conducted in the cities of Beirut (Lebanon’s capital) and Tripoli (Lebanon’s second largest city). It was my wish to do a thorough fieldwork in Tripoli, but the events during 2014 and 2015 meant that the city was regularly shut down and mobility reduced. Further shorter periods of follow-up work took place throughout 2016.

Tripoli, unlike Beirut, is hardly the site for ethnographic work conducted in Lebanon. A cosmopolitan city, Beirut is the geographical site of the highly centralized Lebanese state, which results in the proliferation of both local and global businesses, including Lebanon's largest universities and publishing houses. Tripoli's population is almost exclusively Sunni Muslim. However, despite this gap, both cities housed similar narratives on romantic love and spouse selection.

For this research, I interviewed separately twenty cis heterosexual couples preparing for imminent marriage. My interlocutors ranged between twenty and thirty-five years old and most had pursued some level of education upon graduating from high school. Also, most hailed from what could be categorized as middle-to-low income backgrounds. In this chapter, a middle-to-low income refers to a life that, albeit escaping prevalent definitions of poverty, is nevertheless lived in uncertainty. For instance, most of my interlocutors' parents were or had been indebted over a prolonged period as a result of acquiring the necessary tuition fees for their children's schooling and further education. Another example is that of Lina, whose family "were living it to a minimum" at the time of my fieldwork since all their savings went to covering her mother's medical bills following her diagnosis with breast cancer.¹

On another note, Lebanon is understood in this work as the locus where myriads of collectives converge. These collectives endure precarity simultaneously but separately and distinctively. These collectives include but are not limited to, ordinary Lebanese citizens who increasingly find themselves unable to cope with a deteriorating economy, forcibly displaced Syrian citizens who lack the means to rent property, the Palestinian population who has been confined to its camps since the 1950s, and migrant foreign workers who endure colorism and further discriminatory processes on a daily basis. Their everyday befits what Asef Bayat (2013, 15) terms "quiet encroachment," or the "discreet and prolonged

ways in which the poor struggle to survive and to better their lives by quietly impinging on the propertied and powerful, and on society at large.” Although each group encounters and displays a distinct type of precarity, what most interests me is the nationalistic logic that ensues, whereby the Lebanese national self is defined in relation to the lesser Syrian Other. Here, the Syrian Other is best understood as a distilled rhetoric that encapsulates foreignness.

My data hereafter demonstrates the roles of both language and practice in relocating the m'attar to the realm of the Syrian Other. This relocation, I argue, is necessary for the professing of Lebanese-ness as a quintessential masculine ideal in addition to reflecting how nationalist sentiments are produced in tandem with gendered attachments. In other words, hegemonic masculinity increasingly emerges at the intersection of perceptions of the nation's Other--namely Syrian refugees and a life of precarity.

The M'attar as the Syrian “Other”

M'attar, in the Lebanese context, is understood as he who lags behind. Primarily, the m'attar is overall content. He is highly impressionable and rarely challenges the situation in which he finds himself. The m'attar is a mostly gendered construct, as he who is deemed m'attar is usually understood as occupying a subordinate position vis-à-vis his wife. On one occasion, I joined Suha and her female friends for a coffee and a chat at her house.² Suha informed us that her fiancé, Qassem, had his loan application rejected by a multitude of banks: “How pitiful of you, Qassem! You don't succeed at anything!” to which one of her friends replied, “Qassem is too *ādami* [the local equivalent of the gentleman], perhaps too much.”

When surrounded by his wife and daughters, the m'attar is easily eclipsed, as he leaves most of the talking and the decision-making to them. His daughters, if unmarried, are

likely to wear revealing attire, in addition to carrying themselves in a highly flirty manner, which is often interpreted as a clear shortcoming of the m'attar's authority as head of the household. The m'attar, then, is a mostly docile figure and is primarily positioned in opposition to a wife who is deemed "strong," *awiyyeh*, or *shallūf* in Lebanese dialect.

The m'attar is also constructed in relation to further masculinities. A man who succeeds in businesses in particular or in life more generally is deemed *shāṭer*, a positive connotation for what could be otherwise perceived as a conman. A *shāṭer*'s "victims" are described as *m'attareen*, the plural of m'attar. Despite implying some level of cunning and dishonesty, *shātara* also embraces desired and positive connotations such as high intelligence and an exceptionally adaptive nature, which allows one to overcome tricky situations, notably Lebanon's labyrinth-al bureaucracy. A man who is *shāṭer* successfully navigates the bureaucratic, logistical, and socio-political dilemmas in which he finds himself. For example, Karim, in order to avoid standing in the long line at the Ministry of Education, offered 15000 Lebanese Pounds (approximately US\$10) to the person at the head of the line if he would switch places. Opinions about Karim's actions ranged from "unethical" to "clever," as seen by the array of reactions observed; he did, nevertheless, "get the job done."³ In the same vein, women who succeed in finding a wealthy husband are qualified as *shettār*. Seen uncomfortably through a feminist lens, *shātara* portrays women as "manipulative" (Constable 2003, 2014) beings who capitalize on their "erotic power" (Hakim 2010) and whose sexual prowess ought to be regulated for the sake of social order (Mernissi 1987).

Conversely, when the m'attar finds himself in precarious situations, he is understood to have brought it upon himself because of his own lack of scrutiny. Working-class men who rely on side jobs in order to maximize their income often find themselves "cheated" or "abused." Equally, men from the urban bourgeoisie could well fall under the designation of

m'attar. Often, they hold onto their permanently allocated civil servant job and show little interest in climbing the social order. In this sense, the m'attar could or does inhabit a hegemonic space at least financially and politically speaking.

The m'attar must not be confused with the ādami, or the gentleman. The ādami is someone who “does not throw others under the bus” in their pursuit of upper social mobility, something that the shāṭer often does. The ādami carries a pious meaning too, seeing that the ādami is someone who upholds moralistic values typically found in religious rhetoric, notably kindness, and fairness. In popular discourse, the ādami is nostalgically expressed, often in contrast to the insatiable appetite of Lebanon's elite and its class of business oligarchs. It is no wonder then that Suha's friend remarked that perhaps Qassem is “too ādami.”

Te'tir, the substantive form of m'attar, or the state of being m'attar, is also reiterated in everyday vernacular geopolitical debates. Lebanon is reproduced as m'attar, given the lack of its sovereignty and the fact that its domestic politics are dictated by neighboring hegemonic powers, including Saudi Arabia, Iran, and, more recently, Turkey. At the social level, however, *te'tir* is expressed in relation to the Syrian refugee; in this case, its meaning can be stretched to absolute wretchedness and desolation, in addition to reflecting simple-mindedness and a lack of sophistication in matters typically related to taste and consumerism. In what follows, I show how the racialization of the m'attar, exemplified by the intersection of a precarious economy and nationalism, produces affective, hegemonizing, and often imaginary narratives surrounding Lebanese masculinity.

For Farah, work is simply a temporary occupation. She shows no sign of professional progress and would rather text her fiancé all day on WhatsApp than work on the interminable case files piling up on her desk, a decades-old and heavily chipped piece of furniture occupying a dimly-lit corner in a bleak-looking office within an unassuming

building in the *Burj hammūd* neighborhood. When I asked Farah what work meant to her she replied: “Pfff (venting). I couldn’t care less about my work! So what? Life does not depend on my work! It’s not like I am solving the crisis of the Middle East!”⁴

Farah’s views on her career echo the work of Shehadeh (1999, 67–8), who remarks that work constitutes a “means of financial support” for women in Lebanon, rather than “an avenue for self-expression and stimulation” and is discarded once economic stability is achieved, either through marriage or inheritance. Farah continued:

I want to contribute to the household. The salary is important. But it doesn’t mean that I want to become a manager of the sort. Who can afford not to work nowadays? All I have to do is retrieve whatever folder my boss is looking for. I don’t want to get involved a tiny bit more, and I couldn’t care less.⁵

Whereas Farah showed little enthusiasm toward her career, Layal exhibited a highly positive attitude vis-à-vis work: “My mother is bored all the time. I feel rather sorry for her. She is a housewife. She never worked a day in her life. Sometimes she assists my father with his shop, but apart from that, her life is quite empty.”

For Layal, as was the case for many of my interlocutors, both male and female, the traditional view that holds that adulthood emerges alongside marriage is increasingly seen as “ludicrous”:

What a *maskhara* [mockery]. I’ve been working for six years now, and I contribute to the finances of the household. I am paying for my own car, and I help with my grandmother’s medical bills. No one is going to treat me like a child anymore! Whether I am married or not!

When I asked Layal if she would consider leaving work once she gets married, she categorically rejected such a prospect. On the contrary, she remarked that “marriage leads to misery,” a point that Mahmood, her fiancé, agreed upon: “Look at all the married women! They give birth, and that’s it. I do not intend to quit life. I want to enjoy life with Mahmood and our children.”

This novel rapprochement between wife and husband deviates from widespread depictions of the Arab woman as zealously confined to her household. At the same time, we should resist viewing it from a “celebratory” stance exclusively. After all, most of my interlocutors had at least one relative living and working abroad, which could influence what might be thought of as their progressive perspectives. My female interlocutors, in particular, often stressed the financial difficulties in which their male counterparts find themselves. As Jana remarked:

The other day [my brother and I] saw a Filipina (referring to a migrant female domestic worker from the Philippines) walking a dog. My brother envied the dog so much. My brother hasn’t had a job for two years now. The jobs he comes across are too demeaning, and he is undoubtedly better off without them.⁶

Although Jana does not address the racist and sexist rhetoric that is often found in discussions involving female migrant workers, her narrative reflects how work and societal understandings of masculinity are mutually constitutive: *a man does not exist outside of his work*, and the nature of one’s work--regardless of his level of expertise--directly contributes to him being placed along the echelon of a particular masculinity. At the same time, Jana’s own admission that her brother “is better off” without a job than with a “demeaning” one

indicates how both men and women contribute to the consolidation of systems of masculinities and femininities. Whereas a disdain for manual labor characterizes the view of the majority of the young Lebanese men with whom I spoke, most of these men aspired to occupy jobs with the title of *mudīr*, or manager. For many Lebanese men, the title of *mudīr* distinguishes them from lesser masculinities that verge on the definition of the *m‘attar*. Still, this title is a mere performance: it does not necessarily imply a managerial position, with all the qualifications it entails. If anything, the *mudīr*, despite the title, often finds himself performing manual work and administrative tasks: from organizing shelves as a supermarket manager, attending customers as a café manager, or minding the petrol transfer pumps as a petrol station manager.

Jeena, like many of my female interlocutors, reproduces Lebanese men as sophisticated when juxtaposed against further Arab men:

Jeena: I’m not going to marry a Palestinian man, let alone a Syrian one, am I now?

Me: Why not?

Jeena: Come on now! Unbelievable. Look around! Who do you see? There are only Syrians and God-knows-what in this country.

Me: But surely not all Syrian and Palestinian men are “bad”. . . .

Jeena: Come one! Our men are special. They are educated, clean, and they’ve seen the world!⁷

Jeena contributes to the hegemonizing of certain masculinities at the expense of others. Although Jeena puts little weight on wealth, she nonetheless insists on the importance of a Lebanese man that is not “*m‘attar*.” By elevating the Lebanese man, she reiterates the patriarchal and gendered patterns of connectivity and relationality in Lebanon

(Joseph 2001), which elevates the men and the elders at the expense of women and children. Consequently, she inadvertently reproduces Lebanon's "control/care paradigm" (Joseph 2001), in which men simultaneously control and care for women. Ultimately, Jeena perceives marriage as a space of shared affectivities and long-term partnership. Her narrative is mostly absent from the literature on marriage and kin relations in the Middle East, seeing how both are usually depicted as a "fact of life" in addition to being examined through a lens that reinforces the role of the state and the relevance of the personal status code. Similar views emphasizing Lebanese-ness were raised by Sam, a forty-something single man and owner of a female fashion store in Tripoli: "Where are the good men? They have all gone. This country is being ruled by *ze'rān* (thugs) . . . *te'fir!* Utter *te'fir!* Thugs and *m'attaraīn*, who else do you find when you look around?"⁸

When I asked Sam if he would consider moving abroad, he answered: "I am almost fifty. I am single. This store is all I have. You think one can simply pack and go? And for what? To live in the Gulf?"⁹

Undoubtedly, economic hardship pushes a large number of Lebanese citizens, notably men, to seek work opportunities elsewhere. Those who "fall behind" or are not employed remain in a least desired situation. Following Sam's logic, if the "good men" are gone, then the particular femininity/ies that co-produce "good men," it/they too must be gone. Femininities and masculinities do not emerge independently of each other; to the contrary: they are mutually constitutive. It is also important to remind ourselves that one community's "good men" (and women) are distinct from another's. Patriarchally informed connectivity in Lebanon dictates particular patterns for forging relationships with others, and despite my interlocutors' romanticization of the "Lebanese man," it is imperative that we remember that the "Lebanese man" is always situated within one's sect. Clearly, not

only are affectivities gendered, they also succumb to further societal constructs, including sect.

A Gendered Futurity

In this chapter, the excess of the appropriation of the slogan of “Lebanon is for the Lebanese” is best captured in my female interlocutors’ understandings of Lebanese masculinity through and in opposition to the Syrian Other. Desire contributes to the gendering of each of the nation-state, love, marriage, and the nuclear family. Desire reflects how a nation imagines itself through the desiring of certain bodies over other bodies. This translates in the erection of barriers around bodies deemed “too honorable” or “too precious” to access, evident in the ways in which my interlocutors celebrate and articulate love while injecting it with a highly nationalistic lexicon.

Lutz and Abu-Lughod (1990) critique the culturally revitalizing, often essentializing, and psychology and learning-theory driven existing works on emotions. They include a variety of contexts to support their overall view of emotions as a valid source of knowledge and as socio-culturally constructed. In the context of the United States, Berlant (1999, 54) conceives “national sentimentality” in order to describe how those emotions that resonate with the “national” justify the excesses of the state: “[The] nation is peopled by suffering citizens and noncitizens whose structural exclusion from the [utopian-American] dreamscape exposes the state’s claim of legitimacy and virtue to an acid wash of truth telling that makes hegemonic disavowal virtually impossible, at certain points of political intensity.”

Lebanese-ness as an attribute of ideal masculinity encompasses both immaterial and tangible concepts. How an affect emerges has to do with material underpinnings that shape it in the first place. Every day, we are faced with objects and places that are engulfed with

particular affects, which allow them to evoke specific feelings in us. Following my interlocutors, marriage is seen as a space of mutual care and synchronicity. This “make-believe,” I argue, is the result of an increasingly neoliberal climate where the present is lived in anticipation and is imagined along gendered tropes and masculine lines. This hopeless hope not only recalls Berlant’s (2011) “stupid optimism” but resonates with the postcolonial

Zournazi (2002) introduces her edited anthology on hope by stating that “hope can be what sustains life in the face of despair.” Like most critical affect scholars, she maintains the link between hope and the lived reality. Following Zournazi (2002, 14–15), hope cannot be disassociated from happiness or optimism; at the same time, she argues that the visions of happiness one might experience are but an “imagined reality” that works toward attenuating one’s sense of “instability”--an argument that echoes the concept of “ontological security.”

To speak of hope as a universal concept is to strip it from its economical and material meanings, in addition to eliminating the “social” entirely from it. It is akin to viewing the world through a gender-neutral or colorblind lens, or to ignore the intersection of gender or race in the production of uneven bodies. Speaking of hope, Duggan states:

When I think about *hope*, I set it alongside *happiness* and *optimism*, which I immediately associate with race and class privilege, with imperial hubris, with gender and sexual conventions, with mal-distributed forms of security both national and personal. They can operate as the affective reward for conformity, the privatized emotional bonus for the right kind of investments in the family, private property and the state. (Duggan and Muñoz 2009, 276)

Seen through a feminist lens, hope becomes increasingly difficult to summon--a state of affairs cultural theorists refer to as a “crisis of hope.” Kompridis (2006, 247) goes as far

as to argue that whatever “change” we experience is but “a symptom of our powerlessness rather than . . . the product of our own agency.” Indeed, the intersection of relationality with a patriarchal order results in an affective paradox in Lebanon: love becomes entangled with power. The instrumentalization of gender during the era of nation-building across the Arab world and elsewhere is well-documented in the literature (e.g., Kandiyoti 1991; Abu-Lughod 1998; Yuval-Davis 1997; McClintock 1995). For the sake of the nation, women are constructed as the “symbolic bearers of the collectivity’s identity and honor, both personally and collectively” (Yuval-Davis 1997, 45). Similar state-sponsored understandings of women became apparent in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, with each of Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt’s newly elected government inaugurating their rule with laws and decrees that target women specifically.

Just like the nation-state regulates citizens’ every day, the Lebanese-ing of the “ideal husband” contributes to the gendering of both hope and futurity. My reading of my interlocutors’ narratives bring forth the work of Sabbagh (1996), who argued that the Lebanese civil war resulted in the breakdown of the social order, which, in its turn, led to the intensification of family ties. Khatib (2008, 448) builds on Sabbagh’s work to argue that “the increased adherence to the family can be understood in the context of a society lacking an official protector.” More recently, Kandiyoti (2013) conceptualized “masculinist restoration” in an attempt to theorize the recent backlash and “alienation” (Jabiri 2018) that Arab marginalized bodies, particularly women, have been enduring since 2011. In a similar vein, I view the renewed interest in the Lebanese man as a neo control/care paradigm that reinforces the paradox of the entanglement of love with power in Lebanon. This renewal, nevertheless, occurs in an increasingly militarized climate that brings forth what Cockburn (1999) calls an “ethics of purity”: where an “ethic of purity” prevails, women and marginalized selves become a tool to distinguish a community from another. This is seen in

the renewal of racial confrontations between the Lebanese population and the Syrian refugees for example, or in increasingly violent cases of domestic violence observed at the time of fieldwork (Allouche 2017). Both scenarios recall a masculinity in crisis that is struggling to come to terms with a plunging economy, increased unemployment, and a high immigration rate. Moreover, this purity is increasingly defined along anti-Syrian lines. Current articulations of masculine ideals, it seems, are the result of Lebanon's crumbling economy and the Lebanese state's failure to foster a national home. In other words, they are the re-fashioning of the aesthetics of the very same patriarchal social order that has governed the lives of Lebanese men throughout history.

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- 1 Interview with Lina, March 2016, Beirut.
 - 2 Breakfast gathering with Suha and her friends, May 2014, Tripoli.
 - 3 Fieldwork notes, July 2014, Beirut.
 - 4 Interview with Farah, May 2014, Burj ḥammūd.
 - 5 Interview with Layal, March 2014, Tripoli.
 - 6 Interview with Jana, August 2014, Beirut.
 - 7 Interview with Jeena, September 2015, Jbeil.
 - 8 Interview with Sam, February 2014, Tripoli.
 - 9 Ibid.