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Home under siege: Bab al-Hara, televising morality and everyday life in the Levant

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Home Under Siege:

Bab al-Hara, Televising Morality and Everyday Life in the Levant

HELENA NASSIF

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The Arabic language evolved slowly across the millennia, leaving little undefined, no nuance shaded. Bayt translates literally as house, but its connotations resonate beyond rooms and walls, summoning longings gathered about family and home. In the Middle East, bayt is sacred. Empires fall. Nations topple. Borders may shift or be realigned. Old loyalties may dissolve or, without warning, be altered. Home, whether it be structure or familiar ground, is finally, the identity that does not fade.

(Shadid, 2012: xiii)

What disappointments await the naive traveller to the famous cities of the fabulous East! Were all those old story-tellers lying? Did they see things differently then? Can things and people have changed so much? The eagerly awaited wonders, the marvellous surprises, the ruins, the monuments, the stories from the Thousand and One Nights, the folksongs and dances - they are no longer enough to colour the spectacle and transform it for us. Naples, Baghdad, Calcutta: the same sun shines down on the same rags, the same running sores. The myths have disappeared, the rituals and magic spells have lost their glamour. All we can see now are the destitute masses, and the ignoble apparatus of domination which lies over them, the unlovely art of power. There is nothing left to seduce us. Everywhere a bare-faced display of force: rifles, armoured cars, policemen.

(Lefebvre, 1991a: 44)

ABSTRACT

This PhD research investigates the role of television in representing the past and constructing an idealized society using a case study of a phenomenal Ramadan drama series, *Bab el-Hara*. The television drama, a Syrian production, was funded by the pan-Arab satellite conglomerate, the MBC group, and it is set in a fictitious Damascus of the 1930s under the French Mandate. The series, airing its seventh season in Ramadan, 2015, succeeded in achieving pan-Arab fame and gave a boost to the "Damascene Milieu" drama genre. The study approaches this television phenomenon ethnographically, looking at the fiction's implicatedness in the everyday life of viewers and makers in Damascus and in Beirut, through a multi-sited approach investigating content, context and agency, engaging in questions on space, morality and patriotism. The objective is to investigate audiences, text and makers as distinct yet connected sites of meaning.

This context based analysis of *Bab al-Hara* takes place against the backdrop of 2010/2011; the liminal state of a Levant entering deeper into a complex local, regional and international power struggle. The everyday life of *Bab al-Hara's* viewers was characterized by a general sense of loss and mistrust, and an unclear and threatened future. Contrastingly, *Bab al-Hara* provided the nostalgic promise of ontological security, grounded as it was in the courtyard houses of Old Damascus. The Damascene courtyard house constituted the spatial anchor for an idealized moral past, an ahistorical Damascus-focused Arab cultural history, and an imagination of the domestic as sovereign. It thus promoted a view of the neighbourly, the city and the country as a system based on kin, or the family, as the frame in which to understand the collectivity.

Bab al-Hara's cultural, moral and spatial telos, a fusion of religious and nationalist worldviews, amongst others, is negotiated by *Bab al-Hara's* viewers. The older generation, with situated experience of the social relations during the 1930s, and the younger generation that is appreciative of the virility of the "real" *Bab al-Hara* man that they no longer encounter in their everyday life. The multiple generational readings in regard to the absent idealized strength and authority, became a dominant reading in relation to chastity and unity as two idealized values that are necessary to conserve, but that are facing serious challenges in the everyday.

Bab al-Hara idealizes a moral domestic society that is set in the past and it aims to advance a discourse on unity and patriotism. In so doing, however, it only exposes the weakness of the national project. The Syrian social upheaval in 2011 shows how unity and patriotism as the binaries to sectarianism and treason, have not succeeded in protecting the inner domain of the house from external invasions or internal divisions. In fact, accusations of treason, instead of forcing the outsider to the outside and building solidarity within, accentuates mistrust between the insiders and reveals the power and the limits of the *Bab al-Hara* imaginary of a kin based collectivity, and the omnipresence of imperialism.

CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

I follow a simplified system of transliteration that is based on the International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES). I mainly use the formal Arabic words, except in a few cases where I use the colloquial terms. I eliminated the diacritical marks, except (ʿ) for the ʿayn and (') for the hamza. I italicize only the first appearance of Arabic terms.

To protect the anonymity of all of the research participants, I have used pseudonyms, that is, all first names used in the text are pseudonyms. Full names that appear in the text refer to public figures who have agreed to give the interviews under their own names. Where full names or geographical names do not follow the simplified transliteration system, it is because I use the common transliteration, or the version that was adopted by the individuals themselves.

All translations from Arabic into English, including those of the interviews and texts, are by the author, unless otherwise specified.

DECLARATION

I declare that all the material contained in this thesis is my own.

Helena Nassif

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION: ACCESSING THE NEIGHBOURHOOD GATE

Four years into the social upheavals and repercussions that are, until today, changing the Arab region, *Bab al-Hara* continues to constitute a social phenomenon, a cultural reference and a circulating narrative that withstands rupture, violence and massive population migration across the region. *Bab al-Hara*, a Ramadan drama series of two seasons that began to be aired during Ramadan 2006 and 2007 on MBC 1, part of the MBC Group,[1] succeeded in attracting a global popularity among Arab speaking audiences.[2] The first two seasons, directed by Bassam al-Malla, were written by Marwan Qaouq and produced by Syrian Aaj Productions. The subsequent seasons, were produced by MBC Group under the supervision of Bassam al-Malla, Maysalun Films, who bought the rights of the concept for seven seasons from Qaouq.[3] The MBC group has so far commissioned five seasons of *Bab al-Hara* which were aired between 2008 and 2015 and was suspended for three years due to the Syrian upheaval between 2011 and 2013.[4] *Bab*

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[1] MBC 1 is part of the MBC Group. The Middle East Broadcasting Centre (MBC) Group is the first free-to-air private satellite broadcasting company targeting Arab speaking audiences worldwide (an estimated 250 million). It was founded in London in 1991 by Walid bin Ibrahim al-Ibrahim (who still holds major ownership), the brother-in-law of King Fahd of Saudi Arabia. It moved its headquarters to Dubai Media City in 2002. The Group includes a variety of television channels: MBC 1, 2, 3 and 4, MBC Max, MBC Egypt 1 and 2, MBC Bollywood, MBC Drama, MBC Action, MBC Pro Sports and the Al Arabiya 24 news channel. For more information, please visit MBC.net and see Della Ratta et al. (2015) (eds.) *Arab Media Moguls*. London: I.B.Tauris.

[2] Hanieh (2011) states that the MBC Group is one of the five largest media conglomerates that dominate free-to-air satellite TV in the Middle East. He shows that the top 10 channels claim more than 70% of advertising revenue, and that 26% of the free-to-air TV market share in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE is held by MBC (p.123). For more information, see Hanieh, Adam (2011) *Capitalism and Class in the Gulf Arab States*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

[3] Bassam al-Malla is known for directing drama series that fall under the genre "Damascene Milieu." He first worked as an assistant director with Alaa-eddine Kokash, one of the intellectual artists who has worked in the Syrian Television since its establishment in 1961. In the '70s and '80s, Kokash directed drama series set in the Damascene *hara*. These series critically engaged with the traditional Damascene neighbourhood and the habits of its people. The first drama series that was labelled under the "Damascene Milieu" genre is Kokash's drama series Abu Kamel (1990-1993). This genre builds on the nostalgia for the old Damascene neighbourhoods, the telling of the life world stories of ways of life that are no longer dominant. Contrary to drama series that are set in the Damascene hara of the '70s and '80s, the majority of the "Damascene Milieu" series are, so far, period dramas set in the Damascus of the early 20th century. This genre has taken a regional scope with the success of *Bab al-Hara*. Al-Malla is regarded as one of the main directors participating in the development of the "Damascene Milieu" genre. He received critical acclaim for representing Damascene folklore in his series Ayam Shamiyya [Damascene Days] (1992), al-Khawali [The Old Days] (1995) and Layali al-Salhieh [Salhieh Nights] (2004). He was, however, criticised for misrepresenting Damascus in *Bab al-Hara* and shifting from producing televised folklore to false history.

[4] *Bab al-Hara* seasons and the corresponding years of release: *Bab al-Hara* 1 (2006), *Bab al-Hara* 2 (2007), *Bab al-Hara* 3 (2008), *Bab al-Hara* 4 (2009), *Bab al-Hara* 5 (2010), *Bab al-Hara* 6 (2014) and *Bab al-Hara*

al-Hara's Arab regional popularity, unprecedented for a Syrian production, coincided with it constituting a site of contestation over meaning in Syria. Journalists and intellectuals in the Syrian and Lebanese press continue to criticise *Bab al-Hara* for misrepresenting the social history of Damascus during the '30s and for devalueing the role of women in the public sphere (Abu Khalil, 2010; al-Sawwah, 2007; Halimeh, 2014; Kanaan, 2009, 2012, 2014).[5] Academic analysis reads *Bab al-Hara* as a dramatization of Syrian identity (Al-Ghazzi, 2013). The makers of *Bab al-Hara* respond to criticism in different ways. al-Malla firstly denies that *Bab al-Hara* misrepresents historical Damascus and references works of literature to argue that he has not "distorted" history.[6] In Season 3, a strong female Christian character, was introduced to answer to the critics, who had attacked *Bab al-Hara* for showing Damascus as uni-sectarian and women as submissive.[7] On June 7th, 2015, MBC declared, in a press release, that *Bab al-Hara* 7 will be part of its Ramadan bundle and quotes Abbas al-Nouri[8] one of the main stars of the series:[9]

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7 (2015).

[5] A wide range of newspaper articles, blog posts, Facebook posts, WhatsApp messages circulated that criticised *Bab al-Hara* and confronted its representation with alternative information, facts and images of Damascus in the 1930s. One example is the photograph which dates back to 1885 of the first Syrian women to be trained as a medical doctor in the USA. For more information see Woolf (2013) Historical Photos Depict Women Medical Pioneers. *Public Radio International*. [Online] Available from: http://www.theworld.org/2013/07/historical-photos-depict-women-medical-pioneers/ [Accessed 9th July, 2015].

[6] For more information, please read the interview with al-Malla. Houmani, Hawraa (2007) Bassam al-Malla: *Bab al-Hara* Maʿ Sabeq al-Israr [Bassan al-Malla: *Bab al-Hara* is Premeditated]. *Al-Akhbar*. Issue 363, 26 October. [Online] Available from: http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/135362 [Accessed 7th June, 2015].

[7] For more information on the character of Umm Joseph, please see Chapter 8.

[8] I interviewed Abbas al-Nouri in his house in Damascus on 3rd December, 2010. He was the main star of *Bab al-Hara* Seasons 1&2, in the role of Abu Issam. The Abu Issam character was killed (while away helping the rebels) in the first episode of *Bab al-Hara* Season 3, as a result of disagreements between al-Nouri and the producer Bassam al-Malla. al-Malla kept the door open for al-Nouri's possible return to the series by rendering Abu Issam a martyr in the fiction, without his body being found. In Season 5, we learn that Abu Issam is still alive and is in captivity in a French prison. Al-Nouri returned to *Bab al-Hara* in Season 6 (2014). In his interview with me, al-Nouri criticised *Bab al-Hara*'s non-historical representation of Damascus. He was developing a script, with his wife, the scriptwriter 'Anoud Khaled, produced as Taleʿ al-Fedda (2011), a "Damascene Milieu" drama series that is based on historical research on the last years of Ottoman rule over Syria (1914-1918) and the social history of Tale' al-Fedda, a neighbourhood of Damascus. Al-Nouri starred is the series, directed by Seif-eddine al-Sibai, a well-known director of "Damascene Milieu" drama series, who advocates that the genre respects the historical representation of Damascus. He directed the three seasons of al-Hosrom al-Shami [Damascene Sour Grapes] (2007-2008-2009), the two seasons of Awlad al-Qaymarieh [The Children of Qaymarieh] (2008-2009) and the second season of Ahel al-Rayeh [The Flag's People] (2010), which was initially directed by Alaa-eddine Kokash (2008) (see footnote 3).

[9] I write this introduction just days before the beginning of Ramadan, 2015. MBC has released the promotional video of *Bab al-Hara* 7, which is to be aired on MBC during Ramadan, 2015 (17th June- 17th July). The promotional video tells yet another story of collaboration from within. For the promo, check MBC (2015) Promo.. Maka'id wa Mu'amarat man yatasadda laha fi "*Bab al-Hara* 7"?['Promo.. Wiles and Conspiracies Who Protects "*Bab al-Hara* 7"?] 12 June. [Online] Available from: http://www.mbc.net/ar/programs/ramadan-2015/articles/باب-الحارة-في-لها-يتصدى-من-مؤامرات-ومكائد--برومو؟-7.html [Accessed 14th June, 2015].

This season is based on real sources that depict the real life of Damascenes, based on historical references that document the '30s of the last century. In short, this is what this work needs to become more realistic. It is not enough to assume a Damascene neighbourhood with a leader, a Sheikh and the elderly, to represent a traditional Damascene community. A scenario of this kind disparages Damascus during the last century, for it holds a closer resemblance to the historical period between 1600 and 1700 AD. It is certainly not consistent with the first half of the 20th century that is supposedly covered by the work, since the people's habits were different. This series exceeded the limits of mass success to what is beyond that, and we now have an additional responsibility to our broader Arab audience, especially if we want to build on past successes to gain more success. *Bab al-Hara* returns, in this season, to the depths of reality. Firstly, we observe furtherance in "social solidarity" among various segments of the society that is represented within the *Bab al-Hara* neighbourhood, and with families in other neighbourhoods. On the political level, events shed light on real political and historical facts, like the 1936 treaty that established the Syrian independence. The neighbourhood is deeply incorporated into the national fight against the French Mandate, which seeks to impose its authority through various ways and means. All this takes place in parallel to an embodiment of national unity through a confirmation of religious, confessional, social and cultural diversity, especially when faced with major challenges.[10]

The makers of *Bab al-Hara* 7 claim that they are offering a truer historical representation, however, they continue to produce a *Bab al-Hara* with internal solidarity and cohesion, confronting an invading external other. The Manichean clarity of this representation leads *Bab al-Hara*, its signs, symbols and visual codes, to constitute a symbolic space that is to be used, controlled, appropriated, reproduced and cashed in, by multiple actors, including the drama makers. I start this introductory chapter by recounting one of many stories that exemplify the continued relevance of *Bab al-Hara*. I use it to introduce the research problematic that is grounded in Arab cultural studies, and to situate this research in relation to critical and contextual scholarship on Arab media and culture. I then offer the

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[10] As-Safir (2015) "*Bab al-Hara* 7": Mawsim al-Naqd al-Dhati ["*Bab al-Hara* 7": Season of self-criticism]. *As-Safir*. 7 May. [Online] Available from: http://assafir.com/article/418227 [Accessed 6th June, 2015].

research question, the research's approach and its contribution to knowledge, before summarizing the thesis's chapters.

1.1. The Present Cultural Tense

> No cultural temporality can be conscious or coherent if it is unconscious of the present- the present tense of its culture – and this means the everyday: television, cinema, art, jokes, communication, cooking, work, the ordinary, anthropological space and all the other manifestations of everyday life.   (Sabry, 2010: 26)

On the 27th May, 2015, the Al-Jazeera Arabic channel ran an interview with Abu Muhammad al-Julani, the "prince" of al-Nusra, an al-Qaeda affiliate brigade in Syria.[11] Throughout the interview, which discussed the future of different sects in Syria, their relationship with the US, interpellations of Islamic Shari'a, military updates, messages to Lebanese Hizbullah, al-Julani had his head, the right shoulder and the right side of his face covered with a black cloth, allowing only the tip of his nose to occasionally appear. Under the black cloth, he wore a checked shirt under a khaki sleeveless vest, which was embroidered horizontally across the centre, and wide Aladdin khaki pants. After this interview, a quasi-joke circulated among people in Beirut saying that al-Julani must act in *Bab al-Hara*, since his clothes fitted perfectly into the costume drama. I first heard it from an acquaintance from northern Syria, whose village in the Aleppo region is currently under al-Nusra rule. On the next day, the *AsSafir* newspaper in Beirut summarized the social media comments on the interview.[12] It mentioned one Tweet by a self-proclaimed ISIS supporter, who wrote that al-Julani reminded him of *Bab al-Hara*. In both cynical comments on al-Julani, *Bab al-Hara* is derogative, but for two different reasons. In the joke, al-Julani is situated in the past, in the pre-modern and the traditional. In the Tweet,

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[11] The interview was in two parts, the second part was aired on the 3rd June, 2015. To access the first interview please check: Mansour (2015a) al-Julani: Hizbullah Za'el wa Ladayna Tha'er ma ʾ al- ʾAlawiyyin [al-Julani: Hizbulllah will disappear and we will have revenge on the Alawites]. *Al Jazeera Bila Hudud* [Without Bounds]. 27[Th] May. [Online] Available from:
http://www.aljazeera.net/programs/withoutbounds/2015/5/25/-بسوريا-النصرة-جبهة-أمير-مع-بحوار-ينفرد-حدود-بلا
[Accessed 28th May, 2015]. For the second part of the interview: Mansour (2015b) al-Julani: Ikhwan Masr Inharafu wa Tanzeem al-Dawla Khawarij [al-Julani: Egypt Muslim Brotherhood Deviated and the Islamic State are Kharijites]. *Al Jazeera Bila Hudud* [Without Bounds]. 3 June. [Online] Available from:
http://www.aljazeera.net/programs/withoutbounds/2015/5/30/2 ج-المنطقة-في-الإيراني-الدور-حقيقة-الجولاني
[Accessed 9th June, 2015].
[12] Halabi, Alaa (2015) Ahmad Mansur hafiyan fi hadrat al-Julani [Ahmad Mansur barefoot in the presence of al-Julani]. *AsSafir*. 28 May. [Online] Available from: http://assafir.com/Article/1/422224 [Accessed 1st June, 2015].

written by an Islamic rival, al-Julani is situated in fiction, connoting non-seriousness, disrespect and amusement. In the midst of a violent war, *Bab al-Hara,* constitutes an accessible cultural space of multiple significations to different people and at different times.

One question, however, links the television interview and the social media comments, the press coverage, the oral comments, and the digital user generated content: how are the values inscribed in the past used, manipulated, inhabited, imagined and reproduced, and by whom, in order to control the present and the future? The centrality of history, and the past, to cultural manifestations from the Arab region, may be explained by referring to what Kassab (2010) terms "Arab Specificities", in relation to cultural legacy and colonial histories. The Arab world, compared to Africa and Latin America, "has been less violated by genocide, slavery and colonial settlement", it has succeeded in preserving "its language, its religion, and its extensive written cultural legacy", as well as constituting "a leading civilisational power" that has "challenged Europe in the past" (p.340). The past, thus, constitutes a space where claims to power are manifested, or originated. These claims to power are not solely directed at Europe. In the second part of the interview on Al-Jazeera, al-Julani accuses present day Iran of wanting to regain the glory of the Persian Empire that had ruled over the Arab region. As a visual aid, Al Jazeera includes two maps of the Persian Empire in different periods: 500 BC and 610 AC. Needless to say, neither al-Julani nor Al Jazeera, are representatives of the Arab world, the "Arab self", or the "Arab mind". However, the interview is symptomatic of a trend, where narratives of the past are key to legitimizing discourse.

In this doctoral thesis, I address the research problem: how do the media participate in exploiting the past in support of a cultural salafist trend? This question is based on the assumption that the mediation of history is central to present claims to modernity, tradition, coloniality and decoloniality. I approach this research, however, with awareness that it is not enough to ask questions on the research problem without problematizing the politics of asking academic questions on the region. I build on what Sabry (2010) calls the epistemic space, or 'paradigm', to merge questions on knowledge with questions on epistemology in researching media and culture in the Arab region. This leads to both an intellectual clarity and a challenge: how does one study the complexity of media-related practices as they are infused with multiple temporalities and spaces? How to understand

the presence of the past in the present, in the future, in space and place, while being conscious of the present tense of the postcolonial encounter, representations of the past as power relations, the importance of the spatial in Arab cultural history, and the centrality of a double critique? (cf. Sabry, 2010). I turn to conceptualising my research question, by introducing *Bab al-Hara* and briefly situating it within the body of critical scholarship on Arab media and culture.

Research Question

In this doctoral thesis, I aim to advance knowledge on the research problem that is identified in the context of Arab postcolonial cities, where cultural production contributes to the construction of an ideal society that is set in the past. The problem being addressed in this study is three-fold, at the level of inferring knowledge, and it looks at the production of the teleologies of the subject, as well as at the interpretation of this idealised past; at the epistemic level, it problematises the question: how does one empirically describe, and diachronically interpret, the intersections of media, temporality, space, and power? In order to approach the research problem, I have chosen to study the phenomenal television entertainment Ramadan drama series, *Bab al-Hara*, as a case study of a media text that recreates a utopia which is set in a fantastical 1930s Damascus. I ask the research question: how is *Bab al-Hara* implicated in the everyday life of Beirut and Damascus? By implicatedness, I mean the intersections of the media text with space and time. That is, the instances, practices, utterances and places where the cultural product comes to life in the everyday. To best study this implicatedness, I build on Silverstone (1994), who identified context, content and process as the three axes of the investigation of television in everyday life. The research methodology adopts a multi-sited media ethnographic approach that implements a triangulation of methods (participant observation, interviews and case study) and description-cum-analysis that is situated in theory. It investigates the three sites of text, production and reception, a very useful approach to conceptualising the relationship between the televisual text, *Bab al-Hara;* a particular ethnographic place of reception, the *Rawda* Café in Beirut, and the city of production, Damascus. The objective is to investigate audiences, text and makers as distinct yet connected sites of meaning. The Rawda Café is a seaside café and, since 2008, it projects *Bab al-Hara* during Ramadan on a huge screen for their clients who are enjoying their evenings, eating and drinking, after breaking the fast. Participant observation and in-depth post-viewing interviews in Beirut

and Damascus provide rich description of media practices and discourses. It is based on field research that was implemented in Beirut and Damascus in 2010 and 2011.

Bab al-Hara

Bab al-Hara is a phenomenal hit Syrian television drama series (*musalsal,* Arabic singular, *musalsalat* plural), which has run for seven seasons (1996-2015). It is broadcast during the month of Ramadan (there are an average 30 episodes per series) on the MBC pan-Arab Satellite channel and on other national television stations across the Arab region, and which is then re-aired during the year on various channels. *Bab al-Hara* falls into a composite genre that is usually called "Damascene Milieu" (*al-bi'a al-Shamiyya*). This shares elements with costume dramas/period pieces, spy thrillers, historical fantasia and romantic comedy, set in Damascus of the first half of the 20th century. It has been a trendy genre on Arab speaking television channels during the last few years. *Bab al-Hara* as a phenomenon, is the outcome of a specific political economy that includes MBC (the most watched pan-Arab entertainment channel), the Syrian television drama industry and advertising agencies. The plot is set in a fictitious Damascene neighbourhood, named *Dabʿ* (Arabic for Hyena), between the two World Wars (1918- 1939) and during the French Mandate over Syria. The narrative of Season 5 (the object of this research), tells the story of a Syrian who works as a collaborator with the French army and who infiltrates the Dabʿ neighbourhood, causing harm to its inhabitants through buying their houses to achieve an urban planning project that destroys the old neighbourhoods. The 30 episodes narrate the neighbourhood's everyday life, the struggles of its people against the French army, and the eventual capture and field execution of the spy anti-hero. *Bab al-Hara* may be positioned as an Arab speaking counter-flow that resists the dominance of US based media productions on pan-Arab television channels. *Bab al-Hara* is, however, heavily criticised by intellectuals and critics of mass culture as being an example of social "retardation" and "moralising" in public discourse. Criticism does not hamper *Bab al-Hara*'s fandom, which reaches across the entire Arab world and to Arab speakers living in Europe and the Americas. Reaching its seventh season this year (2015), *Bab al-Hara*, is the first prime time Ramadan drama series to be slowly converted into a soap opera.[13]

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[13] In the famous social chat show *Kalam Nawa'em* on MBC (2009), the four women journalists hosted Bassam al-Malla and Abbas al-Nouri in what was described by the press as an initiative to publicly end the disagreements between them in the hope that al-Nouri would return to *Bab al-Hara* as Abu Issam. One of the anchors compared Abu Issam and Bobby in *Dallas*. She tried to convince Abbas al-Nouri, and the viewers

Sabry (2010) categorises four positions within Arab thought that reflect different worldviews on how to analyse and remedy the Arab intellectual crisis: the historicist/Marxist, the rationalist/structuralist, the cultural *salafist/turatheya,* and the anti-essentialist positions.[14] Notwithstanding that *Bab al-Hara* is an entertainment programme, which does not belong to an intellectual tradition, I evaluate its position on questions of tradition and modernity to be closest to the cultural salafist position. *Bab al-Hara* does not suggest a radical break with the past, which rejects the Arab-Islamic heritage's value system, what Sabry identifies as the historicist/Marxist position, which is based on Laroui (1973, 1996, 2001) (2010: 30), nor does it propose the "historicisation of *turath* by modernizing it from within," or what Sabry terms the rationalist/structuralist position, which is based on al-Jabri (1989) (2010: 31). Building on Taha Abdurrahman (2006), Sabry differentiates between *turatheya* that provides *turath* (cultural heritage), "as a civilisational model or reference point", and *turathaweyah*, which "takes Islamic heritage as the only acceptable narrative for happiness" (2010: 32). *Bab al-Hara* constructs a utopia that belongs to the Damascene near past in the early 20th century. It does not claim a golden Islamic era of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions. It, however, takes the Islamic teachings, in addition to the social norms, as the guiding principles for a good life.

1.2. Arab Television Scholarship

> The growth of Islamic media or a strongly-Arab-based media is understood in one of two ways: either as a natural response to the economic needs of media production to become more like that of the West and using the technological forms of the West, or as a backlash against Western forms of cultural imperialism.
>
> (Tawil-Souri, 2008: 1404)

This research attempts to challenge the scholarship on Arab television that presents a dichotomous reading of media in the region as being either reflective of Western influence, or resistant to it by engaging with the complexities and contradictions that are associated with studying audiences, users and producers. In this section, I present my views on the ways in which to escape a reductionist analysis of Arab realities and I briefly highlight how my research builds on the two most relevant studies on the subject, Lila Abu-

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that if Dallas fans had accepted the return of Bobby after his death, why would *Bab al-Hara* fans not accept the return of Abu Issam?

[14] For a summary of the various schools of thought, see Sabry (2010) and Kassab (2010).

Lughod's (2005) *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt* and Christa Salamandra's (2004) *A New Old Damascus: Authenticity and Distinction in Urban Syria*.

One characteristic of critical, grounded, contextualized and theoretically nuanced research on Arab media is that it does not subscribe to an essentialist view of a generalisable "Arab" identity. Another is that it rejects the belief that there is incommensurability between Islamic or Arab cultural values and Western norms (Tawil-Souri, 2008: 1408). It also advocates a problematization of what Hobart (2010) calls the "great icons of macro-analysis – structure, capitalism, the polity and economy" as being inherent, and it engages in a contextualised revision of media theory. Among the works of critical research on media in the Arab region are anthropological studies that engage with audiences and producers. This body of literature is very limited and extremely valuable for the development of the field. I engage with Abu-Lughod (2005) and Salamandra (2004) in order to highlight how my work, in 2015, meets or departs from their seminal studies.

Abu-Lughod (2005) looks at nation building through studying melodramatic programmes on Egyptian television, comparing the national, secularly educated, middle class producers in Cairo to two groups of disadvantaged women in Cairo and Upper Egypt. This multi-sited approach allows her to observe the eroding hegemony of developmentalism, the strategies used to manage religion in the name of the national community, the growing Islamic piety in Upper Egypt, and the links between the modern, the moral and political ideologies. She describes, through local examples, how television is an essential element in forming modern subjectivities. My work, inspired by Abu-Lughod's, moves away from her work, at multiple levels. It takes an urban multi-city region-centric approach that looks beyond the state to the travelling of a new genre across boundaries. *Bab al-Hara*, produced and aired for a pan-Arab audience, allows for a perspectival shift from national media to the exploration of pan-Arab television. The specificity of the "Damascene Milieu" genre, however, compared to melodrama or reality television shows (Kraidy, 2010), is that it engages with questions on the meanings of Arab cultural history, using the example of Damascus, its representation, the circulation of its symbols, and its complex reception.[15] Like Abu-Lughod, I highlight the importance of Ramadan as a month of television viewing, nevertheless, our work seems to capture opposing trends. While she

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[15] Cited in Sabry, al-Jabri argues that Arab cultural history "is more connected to the spatial than it is to the temporal: our cultural history is the history of Kufa, Basra, Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo, Granada, Fez … which makes it a history of cultural islands (al-Jabri 1991, p.47)" (Sabry, 2010: 162).

describes the growth in Islamic piety at the social level, where religious discourse appropriates the language of morality, contrasted to a decline in secularly educated élite producers, in my own work I analyse the moral discourse on television that is produced by drama makers of a more modest background, who are high on their technical and business skills, but not renowned for their cultural capital, and that is consumed by a hybrid audience in a space that shifts between a secular past and a more "Islamised" present. In other words, the case of *Bab al-Hara* is a good example of what Abu-Lughod calls the "eroding hegemony of developmentalism", and the control of the moral vision of the socially conservative (economically liberal) over the liberals and progressives.

Another important study that offers a reference for my work is Salamandra's (2004) investigation into the social distinction strategies of Damascene élites. She identifies consumption and the preservation of Old Damascus as being essential to national, political and class positioning. She analyses the socio-spatial changes influencing Damascus between the '60s and '90s, and she identifies claims to "authenticity" as a local urban modern phenomenon. She focuses on the Damascene élites and the Syrian state as the main actors in the construction of Old Damascus. I build on Salamandra's work by investigating the construction of Old Damascus through its consumption outside élite circles and beyond the borders of the Syrian state and the city of Damascus. I look at the generational dimension in order to differentiate between phases in the construction of Old Damascus. I argue that it is specifically the old Damascene courtyard house in Old Damascus, that has functioned as a "site of memory" for the generation born in the '30s and '40s, who migrated from the old city, which has allowed for the construction of a new Old Damascus, observed by Salamandra in the '90s as forming part of a complex system of social distinction. What Salamandra starts observing in the '90s reaches hyper-consumption at regional and global levels in the 2000s, when Damascus is a "heterotopia" for a new generation that perceives of it as a museum, or as a monument. The generational perspective also allows for a critical understanding of the cultural producers participating in the production of Old Damascus. For example, the generation of cultural producers who were born in the '30s and '40s of the last century, like Zakaria Tamer (born 1931), Nadia Khost (born 1935), Siham Turjuman (born 1932), Ghassan Jabri (born 1933), Alaa-eddine Kokash (born 1942), Muhammad Malas (born 1945), and Haitham Haqqi (born 1948) share a "structure of feeling" that differentiates them from the younger producers, such as Bassam al-Malla (born 1956) and Hanan Qassab Hasan (born 1958). This is a theme that

requires further historical and anthropological research. The study of *Bab al-Hara* attends to a gap in the existing literature on media, culture and society in the Arab region, where very little focus has been given to studying cultural texts and their implicatedness in the lives of their audiences and makers. This research is a contribution to research on the Levant, investigating the politics of the representations of the past, media reception, and everyday life.

1.3. Contribution to Arab Media/Cultural Studies

This research expects to contribute methodological knowledge to a "de-westernised" field of media studies by focusing on an Arabic speaking drama series that is set in Damascus, together with its reception during Ramadan in an open-air café in Beirut. It provides a case where the text is implicated in everyday life and where the everyday harbours the instability of postcolonial cities. Using media ethnography to access the everyday worlds of cultural users and makers, this research provides a richer understanding of the media text interpreted in a context of cultural analysis. Media ethnography allows for both a media-centric and a socio-centric investigation, across the multiple sites of the text, and its spaces of reception and production. This research evaluates the role of television in constituting time and space. It suggests that *Bab al-Hara* contributes to moralising and to the production of neo-traditional spaces. *Bab al-Hara*, however, provides a challenging case-study through which to empirically illustrate the complex relations between media, culture and everyday life. By comparing the multiple sites and methods, inconsistencies allow me to argue that multiple meanings not only relate to contradictory meanings that are embedded in the text, but to the contradictions between the imagined televisual reality and the everyday social world of the actual audiences.

Chapter Summary

The chapter, "The Politics of Mediating the Past", examines a multidisciplinary body of literature that provides insights into the past, history and its representations. I start with the centrality of the past in critical contemporary Arab thought, then I engage with postcolonial theory in order to identify major questions on the past and representation, as well as to revise the conceptual significance of the house and the family to anti-colonial struggle. I then move on to learn from critical space theories the complexity of the house,

home and family construct and, finally, I briefly identify the major deficiencies in the relevant cultural studies literature on Syria.

Through the Chapter, "Media Ethnography between Beirut and Damascus", I explain the methodological achievements and challenges that I faced while accomplishing this work, confronting essentialist readings of what is a complex socio-cultural reality and responding, at the same time, to new everyday challenges that were caused by the Arab uprisings. I introduce the methodological questions that are associated with being a "native" researcher, and I explore the difficulties of studying media and culture in the context of the Arab world. I justify the research design and my choices of multi-sited media ethnography and everyday life television. I reconstruct the research journey from Beirut in Ramadan to Damascus, both before and during the upheaval. I reflect on watching *Bab al-Hara* and on writing the PhD, as well as on my positionality as a researcher.

In Chapter 4, I establish how *Bab al-Hara* constructs a "moral" home that is composed of the courtyard house and the set of relationships that value kinship, gender segregation and communal solidarity against the French Mandate forces. I show how the courtyard house is consecrated as a "place of memory" that reproduces Old Damascus, and how the "ideal" home is grounded in both memories and an imagination of the old city quarters. I describe how, in *Bab al-Hara*, the "moral" home is constructed to signify wealth, chastity and patriotism. I argue that the mutually constitutive relationship between Old Damascus, as material, symbolic and thought, helps us to situate the "Damascene Milieu" drama genre within a complex process that flags up the contradictions between discourses on domestic morality, and the production of Old Damascus as a heritage site that was attractive to tourists and investors as part of a globalised tourism network before the Syrian crisis.

In Chapter 5, I move to another "place of memory" that is located in Beirut, where *Bab al-Hara* viewing takes place. This chapter is an ethnography of *Qahwat al-Rawda* (the Rawda Café) and the viewing of television drama series during Ramadan, in a café. I conceptualise the café as a contested neo-traditional space and I explore the multiple dynamics that influence its production as a space of stability and morality. I trace the shifts at the level of Rawda and situate the screen, and specifically *Bab al-Hara*, within more

general societal changes. I establish the links between Beirut and Damascus at the level of the imagined and the lived.

In Chapter 6, I analyse how the imaginary of the "moral" Damascene home is talked about, contested and re-imagined by two generations of viewers in Beirut at the Rawda Café. I juxtapose the idealised, moralised, privatised imaginary with the public everydayness of Ramadan, so as to learn how these imaginaries are inscribed in spaces and participate in defining reality. I focus on gender morality to compare the older to the younger generations of viewers. I interpret nostalgic interests in the house as a site of memory, criticisms of moralising and the societal pressures to valorise home ownership that are "restored" in *Bab al-Hara* into a set of moral gender values that are in tension with everyday practices.

In Chapter 7, I investigate a liminal moment lived in Beirut in order to establish how *Bab al-Hara*'s idealization of unity, and how it is implicated in everyday reproduction of sectarian discourse. I juxtapose the fictional to the highly charged political reality, and trace what happens to Arab national discourses across generations. I compare Beirut (viewers) to Damascus (makers) at the level of how sectarianism is made visible/invisible, challenged, and negotiated, by using the *Bab al-Hara* frame of unity and sectarianism as a binary. I explore the limits and semblance of *Bab al-Hara*'s idealization of unity.

In Chapter 8, I continue to test the boundaries of the "moral" home imaginary at the level of constructing patriotic solidarity. I question the private/public divide as the "enemy" infiltrates into the "inner" domain in both fiction and reality. I compare treason and the accusation of treason and I analyse the accusation of treason as a mechanism through which to discipline dissent. I use the case study of Muna Wassef, the famous Syrian actress, as she became involved in oppositional politics at the beginning of the Syrian upheaval in order to show the limits of this imaginary so as to enforce the "unity" it promises and to criticise its role in encouraging a dual performative public show of patriotism.

I conclude that the imagined "moral" home that promises a sense of ontological security to its viewers of the postcolonial Middle East, is in contradiction with their daily realities of economic deprivation, continuous social change and imperial, as well as internal, wars.

This "moral" home, set in an imagined past, is faced with the memories of those with situated experiences, the changing daily practices of the younger generation, and the societal divisions that adopts the language of colonial othering. As a result, this home fails to provide an imagination of an alternative reality that provides an answer to placelessness that is associated with modernity, displacement that is associated with colonial/ civil wars, and the failures of the postcolonial state projects in the Levant to provide a stable, peaceful, and prosperous life.

Chapter 2

THE POLITICS OF MEDIATING THE PAST

Cultural debates and critiques in Arabic are rarely free of questions that problematize the ways in which the past is being dealt with, represented, and narrated. Critical schools in contemporary Arab thought denounce the idealization and ahistorical exaggeration of the past, and call for a "demystification", a "break with the past", a "decentring of the past", "historicization", and "critical reappropriation" (Kassab, 2010). The Arabic language press, especially the cultural press, tends to engage with these ideas and to reproduce them as frames within which to evaluate cultural production, including television production in general and, specifically, historical drama series. The evaluation of secular critics is that a wide range of cultural productions are contributing to the *madawiya*, (passéisme in French), the trend to show excessive attachment to the past. The *madawiya* is the tendency to advocate a withdrawal towards, and a fascination with, the past and its values. These debates on the past, history and culture which are raised by contemporary cultural critics, are traced to Arab renaissance (*al-nahda*) intellectuals.[16] Qassim Amin (1863-1908), for example, a proponent of women's liberation, argued against idealizing the Islamic civilization of the past and insisted that perfection "lies in the future, not in the past" (cited in Kassab, 2010: 35). The centrality of these debates to the analysis of the social and the political in the Arab region, in both the public and intellectual spheres, has not been translated, so far, into academic questions in media and cultural studies. Sabry calls for the thinking and studying of Arab cultural studies, "in ways that make it, through ongoing processes of reterritorialisation (creative connectivity), grounded in and answerable to Arab contemporary thought and realities; and through deterriorialisation (dislocation), as a mechanism of différance and constant flight that guarantees self-reflexion and creativity" (2012:19). In this chapter, I conduct a general multidisciplinary overview of the relevant literature that helps to contextualise, study and analyse the politics of mediating the past. Firstly, I review how the past is framed in contemporary Arab thought, and then I look at postcolonial literature for insights on history, culture and domesticity. Thirdly, I explore the concept of home, before I move to examining how history is approached, as a

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       Al-Nahda is a social and cultural renaissance or awakening that took place in Egypt, Syria and Lebanon during the nineteenth and early twentieth-century. Kassab defines the Nahda debates to be the range of debates "within and about Arab societies" stimulated by "the Ottoman reform projects, the post-Ottoman political struggles, and the colonial encounters with Europe" (2010: 19).

discipline, on the screen and to evaluate discussions on media genres and the Syrian drama industry. Lastly, I conclude by examining the lack in studying the politics of drama viewing and I recommend that a critical Arab cultural studies project engages in questions on media's role in contributing to the *madawiya* trend.

2.1. The Past in "Arab Contemporary Thought"

> The perception of this past Arab power, which does not exist in a comparable scope in the African and Latin American cases, plays a double role. It inspires confidence and offers a positive image of the self, at least of the past self, but it also exacerbates the present frustration and anger. More important, it allows an escape into fantasies of power from states of pain, humiliation, desolation, weakness, and defeat, and into a wishful anticipation of that power's certain return in the future. (Kassab, 2010: 342)

In her book on contemporary Arab thought, Kassab provides a critical reading of cultural malaise and cultural identity in twentieth-century western, postcolonial and Arab debates. She focuses on contemporary Arab thought that originated as a critique after the 1967 defeat; the Marxist and epistemological critique of pan-Arab intellectual conferences in the '70s and '80s; critique in Islamic theology and secular critique. A review of the main issues that are raised by Arab Intellectuals situates history as one of the main challenges facing Arab societies during the twentieth century. History has diverse meanings; as a discipline that narrates the past, as an approach to making sense of the present, as a claim to identity and as a tool of power. This interest in history raises a set of questions around whether there is an Arab history; when does this start? Who narrates it? For what purposes, and why is history central to all attempts to deal with the present? In addition to the questions around the existence of an independent "Arab" thought, its characteristics, and its relationship to "Western" thought. I base this interest in history and the past on the assumption that the past contributes to shaping the present and the future in potentially opposite ways and that it also holds a lot of the power in the sites of intersection between the emotional and the intellectual which impacts, and is impacted on, by politics. Kassab links the "mounting despair and anger" in the Arab World with the "desperate search for absolutes and certainties, that make critical thinking a … challenge" (2010: 346). She further asks, "Can Arabs abandon this attachment to a glorious past when no tangible

compensation seems at hand, when the sense of self seems so wounded and damaged, and when capacities seem so crippled?" (2010: 361). I build on Kassab's work to introduce a few of the intellectual positions on historical awareness and the critical proposals for a future that is out of the deadlock.

Kassab echoes the request of the Syrian Marxist thinker, Yassin Hafez (1930-1978): "the awareness of the defeat should not deteriorate into a defeated awareness" (Kassab, 2010: 63). Saadallah Wannous (1941-1997), the Syrian playwright and intellectual, suggests that to overcome the defeated awareness one must have the courage to take on historical awareness and historical thinking, and to examine the real problems of "despotism and ruthless repression" (Kassab, 2010: 166). Kassab re-articulates Wannous by analysing the role of colonialism as being "the phenomenon that thwarted enlightenment efforts at the turn of the twentieth century", and the responsibility of the post-independence state in crushing "these same efforts even more forcefully in the second half of the twentieth century" (2010: 62). The failures of the post-independence state were traced at the multiple levels of the social, the political, the economic and the military. Here, Kassab builds on Wannous to explain the defeated awareness as being "an illusory attachment to an idealized golden past or the confident expectation of a predetermined glorious future" (2010: 63). Similarly, Qustantin Zurayq (1909-2000), an Arab nationalist, advocates the "respect for truth" and historiography as an exercise in resisting "the temptation to mystify the past or escape the present" (Kassab, 2010: 71). Laroui's call to demystify history as an absolute is not contradictory to his other call for authenticity. Authenticity, if grounded in serious explorations and investigations that are "appropriated in concrete living conditions", stands against the "hopeless delusion" of seeking "magical answers to difficult and real problems" in heritage, language or the past (Kassab, 2010: 87). Kassab differentiates between critical thinkers and secularists in their calls for demystification. She identifies the calls of the secularist thinkers as being focused on demystifying the Islamic past, rather than just its heritage (2010: 280).

Sharabi considers that both Islamist and secularist identity claims have taken place in a politico-cultural environment that has situated history in opposition to the "West", where each pole became a source from which to envision identity and to build credibility (1988: 40). Islam and the Arab secularist national movement, according to Sharabi, are the two main social movements that have proposed a transcendence of familial-tribal identity and

have led to the two major ideological movements: liberal secularism and reformist Islam (1988: 101-113). Perspectives on history vary between the fundamentalist and critical positions within these two trends, and history, in each movement, serves ideological, political and power projects. All of the questions around history become political queries about the defining of the multiple selves and multiple others in the context of modernity. Modernity is, however, regarded as another challenge that faces the Arab region, for it is defined as a product of the "West" that was introduced to the "Arab" world alongside the imperial/colonial project in order to rule the region. Modernity, in Arab intellectual discourse, stands in opposition to heritage, and there are various propositions as to how to interpret this confrontation. Sharabi (1988) regards heritage as now being inexistent, for it has been transformed into a modern hybrid, which he defines as neo-patriarchy. Sabry (2012) proposes that "aspects of modernness can be found in all the intellectual positions": historicist/Marxist, rationalist/structuralist, cultural salafist/*turatheya* and anti-essentialist, with the exception of the "orthodox salafist" position.[17] Al-Azmeh (1993) argues that salafist "authenticity" is merely an Arabized version of "Western" nationalism, and both are modern constructs.

Kassab compares contemporary intellectual debates in the Arab region to those in Latin America and Africa, and finds many similarities. However, I am interested in what she identifies as the Arab specificities. The first specificity relates to how: in Arab discourses, modernity is not strongly associated with genocide, slavery and colonial settlement, as is the case in Africa and Latin America, where people suffered from physical and cultural violation. The second specificity concerns the preservation of the Arab language, its religion and its written cultural legacy, while the third focuses on how "the Arab World forcefully challenged Europe in the past and imposed itself as a leading civilizational power" (2010: 340). Kassab builds on the three specificities above to further describe how the Arab philosophical discussions around the cultural malaise focus on history. She explains that Arab debates do not question whether there is an "Arab Philosophy", but rather they question the means to "reconnect with this past philosophical heritage" for the purposes of today (2010: 340). Kassab explains the pros and cons of this past Arab imperial history, or its literary heritage, which serves as a means to affirm power, as well as to disempower thinking that is free of ideology.

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[17] Sabry builds on Abdurrahman (2006) to introduce *turatheya* as the position that refers to schools of thought that "privilege *turath* (cultural heritage) as a civilisational model and reference point" (2010:32). See Chapter 1.

What is stressed in Kassab's analysis are the links between the political erosion, the socio-psychological state of despair, anger, humiliation, etc., and the difficulties caused by engaging in critical intellectual practice that can lead to political change. She adopts the political explanation and rejects any culturalist call for self-review, situating the intellectual debate within the three different phases: the first Nahda, where the main question was "why have Muslims lagged behind while others have progressed?"; the second Nahda,[18] with its question on "why did the [1st] Nahda fail to come to fruition?"; while, for the last forty years the question has been: "why are we in a deadlock?" (2010: 362). To escape this deadlock, Arab thinkers have stressed the need for a 'radicalization of critique' and have criticized themselves for being distanced from the masses.

The value of these debates is threefold: firstly, there is no one coherent body of thought called 'contemporary Arab thought', but there are a variety of schools of thought and intellectual projects on dialogue or ones that are in conflict. Secondly, these schools and debates share the common ground of the region, which was once a civilisational power, thus engendering this complicated relationship with history and the past. Thirdly, there is knowledge void in the empirical tracing of the ideas that are posed by the different intellectual trends that exist in the everyday life of the region. Here, it is important to clarify that among these various schools, I build on Sabry, in order to argue for an intellectual bias that leans towards the anti-essentialist trend:

> If we were to consider 'Arab cultures as objects of scientific inquiry, we must be prepared for the archaeological task that comes with this. We must be prepared to implement Khatibi's double-critique (1980) by questioning, interrogating and disturbing the continuities, totalisations and teleologies inherent to Arab discourses on culture and identity.   (Sabry, 2012: 13)

Two of the totalisations that are inherent to Arab discourses are the definition of who an Arab is, and what the borders of the Arab geography are. The difficulty in defining the geographical area being studied is part of the problematic of studying a region that has not developed "nation" states that are independent of the colonial intervention that has shaped

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[18] The "second nahda" is a term coined by Abdallah Laroui to identify the critical intellectual movement that emerged "under the impact of the shock of the 1967 defeat" (Kassab, 2010: 20).

states that are still negotiating their independent and shared identities. This problematic is materialised in the case of the naming of the region being studied. The cities of Beirut and Damascus belong to a region with shifting boundaries, which are sometimes defined as being part of the Arab World, of the Arab Nation, of the Muslim Nation, of the Middle East, of Natural or Greater Syria, of the Fertile Crescent or of the Levant. The different terminologies are associated with different political projects or geographical designations that are offered, both by those from, in and outside the region.

The problems that result from this naming and defining are highlighted by Corm (2006) as being part of the epistemological challenges involved in studying the historical narratives of the societies of the contemporary Levant. He identifies three questions: 1) what is the geographic focus of the study, and what criteria define these borders? 2) What is the subject of the historical investigation? 3) What is the temporal reference that is used to judge and to analyse the historical subject under study? (2006: 22). Any attempt to answer these questions needs to take into consideration that *Bab al-Hara*, Damascus, and by extension Beirut, are situated within multiple geopolitical spaces. The Damascus of the first half of the 20th century is portrayed within the text as not being controlled by state borders, while, in the early 21st century, it has become part of the constructed borders that are controlled by the contemporary state.[19] This was the case until the upheavals, since that time these borders have become "quasi-borders" (Kossayfi, 2014).

One way to analyse the various spatial definitions is to relate them to the third question posed by Corm and the three temporal dimensions of this research. The first temporality is that of *Bab al-Hara* as a time in the past (represented time), which introduces Damascus/Beirut as being situated in the pre-state-border space. The second temporality is that of the fiction as a construction (reconstructed time), with a political function and a sense of Damascenness that belongs to an imagined Arab whole. The third temporality is that of the audiences (viewed time) in their multiple individual and collective viewing, using experiences in which Damascus, or Beirut, is redefined in space at each present

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[19] It is important to remind the reader that *Bab al-Hara* is a fictional representation of a very critical time in the history of the geography that encompasses today's Syria and Lebanon. The Arab Republic of Syria and The Republic of Lebanon are postcolonial states whose borders have been drawn as a result of the Franco-British Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916. The Syria of today is where the production of *Bab al-Hara* takes place. Nevertheless, *Bab al-Hara*, as a script, shows the Damascus of the region that was in transition between the Ottoman Empire, the French and British colonial mandate and the establishment of the two independent states.

moment. These multiple extended temporal geographies are physical, emotional and ideological in their construction.

Corm's second question on the subject of historical investigation opens the discussion to another dimension; how is a subject of investigation, in a region where there is a need for a Theory on the social that goes beyond critical methodology, defined? (Sharabi, 1988) (see Chapter 3). In order to do this, it is important to be aware that problematizing the spatial does not mean ignoring the existing dominant notions, such as the Arab World, Arab Thought, or the Syrian and Lebanese states. I acknowledge that I work from within these categories, however, I keep an open mind in regard to the various interpretations of history, the multiple narrations of collective identities, and the corresponding issues of power, resistance and agency, in a post/neo-colonial context.

2.2. History in Postcolonial Literature

The division between Arab thought and postcolonial studies is not fixed in any way, since many Arab thinkers have situated themselves within postcolonial literature and debate. I have chosen to separate the ways in which history has been discussed in both bodies of literature in an attempt to accentuate the similarities, after having highlighted, in the section above, the specificities of the Arab debate. I am specifically interested in postcolonial literature for the insight it provides into the relationship between popular text/experience and history, from the perspectives of past colonialism and present domination, marginalization, globalization, localization and the resistance to "Westernization" that is not specific just to the Arab World. To begin, I look at Said's question, which pinpoints the centrality of history to postcolonial settings. In his book *Culture and Imperialism* Said asks: "how does a culture seeking to become independent of imperialism imagine its own past?" (1993: 258). Said makes it clear that the cultural effort to decolonize is an "effort at the restoration of community and repossession of culture that goes on long after the political establishment of independent nation-states" (1993: 259). For analytical purposes, Said differentiates among three trends that are associated with "cultural" resistance. The first adopts an essentialist reading; the second perceives resistance to be "an alternative way of conceiving human history", and the third moves

away from "separatist nationalism towards a more integrative view of human community and human liberation" (1993: 259).

Fanon (1963) belongs to the third trend among anti-essentialist resistance intellectuals. He analyses the emergence of a national culture under colonial regimes, and he studies the role of the national middle class and the "masses". Fanon establishes colonialism as violence that destroys humanness in its emotional, intellectual and political dimensions. He provides a reading that holds the national "educated classes" responsible for the "lack of practical links between them and the mass of the people, their laziness, and … their cowardice at the decisive moment of the struggle" (1963: 119). Fanon explains, without justification, that the national bourgeoisie could not fulfil its historic role since it lacked economic power, and the bourgeoisie were characterized by the "smallness of their number and their being concentrated in the capital, and the type of activities in which they are engaged" (1963: 120). He further suggests that "under the colonial system, a middle class which accumulates capital is an impossible phenomenon", the national middle class mainly became involved in activities of an intermediary type (1963: 120). As a result, the psychology of the national bourgeoisie is that of businessmen and their historic mission is "that of intermediary" (1963: 122). He differentiates between intellectuals and governing politicians by emphasizing that "politicians situate their action in actual present-day events, [while] men of culture take their stand in the field of history" (1963: 168). Fanon holds "third world intellectuals" accountable for building a national culture that is based on history:

> It has been remarked several times that this passionate search for a national culture which existed before the colonial era finds its legitimate reason in the anxiety shared by the native intellectuals to shrink away from that Western culture in which they all risk being swamped. Because they realize they are in danger of losing their lives and thus becoming lost to their people, these men, hot-headed and with anger in their hearts, relentlessly determine to renew contact once more with the oldest and most pre-colonial springs of life of their people.
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> (Fanon, 1963: 169)

Fanon does not offer a critical perspective on the notion of "masses" or "people", although he critically interrogates essentialist approaches to culture. In his analysis, he highlights

the need for intellectuals to disconnect themselves from the "west" and to reconnect with "their people" through a claim to a national culture that he believes "does not only rehabilitate that nation and serve as a justification for the hope of a future national culture [but also provides] in the sphere of psycho-affective equilibrium,... an important change in the native" (1963: 169). Fanon is aware that any writing on the past should be "with the intention of opening the future", however, he is not satisfied with "the colonized man who writes for his people" without taking part in the action and throwing her- or "… himself body and soul into the national struggle" (1963: 187). This understanding of the importance of national culture as being a temporary strategy may be understood in terms of Spivak's "strategic essentialism". The signification of the anti-colonial national struggle is continuously changing, and it is important to keep questioning "strategic essentialism", its functions and possible abuses.

Spivak asks another major question: "on the other side of the international division of labor from socialized capital, inside and outside the circuit of the epistemic violence of imperialist law and education supplementing an earlier economic text, can the subaltern speak?" (1995: 25). To explain "speak", she refers to Said's "permission to narrate", and Guha's analysis of the historiography of Indian nationalism as being dominated by the colonial and bourgeois-nationalist élites. The challenging question that Spivak poses leads to two more questions; the first is whether cultural production in postcolonial contexts is a counter-narrative to the imperialist representation of the Arab people and history; the second: on whose imagined version of national "history" is the narration dependent? Spivak, based on Guha, identifies a hierarchy of groups that make up the colonial social system. The divisions she mentions are the élites, foreign and indigenous, the buffer group, which is composed of the dominant indigenous at the local and regional levels, and the "people", or "subaltern" classes (1995: 26). Spivak argues against the essentialist power of this classification, which she proposed and has since revisited. Nevertheless, and without accepting the classification as being a rigid representation of reality, I find value in her analysis, which de-essentialises the complete fissure between "élites" and "people" and provides an insight into a better understanding of today's neo-colonial settings in the Arab world (see Sharabi, 1988). What I find interesting in this classification is that it makes the investigation of the voices of resistance and hegemony that are involved in cultural production and consumption more complex. In other words, even when it is argued that a text can be situated within the range of cultural productions and experiences

that re-narrate the history of colonialism, it does not necessarily do so, and it is crucial to research whether it carries forward the narrative of the subaltern groups and, specifically, those of women.

Chatterjee, based on a study of influential cultural texts relating to the national liberation movement against colonial rule in Bengal, argues that the educated women of nineteenth century India "were subordinated, at one and the same time, to colonialism as well as to a nationalist patriarchy" (1993: 140). Similarly to Sharabi, he calls the patriarchy of nationalism a new patriarchy that associates the task of female emancipation with the historical goal of sovereign nationhood, thus binding women "to a new, and yet entirely legitimate, subordination" (Chatterjee, 1993: 130). The site of the nation's sovereignty is the home, which Chatterjee reads as being "the original site on which the hegemonic project of nationalism was launched" (1993: 147). To explain the birth of this counter-view to European nationalism, he explains the rule of colonial difference that links the history of the colonial state to that of the "modern" contemporary state (1993: 18). The argument is that:

> [T]he colonial state,... was not just the agency that brought the modular forms of the modern state to the colonies; it was also an agency that was destined never to fulfil the normalizing mission of the modern state because the premise of its power was a rule of colonial difference, namely, the preservation of alienness of the ruling group. (1993: 10)

In other words, the pasts and presents of postcolonial states are associated with the unresolved contests that are embedded in the "inherent impossibility of completing the project of the modern state without superseding the condition of colonial rule" (1993: 21-22). Chatterjee differentiates between an embrace of modernity that takes place at the level of the material domain, and the effort to resist modernity or to make it consistent with the nationalist project, which is performed at the level of the spiritual and which bears the "'essential' marks of cultural identity" (1993: 6,121). He argues that the divide between the material/outside and spiritual/inner domains was a result of the political battle that was lost at the material level, and had to be won on the spiritual one. Although the area of the spiritual domain includes language, culture, religion and education, Chatterjee gives special emphasis to family life, where resistance to the rule of colonial difference is played

out in the accessible sovereign domain of the house. This mind of the new middle class, which is "split in two", resulted in the public expression of an enlightened nationalism and a private retreat into tradition (1993: 54, 72). A nationalism that was being imagined without the actual structures of a state, led communities that were declared as being different by the colonial Other to come together into large political solidarities of kinship (1993: 225). Finally, Chatterjee evaluates community as being a counter-imagination to the liberal and capitalist individual views of state and society. It is important to note three reflections: firstly, that the conceptual division between the material and spiritual domains is useful in analysing the ways in which cultural production imagines the national struggle in mandate Syria. Secondly, that it is necessary to question Chatterjee's historical findings that the power of community, which is based on kin, is necessary in order to provide a resistant imagination, especially when the idealisation of community is taking place through capitalist structures. It may be necessary to differentiate between community as an imagination or as a practice. Thirdly, there still needs to be a comparative study between Arab nationalism, as a spiritual nationalism, and other non-state nationalisms in India, to trace how resistance to colonialism was produced at both the levels of the spiritual and the material domains.

2.3. Home in the past, present or future

> Homebuilding (at both micro and macro levels), we might then argue, is to be seen as much as a process of domestication as of the exclusion of otherness. Alterity, on this model, is non-threatening as long as it is "in its place", and home-building does not require its absolute displacement but, rather, only its domestication.
> (Morley, 2000: 223)

Morley builds on Ghassan Hage to draw the links between home, national identity and the Other, where he argues that the Other is a necessity for the functioning of the national rhetoric. Morley argues against celebratory postmodern nomadology claims that suggest that home is regressive and outdated. He quotes Hage (1993), who builds on the classical genre of pre-Islamic poetry where a Bedouin poet sits by the ruins and composes a poem mourning the relics and memories of a bygone time, expressing attachment to the beloved, to state that "while this era could be that of nomadism, it does not make it in any sense an era where people stop yearning for home" (2000: 275). Morley also builds on Massey,

arguing that there is "nothing inevitably reactionary about place-based identities" (2000: 234). Massey's position on home and locality needs to be first understood through her conception of space. Space, for Massey, is not static, and nor is time spaceless. She clarifies that "spatiality and temporality are different from each other, but neither can be conceptualized as the absence of the other" (1992: 80). It is thus crucial to conceive of the co-constitutive relationship between the spatial and the social. That is, it is not only the spatial which is socially constituted, but also the social which is spatially constituted within spatial forms and relative social locations (1992: 80). The spread of social relations between the local and the global, does not lead Massey to conclude that seeking a sense of place is necessarily reactionary (1994: 147). She reads the power geometry of time-space compression and concludes that geographical fragmentation and spatial disruption do not constitute a uniform experience. She recommends tracing the highly complex social differentiation, in its connectedness with differentiated mobility and communication and control and initiation (1994: 149). She critiques the ways in which space is conceptualized and idealized as a place of community and heritage, and is equated with stasis, nostalgia, reaction and enclosed security:

> Such views of place have been evident in a whole range of settings - in the emergence of certain kinds of nationalisms, in the marketing of places, whether for investment or for tourism, in the new urban enclosures, and even - on the other side of the social divide - on occasion by those defending their communities against yuppification... All of these have been attempts to fix the meanings of places, to enclose and defend them: they construct singular, fixed and static identities for places, and they interpret places as bounded enclosed spaces defined through counterposition against the Other who is outside.   (Massey, 1994: 167-168)

Massey conceptualizes the place called home in contrast to these readings, where home is imagined to provide the security and stability of enclosures with boundaries, and where its identity is established in opposition to an Other. She suggests an alternative reading of space where it is a meeting point with links to the outside world, or it is: "articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings, but where a larger proportion of those relations, experiences and understandings are constructed on a far larger scale

than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself" (1994: 154). Massey does not romanticise social relations, but she places them in power relations and critically evaluates the theories that assert that globalization and post modernity are causing placelessness. She questions the newness of this placelessness for the colonized, arguing that the coherence of the local culture and "the security of the boundaries of the place one called home must have dissolved long ago" (1994:165). She builds on bell hooks (1991) twice, firstly, to explain that "the very meaning of the term 'home', in terms of a sense of place" changes for those who have been colonized, decolonized and radicalized (1994: 166). Secondly, to differentiate between two types of nostalgia, one which is a longing for something which once was, and, the other, nostalgia as memory against forgetting, which aims to transform the present (1994: 171). Massey concludes that the identity of any place, including the place called home, whether understood as being enclosed or as a meeting point, is continuously being produced and is "for ever open to contestation" (1994: 169).

Similarly to Massey, Silverstone defines home as a construct. His view, however, is that it is a place and not a space, it ranges from a tent to a nation, and it holds intense emotions, and a sense of belonging. (1994: 26). Silverstone conceptualizes home as being part of the three dimensions of domesticity: home, family and household. 'Home' provides the phenomenological experience of domesticity, while 'family' is a reflection of the socio-cultural, and 'household' is a materialisation of the economic. Domestic life is thus a sociological, cultural and historical phenomenon, which Silverstone situates within the rise of the bourgeois class in early nineteenth century Europe. This class produced "a private world, separate from the world of affairs" (1994: 24). It is important to mention here that I have not discovered a study that traces the historical development of the notion of domesticity in the Levant, or one that phenomenologically describes the experience of home making.[20] Additionally, the concept of home does not have a corresponding word in the Arabic language. The words for house, *dar* or *bayt*, carry material, social and emotional dimensions. As a result, I have found it useful to be aware of the analytical distinctions, but not to fall into the dichotomies that prevent a complex view of the home, the house and the household as being mutually constitutive. Mallett (2004) summarises the various multidisciplinary ways to understand home. She warns against the idealization of home, and differentiates between research that studies the construction of the ideal

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[20] For a literary engagement with home making please see Shadid (2012) *House of Stone: A Memoire of Home, Family and a Lost Middle East*. Boston: Hughton Mifflin Harcourt.

house/home, or that compares the actual, the ideal and the remembered. She also looks at research that studies home as a repository of memories, as a refuge, as a site of oppression, as an anchor for moralities, and as a place for the family. This research builds on the understanding of home as being constituted by the mutually defining tension between the real and the imagined.

I build on Nora to think of home in relation to the past through his concept of *lieux de memoire*, or sites of memory, which he defines to be taking over memory that is lost, "atomized" or "transformed by its passage through history" (1997: 8). *Lieux de memoire* is the site of intentional remembrance, where memory is reshaped "in some fundamental way" or revised "for pedagogical purposes" (1997: 17). *Lieux de memoire*, as a system of signs, although introduced in the context of the history of the French republic, provides a useful concept with which to analyse the courtyard house as a hyper-real site of memory. To better understand Nora's concept, we need to go back to his understanding of history as "administering the presence of the past within the present" (1989: 20). He specifically interprets how "hopelessly forgetful modern societies, propelled by change, organize the past" (1989: 8). The act of organizing and administering is not a spontaneous action, but is a structured process of archiving and narrating. These processes of modernity are the outcomes of that point of rupture that took place with industrialization (1997: 1). Nora explains that the sense of rupture in the "new nations" has taken place with colonization, which led to "a sort of internal decolonization [that] has had a similar effect on ethnic minorities, families, and subcultures that until recently had amassed abundant reserves of memory but little in the way of history" (1997: 2). Nora announces the death of memory-history and the birth of the "acceleration of history" that applies to everyone independent of their context. I agree with Nora's analysis that social developments have led to changes in the meaning of 'memory'. However, I believe that in what he calls "new nations", the process of administering history has been different to that which he observes in France. These differences do not change the fact that modern understandings of memory are dominant outside France and in postcolonial settings.

To differentiate between memory and history, Nora defines memory as lived history that is "collective, plural and yet individual", while he defines history as being an intellectual operation that renders the lived intelligible and which subsequently "belongs to everyone and to no one … whence its claim to universal authority" (1989: 9). Memory, he believes,

has known "two forms of legitimacy: historical and literary" and it is the blurring of memory-history and memory-fiction that has led to the development of a new history that has become "our replaceable imagination" (1989: 24). Nora stresses the role of media in the "enormous expansion" of our perception of history to include the memory of experiences that are viewed on screens (1997: 2). My interest lies in how the interplay between memory, in its new subjective meaning, fiction, mainly in mediated drama, and historical perception, is articulated among audiences in Beirut and in Damascus.

2.4. History as a Screen Discipline

To think of the mediation of the past and the representations of home on the screen leads me to look into the discussions around history-based television fiction within the discipline. Literature from Europe and the US mainly discusses history on the screen as that portrayed on film. Hesling claims that "historians and media critics are only at the beginning of understanding how filmic versions of the past operate and in what ways they can influence spectators" (2001: 202). Rosenstone finds two problematic assumptions in the explicit and implicit approaches to evaluating the contribution of "historical" film to "historical understanding". The first assumption is that "the current practice of written history is the only possible way of understanding the relationship of past to present", while the second is that "written history mirrors 'reality'" (2001: 51). However, history, according to Rosenstone, is a construction, and it is at this point that he asks these questions:

> What sort of history world does each film construct and how does it construct that world? How can we make judgments about that construction? How and what does that historical construction mean to us? … How does the historical world on the screen relate to written history? (Rosenstone, 2001: 52)

According to Rosenstone's categories of history on film, *Bab al-Hara*'s portrayal of history falls under 'history as drama', where the drama is set in the past and the "central plot and characters are fictional" (2001: 53). This subjective reconstruction of the past leads us, in Hesling's opinion, to "restore to a society's historical consciousness the themes and stories that were lost in the specialized discourse of academe" (2001: 203). Or, as in the case of *Bab al-Hara*, to put to the forefront the tales that are usually told by

grandmothers as the historical world that is constructed by the drama. Bartholeyns provides useful tips for understanding the multiple ways in which we can analyse history on film. He suggests focusing on how films "take charge of history" through the choices that the author takes (2000: 31). He differentiates between history that constitutes "only a dramatic pretext", or the author who works with "a teleological intention" (2000: 32). Another differentiation relates to the film author who: "chooses to develop a story within history", or "to present a moment from it" (2000: 32). Bartholeyns argues that the role the film gives to history alters the spectators' judgment "as though the ideological implicatedness of a film compensates for the lack of historicity" (2000: 33). To apply this t o *Bab al-Hara* means acknowledging how history, in drama, is used as part of the ideological teleology.

Castello is more interested in television fiction than in film and the debate around globalization and nationhood that focuses on stateless nations. He argues, "nationality, nationalism and the nation state... are in fact the powerful logic behind modern social and cultural organization" and asks, "how social spaces are defined as national?" (2009: 304). Castello's work is grounded in the Catalonian context but, nevertheless, his analysis bears a lot of insight into the context of the Arab world. One important issue he raises is in his criticism of communication researchers giving too much attention to "effects attenuation and active audience paradigms" (2009: 306). He proposes that there is a need to analyse the system on which the national identity is based before becoming engaged in research around the role of mass media. Consequently, it makes more sense to ask different research questions around the workings of "the nation-building process through serial fiction" (2009: 307). He proposes four elements that can explain nation building on screen: territory, language, cultural representation and historical references. Castello understands the representation of the past to be the result of complex interactions among the presentation of territory, the use of language and cultural proximity. Mass media, and television, in particular, as powerful nation-building tools, serve as a major communication space for the definition of the "imagined community", even if it is a site of contestation.

Each cultural text supports multiple readings that are exacerbated by the struggle for the power to narrate and that are defined according to various approaches which are employed in studying the text and its relation to history. Bartholeyns, based on Ferro, introduces four

different ways; the top-down approach: "which focuses on those in power and the instances of their authority", the bottom-up approach: "where socio-historical problems are portrayed by the masses"; the approach from within: "where the author is truly committed to his point of view exhibiting a certain auto-reflexivity", and the external approach: "which goes about reconstructing an ideological context or constructing models" (2000: 31). This classification, although it may not be exhaustive, provides a reference upon which to reflect, and to judge whether the analysis is limited to one of the many readings.

A review of a discussion around history-based drama in the Arabic language public sphere is essential before closing this section. One important example that reflects various perspectives on the issue is an episode of a*l-Ittijah al-Muʿakis* (The Opposite Direction), a chat show on Al Jazeera (al-Qassem, 2009). The show hosted two perspectives that differed on the value of setting drama in the past, but that agreed on the "development" discourse and the need to "catch up" with the "west". The fierce polarized debate that was encouraged by the journalist led to little understanding being communicated between the first position, which took a stand that appreciates history-based drama series for their re-emphasis of a set of values that were carried forward from the more "beautiful" past, and the oppositional position that argued that there is no moral superiority embodied in the past, and that all of the fiction that glorifies the past participates in the construction of a troubled future and a present that is stuck in a bygone age. Interestingly, both positions agreed that the values around gender that the history based drama series advocates, are unacceptable from both the Islamic and "western" standpoints. The same opinions that are debated on television are common among Arab intellectuals, who tend to take contradictory positions on the support or rejection of history influenced drama.

2.5. Arab Cultural Studies and Syrian Drama Series

Bab al-Hara falls under the genre "*musalsalat*", which Salamandra uses following the Arabic word that translates as serialized television drama. *Musalsalat* differ from the British or US soap operas and the Latin American *telenovela*. The genre is still under-researched in the Arab region and so is the sub-genre of history-based series or, more specifically, the "Damascene Milieu" based drama (*musalsalat al-bi'a al-Shamiyya*) (cf. Al-Ghazzi, 2013). To read through the scant research that is available in English on

cultural production in Syria is to mainly look at Cooke (2007), Salamandra (1998, 2000, 2004 & 2005), and Dickinson (2012a, 2012b). Cooke and Salamandra's approaches are top-down, with a focus on the contestation that takes place between the official and the élite discourses. Although Cooke and Salamandra come from different disciplinary backgrounds, they are both grounded in the political discourse on the "democratic" versus the "authoritarian" regimes, and they are interested in studying the challenges of cultural production in Syria as an "authoritarian" state. Although the "authoritarian" state is one of the main factors influencing cultural production in Syria, reducing the angle of analysis to élite dissidence against official discourse does not tell the whole story. Dickinson, however, engages in a complex political economy analysis of Syrian cinema production. She evaluates the role of the state within myriad regional and global structures.

In this section, I will briefly focus on Salamandra's work, which shares with mine the ethnographic approach and the television production focus (see Chapter 1). In a reflective article on her ethnographic experience in Syria, Salamandra explains that audience fragmentation pushes ethnography to "expand beyond the exploration of individual works" (2005: 4). She advocates for reception to be regarded as being: "critical to the process, as some programs resonate more than others", but she suggests: "moving ethnography behind the scenes" and focusing on issues of "identity, authenticity and social distinction" (2005: 8). Her interest in élite life in Syria leads her to look at the élites as the producers, consumers and partners, for their non-marginality allows them to ask her to "give back", which she does by participating in writing Syria's history through writing the history of Syrian drama, which she says "has become the contemporary Syrian cultural form *par excellence*" (2005: 10). Salamandra's position on Syrian drama is useful, and her research on the production process highlights important insights into the producers' discourse, which suggests that audiences are "unsophisticated and impressionable" (2005: 12). She also mentions the shift in the content of serial dramas throughout the 1990s, with the "exploration of local resistance against imperial powers" as the "most salient theme emerging" (2005: 16). She portrays it as "nation building" under the "pressures of regionalization", but she further explains that the Syrian cultural industry is under the influence of the Gulf producers and audiences who direct the choice of drama producers to the "Golden Age of Islamic Empire" (2005: 16). Her work describes the contestations, in the site of culture, that are taking place between "cultural" élites and the ruling class.

A review of Salamandra's (2000, 2004, 2005 & 2007) work, which is rich in description but focused on theorizing élite life, emphasizes the need for research on cultural production in Syria. Whether research should be limited to one cultural text or not, it must take into consideration postcolonial theory questioning the colonial and nationalist narratives that are prominent in television history-based drama. These questions highlight the issues of agency, the relationship to the state, the definition of the state and its relationship to its subjects, the position of the subaltern, those who are marginalized and whose voices are excluded from the official national history or the dominant collective narrative, the regional scope of the television industry, as well as its enmeshment within global structures.

2.6. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have reviewed a wide range of theoretical approaches to studying the representations of the past. I started by relating the work to debates within contemporary Arab thought on the need to change the *madawiya* trend to relating to the past. Then, I borrowed, from postcolonial theory, useful concepts with which to approach my research. Thirdly, I built on critical space theories in order to ascertain the complex relationships between space, time and the social. I identified the concept of home as being central to debates on locality, history and nationalism. Then I looked at the interdisciplinary debates on the visual representations of history. Finally, I briefly identified the major lack in the literature on cultural production from Syria. Before I move to methodologically introducing the study, I highlight a number of issues or questions that I carry through this research and which are based on the theoretical discussions raised above.

This study of *Bab al-Hara* indirectly answers Kassab's question about whether "Arabs [can] abandon this attachment to a glorious past when no tangible compensation seems at hand, when the sense of self seems so wounded and damaged, and when capacities seem so crippled?" (2010: 361). In this research, I take on a number of challenges: for example, I do not choose to put Arabs in quotation marks, but, I continuously challenge any essentialist reading of "Arab" or "Western" as claims to power, and refuse to dismiss contextual particularities or to ignore the complex interconnectedness between the universal and the local. Similarly, this research attempts to avoid the pre-set definitions and boundaries of space and it is careful to question fixed identity claims. It relates to the

past in the Heideggerian sense, interpreting the having-been only in its unity with the making-present and the coming-towards. It aims to engage in a process of deconstructing reality while, at the same time, providing an analysis that increases understanding without supporting existing dichotomies (Sharabi, 1988: 212).

Engaging with Nora's theorization of memory and history leads me to question, in the context of the Levant: how the historicity of the postcolonial modern state relates to memory and history. Is memory, in the Arab context, a product of history, as Nora has analysed in France, or is it a product of histories? How does memory offer a site of contested multiple narratives? Has history, as a discipline, been able to situate itself as a legitimate reference and, if not, why? Finally, how do the roles of public intellectuals or historians influence how drama makers represent the past? What is so particular about history, as a discipline, when it is visualised on the screen? How do the representations of space and of sites of memory influence the narrative? How do audiences contest or re-appropriate the various national narratives in the region? I do not approach the study of *Bab al-Hara*, as being restricted to a perspective on reading the text: the "official", the "counter-history", the "social and historical memory", or the "original and independent interpretation" discourse. I try to trace the interplay amongst these discourses in the televisual site of contestation that makes fiction so powerful. Finally, I borrow from Said and Kassab to ask: Is *Bab al-Hara*'s discourse on national resistance to imperialism critical of itself, or is it trying to reassert a historical "essence"? How does *Bab al-Hara* facilitate the imagining of dignity and pride or of self-glorification?

Chapter 3

MEDIA ETHNOGRAPHY BETWEEN BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS

In this chapter I outline as clearly as possible, the choices I made in order to answer the research problem that relates to the centrality of the past in the media constructions of an ideal society in Arab postcolonial cities. I approached the research problem by choosing to focus on *Bab al-Hara,* a phenomenal television entertainment Ramadan drama series that recreates a utopian past, set in Damascus in the 1930s. I ask the research question: how is *Bab al-Hara* implicated in everyday life between Beirut and Damascus? Before embarking on describing the research design, context, methods, informants and analysis of field material, it is important to set the scene and summarise a few of the methodological challenges inherent to knowledge production in the Arab region.

Many ethnographic studies start with a tale that describes the researcher's encounter with the field. I prefer the story that I first encountered Damascus while in my mother's womb, when she left Beirut under fire to fly to Brazil from Damascus International Airport. The second encounter was in 1982, when Beirut was under Israeli siege, I accompanied my mother across checkpoints to Damascus to meet my grandfather, who came from Brazil to fetch us. Growing up in Lebanon during the '80s, I kept experiencing Damascus either as a safe haven, during major escalations, or as a post war vacation destination. These memories were not all pleasant, but on many occasions were conflictual, disturbing and troubling. Damascus in the '80s and through the eyes of a child, had a strange conservative feel that was observed through the rare public presence of young people in groups, women alone, or lovers in cafés and restaurants. Later, I learned that the violent political contestation during the '80s drove many people indoors. During my university years in the '90s, I travelled with friends to discover Damascus, Aleppo, the Syrian coast and Palmyra, to frequent restaurants, affordable hotels, and souqs, and to compare Beirut with Damascus. During the '90s many Lebanese used to travel to Damascus to buy cheaper products, for instance, textiles, cotton goods, and food items in bulk. In 2002, I moved to live in Damascus for a 6 month consultancy project. I rented my first apartment in the Mazzeh area, gained good friends and learned to navigate through Damascus, both old and new. After this consultancy, based in Beirut, I kept taking production assignments which meant visiting Damascus once every two months between 2002-2007. When I moved back

to Damascus for phase one of the field work in 2010, the city had a new feel. It was bustling with tourists, investment projects, new restaurants and pubs, new shops with international brands, and a sense of a globalised present and future. In my field notes I recorded two conversations: the first with my mother, the second with a friend in the advertising business, who I met in 2002. Both stories are relevant to setting the scene of this PhD journey: the "native" researcher, Beirut-Damascus as two sites for media ethnographic explorations, and the continuous presence of the past in the present.

3.1. The "Native" Researcher

During the second month of my stay in Damascus in 2010, my mother and sister surprised me for my birthday. It was a Friday, the first day of the weekend in Syria. They knocked on the door of my apartment in the morning and I remember jumping up and down in excitement. This was the second apartment that I had rented in Damascus that my family had visited. A one bedroom, first floor apartment in central Shaalan,[21] overlooking the French Franciscan monastery school that was expropriated to become a public school in 1968. My mother, however, lived in Damascus with her parents in the late '40s. They lived in a courtyard house, and every time we are in Damascus, she comments on how much it has changed and retells the story of June, 1976. That year, she was pregnant with me and, in June, the Syrian army was intervening militarily in Lebanon at the request of President Franjieh and in support of the Lebanese Front (Christian Alliance) in their combat with the PLO and the Left.[22] My parents decided to travel to Brazil to visit my grandparents. During that month, Beirut airport recurrently suspended its operations because of shelling that targeted the airport and its vicinity. Damascus airport was the only other safe option for air travel, and they took the trip with two friends of theirs and reached the city to find no hotel rooms available. Back in 1976, Damascus hotel accommodation capacity was limited. Walking with my mother through the shopping hallways of the Four Seasons Hotel in 2010,[23] she could spot all the global brands that wealthy Syrians used to travel abroad or drive to Beirut in order to buy. Visiting for my birthday, my mother was being

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[21] A central area of Damascus.

[22] For more on the subject please see Traboulsi, Fawwaz (2007) *A History of Modern Lebanon*. London: Pluto Press.

[23] The Four Seasons Hotel is the first five stars private hotel in Syria owned by the Syrian Saudi Tourism Investments Company (SSTIC) which is majorly owned by the Kingdom Hotel Investments, founded by Alwaleed Bin Talal Abdulaziz Alsaud. The hotel began its operations in December, 2005. The hotel currently hosts the headquarters of many of the UN operations in Syria.

introduced to a new Damascus that she found intriguing. It was not the luxury of the Four Seasons that made its first impression on me, but the private club on the road to Beirut to which I was invited on my first day back in Damascus in September, 2010.

It was about a twenty minutes' drive from Damascus. We were a group of seven, two women and five men, each sitting on a white couch in an open-air area by the pool. The club, established in 2008, hosted a number of restaurants, horseback-riding trails, a gym, outdoor and indoor playgrounds, and entertainment areas. I told my friend, Fares, that I was not comfortable in the place, because it reminded me of Beirut's extravagant crowds, I escaped to Damascus to find a more grounded lifestyles. Fares objected to what he regarded as my fixing Damascus in time, romanticizing the past, and othering the Syrians. He said that they do not need to travel to Beirut to enjoy the "fruits of modernity", in terms of aesthetics, access to globalised objects, and connectivity. His argument was that people living in Damascus should not constitute a symbol of authenticity for those in Beirut, who wish to see Damascus as a museum of folklore, but must participate in producing the global order. I tried to establish the connections between economic liberalization, the regime-dependent business class, and the social and cultural changes. None of us, however, was expecting the changes that both of us are still trying to understand.

The "Native's" Positionality

One of the issues that arose during my methodological journey is the problematic: how does one study the politics of mediated cultural practices in today's globalised and mediatised world when the research subject is located in the "non-western" geography of the Arab world (more precisely, in the Levant), a place that is in close proximity and yet is represented as being in continuous struggle with Europe? Before my attempt to grapple with this complex question, I must emphasise that all research on the region is taking place in the absence of sustained (local Levantine or Arab) institutional efforts to study media, society and culture in the region. This institutional weakness, the causes of which will not be discussed here, contributes to the context from which the following methodological concerns come in order to govern the practices of researchers who are studying the region. The first observation on the methodology is that the main academic studies on *mediated practices* in the Arab Middle East are qualitative, exploratory and implemented by individual scholars working with limited budgets (Abu-Lughod, 2005; Armbrust, 1996,

2000; Gerbaudo, 2012; Harb, 2011; Kraidy, 2005, 2010; Sabry, 2010; Salamandra, 2004). The aim of this body of critical research is to understand the complex and nuanced terrain of Arab cultural studies by embracing contextual empirical description-cum-analysis of practices. It is also generally authored by scholars who are based in western academia and who reflect in their work on the power disparities between the countries that host their academic culture and the region they study. The power of research and the politics of qualitative complexity are thus central to methodological questions and reflections on media and cultural studies in the region.

Secondly, both media studies and cultural studies are interdisciplinary, developed within the confines of specific western political and historical moments, questions and struggles. When extending these interdisciplinary practices to the area study of the Middle East, Arab World or the Levant, methodological challenges are made more complex by an additional intellectual task: the questioning, reworking and translation of key concepts including those of the state, class, historicity, nation building, suburbia and everyday life at the very least.

Thirdly, critical attempts to review academic literature on the region have brought to the fore the ways in which the "methodological failures of Orientalism" have participated in creating "zones of theory" that govern anthropological disciplinary scholarship (Abu-Lughod, 1989: 270). Abu-Lughod identifies three main anthropological zones of theory that are used as the dominant frames of explanation in anthropological literature on the region: segmentation (tribalism and, I can argue, in the context of the Levant, sectarianism), the harem and Islam (1989: 280). Mitchell (2002) identifies the theory of modernization as governing most political science literature on the region. These methodological and theoretical blinders, also prevalent in media research, point critical scholarship to the importance of giving attention to spatial politics. The Levant, a geographical area with no dominant agreed upon name, is the Middle East, or the Near East of an unnamed centre (see Chapter 2). This same area is studied under the rubrics of Arab/Islamic civilizations, ancient civilizations, biblical studies, Mediterranean studies, etc. Beirut and Damascus, specifically, were governed one hundred years ago under the last Muslim Caliphate, where Ottoman provinces kept shifting their borders. Today, the capitals of two adjacent states—Lebanon and Syria—are situated within a turbulent war

zone that is engulfing the region (Iraq, Syria and Lebanon) and in close proximity to the decades old conflict over Palestine.

Fourth, shortly after the fieldwork and during the process of re-watching *Bab al-Hara*, inter-linguistic translation emerged as a key problematic. Re-listening to the dialogue between the *Bab al-Hara* characters, or to the recordings with informants, I became sensitive to the affective charge of language and the difficulties that accompany translation. One example relates to the letter ḥ, that has no similar sound in the English language.[24] This letter is associated with words that harbour a sense of warmth like love (*hob*), my beloved (*habibi*), affection (*hanan*), nostalgia (*hanin*), intimacy (*hamimiyya*) and freedom (*hurriyya*). To translate the emotional resonance of letters and words is difficult, and any research on the politics of culture needs to be reflective of the power of the spoken words (in dialect) and the limitations of both literary Arabic and English translations in revealing the emotional charge of cultural meanings. Here, I am not only highlighting the translatability (or un-translatability) of language that is linked to the politics of everyday interactions and emotions. I am also referring to the translatability of culture, understood as the ability to articulate/analyse the voices of interlocutors outside the dominant hold of the theoretical discourses mentioned above. In other words: How can scholarship on the region produce knowledge that does not fall prey to the taken-for-granted explanatory limitations of modernization, the harem, Islam and segmentation? In the sections below, I describe a few of the strategies that I adopted in an attempt to overcome these methodological problematics. In the conclusion, I stand, modestly facing the altar of the social sciences, to reflect on one of the methodological lessons learned: the research path is one that follows the journey of an individual researcher's symbolic extermination.

3.2. Studying the Politics of Television Drama in Context

This research explores how an ideal society is imagined, contested and re-imagined in the context of postcolonial cities. It does so through inferring knowledge on a phenomenal pan-Arab entertainment media text, *Bab al-Hara*, by investigating its implicatedness in the everyday life of both its audiences and makers.

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[24] To be transliterated as h, henceforward.

In this section, I explain the way I conceived the research by examining the complexity of studying the politics of mass culture, in general, and in a region like the Levant, specifically. The study of the media today is caught in the growing inability of researchers to separate the medium from the social formation that shapes it and that is shaped by it. Consequently, media scholars aim to understand the relationship between media, understood as both the symbolic forms of expressions and the material objects that interrelate to help constitute "people's sense making and exchanges of experience in their everyday lives" (Schroder et al., 2003: 63). In order to understand media as being inseparable from non-mediated "reality", I base my methodology on empirical fieldwork that is informed by media ethnography. My knowledge interest lies in both; the media and the people watching; in the using and making of *Bab al-Hara*. I use a multiplicity of methods in order to ensure triangulation or cross-comparison between results (participant observation, interviews, case study and visual analysis). Inconsistencies, when they occur, provide a "creative uncertainty" that is essential for the analytical process (Schroder et al., 2003: 75). As part of the standard ethnographic procedure, I kept a diary, in which I made my daily notes, noted my reactions and reflections during the fieldwork, which was officially implemented for the period of six months in two separate phases between August, 2010, and August, 2011. A "native" of Beirut, I kept an engagement with the field that lasted until the end of the process. I finished writing up the research from Beirut and I kept visiting Damascus until 2013.

As a general approach, I applied multi-sited media ethnography (Abu-Lughod, 2005; Marcus, 1995, 1998). This methodology allowed me to follow my particular visual text of interest so as to study its implicatedness in the everyday life of both its viewers and makers across space. Three main sites were the focus of the research. The first site is concerned with the context of viewing. I investigated *Bab al-Hara* viewing in the Beirut Rawda café during the month of Ramadan 2010 (11th August- 10th September). Café Rawda, as an anthropological place (Augé, 2009), is a popular destination all year long, and especially during non-rainy days. Starting in 2008, Rawda became an attractive place to watch *Bab al-Hara* during Ramadan. In 2010, Rawda showed *Bab al-Hara*, which was aired on MBC between 10-11pm, leading to an almost full café throughout the evenings of the month. The field methods used included observation, participant observation and

unstructured interviews that continued, post-viewing, until the end of September. The second site is Damascus, the space of production, which was the field location for the months of October-December 2010, and June 2011. The third site is *Bab al-Hara*, the televisual text, the site of continuous reviews, critical readings and semiotic analysis. The research design is based on an interest in the connections and interactions among these three sites. I use the multi-sited methodology and the multi-method approach in order to identify various examples of everyday implicatedness. I focus on three different examples of *Bab al-Hara*'s implicatedness in the everyday. The first is the viewing context, where people practise a leisure activity that involves going out to cafés during Ramadan to watch hit drama series (this refers to the context). The second implicatedness is the result of interlocutors talking about their lives as they intersect with *Bab al-Hara* or "*Bab al-Hara* talk". It is an approach that studies the televisual text in association with its reception (this refers to content). The third case of implicatedness traces the circulation of the text and its intertextuality within the political sphere. It is the case study of the re-contextualisation of a fictional *Bab al-Hara* character into a political act of protest in Damascus during the first months of the upheaval (this refers to process).[25] The case study is included as a result of the dissidence movement that unexpectedly started changing the field a few months before the second phase of the fieldwork in 2011.

Multi-sited Media Ethnography

Media ethnography is used to describe three different approaches to researching media. The first and second approaches exist in the discipline of anthropology and engage discussions on media practice, anthropology and ethnography. The third approach is a practice of ethnography adapted by media scholars, who refuse to limit their work to that which falls within the disciplinary blinkers. Reading the various debates between scholars who follow the three approaches above, it is clear that this new methodological field, or sub-field, is still in the making, and that media ethnography still needs to come to terms with an agreed upon definition. The understanding that media ethnography is an ethnographic and contextual study of media-related practices that builds on cross-

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[25] The definition of intertextuality, based on Bauman and Briggs (1990), Briggs and Bauman (1992) and Silverstone and Urban (1996) quoted in Peterson (2005), is "an active social process involving the extracting of a discourse or discursive element from one setting (de-contextualisation) and inserting it into another (re-contextualisation)" (p.130). Check Peterson, M.A. (2005) Performing Media: Towards an Ethnography of Intertextuality, in Rothenbuhler, E.W. and Coman, M. (eds.) *Media Anthropology*. London: Sage Publications.

disciplinary theory, however, is generally agreed upon (Media Anthropology Network, 2005).

The "ethnographic turn" in the study of media consumption/ media reception or interpretive/active audience has introduced ethnographic methods to the field of media studies and cultural studies, allowing, since the early eighties, for breakthroughs in research that have shaped our understanding of television viewing (Hobson, 1982; Ang, 1985; Morley, 1980, 1986; Buckingham, 1987; Lull, 1990; Liebes & Katz, 1990). Morley, for example, promised to contribute to the "remained unexplained 'how' and 'why' questions behind the patterns of viewing behaviour, revealed by large-scale survey work" (1986: 17). These earlier studies, now canonical texts, are nevertheless criticized by anthropologists for adopting the "label 'ethnography'" when they have minimally engaged in detailed participant observation, or have rarely practised an "actual immersion in the daily practices and social worlds of the people" (Spitulnik, 1993: 298). Criticism of media scholarship that takes ethnography on board is the outcome of anthropology's reflexive turn, which demands of media research the appropriation of the examination of discourse structures, their relation to observable practices and reflection on the researcher's situatedness (1993: 298). A third criticism of ethnographic media studies has been its concentration on "television audiences in Western contexts," with fewer studies filling the gaps in knowledge about other, diverse societies (1993: 299). Notwithstanding the criticism that continues to pose methodological challenges to anthropology and media studies, a fascinating body of interdisciplinary literature has emerged since the "ethnographic turn" and it has enriched both of the fields that share a concern with media "power" and media's "roles as vehicles of culture", without necessarily sharing theoretical frameworks or methodological techniques (1993: 294). This doctoral thesis belongs to the interdisciplinary tradition of media and cultural studies. It borrows the practices of ethnography from anthropology, adopting media ethnography as a methodology and not simply as a method.

I understand media ethnography as an approach to meaning that is constituted in and through contextualized practices. Ethnography, an interpretative research methodology, combines the integration of empirical description and theoretical conceptualization (Schroder et al. 2003: 64-65). It involves a number of methods, including participation, observation, participant observation, interviewing and case studies. Ethnographic research

has shifted from realism to relativism to reflexivity, whereby the scholars' reflexive attitudes to the research and their situatedness within it are central to ethnographic practice (Schroder et al. 2003: 68). My interest in media ethnography coincides with existing calls which advocate that media scholarship embrace anthropological approaches as a sound methodology for the study of media and culture in the Arab region (Murphy & Kraidy, 2003; Zayani, 2011). Media ethnography, understood as "a cross-disciplinary, theoretically informed and empirically grounded work", is considered a necessity for research into localized practices that is driven by an interest in "various social, political and cultural dynamics" (Zayani, 2011: 47).

The centrality of context in ethnography leads me to "the field" in media ethnographic research. In a globalized world of interconnectedness, the multi-sited approach allows for an analysis that integrates local, regional and global flows. In this research, I focus on the local (Beirut) and the regional flows (Damascus). Limitations, however, lie in the form of barriers to access to empirical fieldwork in multiple regional contexts, mainly in the Gulf (Dubai), where the funding and broadcasting television channel MBC Group is located. The absence of insight into the funding production mechanisms, however, does not prevent the study from examining the political economy of cultural production as it is experienced in the local and regional context. In order to defend my choice of multi-sited media ethnography, I build on the justifications for multi-sited ethnography.

Multi-sited ethnography is related to the "spatial turn," when postmodernism brought about the view that space is socially produced (Falzon, 2009). Space, perceived to be under construction by both researchers and informants, can no longer be described independently of its interrelations and the resulting heterogeneity. Such an understanding of space leads to a conceptualisation of "the field" as being dependent on "field experience," and not as preconceived spatial boundaries that are enforced by the postcolonial state, the international powers or by local struggles. Starting my "field" in the Beirut Rawda Café and following the informants and the media text leads to Damascus. Damascus, the city where *Bab al-Hara* is imagined and executed, is also the mediated historical city represented by the drama series and consumed in the Beirut café.

The second rationale for using multi-sited methodology relates to the limits of the local approach in a global system. *Bab al-Hara*, as an example of a regional media flow with global implicatedness, challenges the construction of the local. I thus argue that a locality bounded approach does not suffice to study a cultural production that targets Arab speaking viewers in multiple locales (across the globe) and which is the result of a regional collaboration among Gulf funding sources, pan-Arab media institutions, the marketing departments of multinational brands, and the Syrian drama industry. The "field" is expected to follow, as much as possible, the unbounded regional and global dimension of the object of study. An ideal study would trace associations to the regional level of funding and production while investigating reception at one or many localities across the world (such a study requires more than one researcher, or longer periods of field research and multiple research grants, as well as permissions in heavily and closely observed strict Gulf countries). The third reason that multi-sited ethnography proves to be necessary relates to pragmatic research limitations, self-imposed restrictions and force majeure.[26] The initial research plan conceptualized the exploration of the three different sites of production, consumption and text taking place within the geography of Syria. This initial conceptualization of multiple research sites allows for the flexible inclusion of the Beirut Rawda Café as a site of consumption sharing associations from within and without *Bab al-Hara* to Damascus, the city of *Bab al-Hara*.

Falzon highlights three criticisms of multi-sited ethnography: lack of depth, abdication of ethnographic responsibility and the "latter-day Holism" charge (2009: 8-13). He later defends multi-sited ethnography from these criticisms by arguing that if the ethnographer is able to write this spatial depth, "understanding the shallow may itself be a form of depth" (2009: 9). Secondly, he reaffirms that space being socially constructed counters all of the claims of ethnographers following a pre-existing field. Thirdly, that multi-sitedness does not claim comprehensiveness, but contextualization (2009: 13). I took advantage of the flexibility that multi-sitedness allows in order to gain horizontal complexity. I compromised on the time spent with the interlocutors in Beirut to learn from new informants in Damascus, thus taking on the challenge to write a complex comparative

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[26] The researcher suffered a serious back injury during July, 2010, and was advised by both the orthopaedic consultant and the neurologist not to travel from Beirut to Damascus before October, 2010. Prevented by the medical condition from moving to Syria when the month of Ramadan, 2010, was about to start, the researcher had to identify a reception site that would be an accessible ethnographic place during *Bab al-Hara*'s screening.

depth across localities. In order to write the thickest description possible, I spent more time with fewer people in both cities.

Everyday Life Television

The study of the implicatedness of a televisual text in the everyday necessitates a revision of the concept of *everyday life*. I base this research on the basic understanding of the concept as the "ordinariness," the "taken-for-grantedness" that is both political yet "standing in the face of the unknown, the unexpected or the catastrophic" (Silverstone, 1994: 165-166). I adopt this definition so as to avoid the undesired implicatedness of the "invention of everyday life" on the research methodology (Felski, 1999). Three different theoretical approaches to everyday life make it problematic to adopt a definition proposed by one scholarly school of thought. The Marxist, critique of alienation and reification under capitalism; the popular, identifying everyday life as a space for pleasure and resistance; and the third, which is concerned with the creativity paradoxes and the relation between subject and object, which make it necessary- not to theorize- but to highlight the paradoxes of everyday life (Silverstone, 1994: 160-161). De Certeau regards studying everyday practices to be an investigation of "ways of operating" through an analysis of "representations", "modes of behaviour" and "the use" or "what the cultural consumer 'makes' or does'" with the products (1984: xii-30). De Certeau's definition includes a bias towards reading the everyday life from the perspective of consumers, expressing an inclination to celebrate agency with less regard for structure. Silverstone argues that an ethnographic study of the particular that is "firmly grounded in the mutuality of empirical and theoretical understanding" allows for a comprehension of both "forces of structure … domination and resistance" (1994: 164). He suggests that television and everyday life be studied through the three dimensions governing the relation between them: "agency (referring to process), modernity (referring to content) and domesticity (referring to context)" (1994: 165). My approach to the study of *Bab al-Hara* is inspired by Silverstone's (1994) proposal to investigate process, content and context. I pursue a three dimensional framework that investigates: a) the context of café viewing, b) content, through "*Bab al-Hara* talk" by audiences, makers and the visual text, and c) the process of *Bab al-Hara*'s implicatedness in a street protest during the upheaval.

There are two main methodological and theoretical challenges to applying the concept of everyday life to television viewing during Ramadan in the Levant. Ramadan (see Chapter 5 for more information on Ramadan) is a yearly event that extends for a month. As a result, Ramadan harbours both the characteristics of ordinariness (within) and exception (in comparison to the rest of the year). To take Ramadan viewing as a site for the everyday implicatedness of televisual culture is a choice that exposes the taken for granted practices within the month, but does not succeed in identifying how it shifts away from media practices during the rest of the year. It also highlights the contradictions of "ordinariness" and the "catastrophic" that blend together in the life of Beirut and Damascus (after the upheaval). Here, it is necessary to engage in rethinking everydayness by comparing Beirut to Damascus (before and after the uprising). The current revolutions and counter-revolutions in the Arab region, and the occupation of Iraq, which has had a serious impact on the Levant region, leads to the questioning of the meanings of ordinariness and the catastrophic as lived experiences in the contexts of postcolonial states that are living both internal and external turmoil.

Bab al-Hara's Everyday Implicatedness 1: Context

Literature on television audiences is instrumental in explaining the social and interpersonal purposes of television viewing and in providing insight into family consumption practices, interfamilial power and hierarchy, the structural uses of television, and the use of television as a resource for identity construction (Hobson, 1982; Morley, 1986, 1992; Lull, 1988; Silverstone, 1994). In all these studies, domestic space is regarded as the main context for television viewing. This knowledge of the importance of the domestication of television, as well as the centrality of the television medium in the domestic sphere, does not contradict two important observations. The first observation supports the calls to de-westernise media studies by tracing the media practices of individual family members outside domestic spaces of intimacy and in public spaces of extended family, or non-family, based relationships. It is important here to review the concept of the family as not being limited to the confines of the physical household unit. Research from Africa provides examples of radio travelling with families, through walls and across neighbourhoods (Spitulnik, 2002). This leads to the second observation, which relates to the technological developments that are converging mobile technology with digital television, thus making it accessible in multiple viewing contexts and, as a result,

rendering almost obsolete the limiting of television research to household viewing. While not undermining the centrality of television to home/family life, this study identifies television viewing outside the domestic sphere, in cafés and streets, to be valuable for the study of the televisual text in general, and to *Bab al-Hara* as a phenomenon linked to the month of Ramadan, specifically. My choice to conduct media ethnography in the privately owned public space of a café allows me to observe routine outdoor non-staged leisure television watching during Ramadan, and to draw inferences on the politics of media practices outside the domestic space.

Bab al-Hara's Everyday Implicatedness 2: Content

The second dimension in the framework seeks to investigate content. Silverstone (1994) recognizes that studying everyday life and television's content is an exploration of modernity. Acknowledging Silverstone's contribution, I argue that analysing one media text and, in this case, *Bab al-Hara* as content, provides a complex discussion on modernity in the context of two postcolonial cities: Beirut and Damascus. This context, where modernity is linked to the colonial encounter, allows for the systematic examination of mediated history, home, nostalgia, utopia, and morality. My approach to analysing content is inspired by Jensen (1998) and Fiske (1989), as adopted by Tufte (2000). Here, *Bab al-Hara*, as a text, is understood to be inseparable from its reception and, as a result, its content is studied as "audience-cum-content-analysis." Jensen and Tufte use the term "television talk" to identify the intertextual relationship between the textual and the social. I suggest the use of the term "*Bab al-Hara* talk," which signifies both talk within and about the television drama. "*Bab al-Hara* talk" is thus the means with which to explore the rich meanings of the televisual text and its political significance.

Bab al-Hara's Everyday Implicatedness 3: Process

The third dimension of the relationship between media and everyday life refers to process, defined as agency (Silverstone 1994). In his analysis, Silverstone questions the meanings of everyday life and the situatedness of the television's ritual space within it. He discusses ordinariness, taken-for-grantedness, doxa, the mundane, the quotidian, and play, to conclude that the boundary between fantasy and reality still holds, because "the particularities of everyday life require and depend on it" (1994: 169). Secondly, he

trivializes questions that look into the passivity and activity of audiences and refocuses the attention onto how to understand "engagement" with television as it takes place in everyday life. He understands engagement to be dynamic and it is this dynamic political engagement with television that I am interested in researching in the case study of Muna Wassef (see Chapter 8). The case study provides an opportunity to engage with Silverstone at the level of rethinking the everyday as being inseparable from politics and catastrophe, and the relationship between "anxiety" and "security", without undermining the dual forces of structure (domination and resistance). The case study also allows for an investigation into the intersections and contradictions between lived and televisual narratives.

3.3. The Research Journey

In this section I present a short narrative that describes the three main building blocks of my research journey: the fieldwork in its three phases (Beirut and Damascus before and after the uprising), watching *Bab al-Hara* and writing up the thesis. This section is based on a description-cum-analysis of a research trajectory that has reached its maturity. Nevertheless, this research journey continues, to the date of submission, to be both a fulfilling and troubling experience.

Ramadan Reception

Ramadan is the hype month of television drama production in the Arab world. The cultural industry across the region, and specifically in the three main production zones – Egypt, the Gulf and Syria, specifically produce work to be released during the month of Ramadan and then to be rebroadcast during the rest of the year. Ramadan follows the lunar calendar of 29 to 30 days. The length of the month influences the format of television drama series, eventually producing (mostly) 30 episodes for the programmes. Producers try to escape these limitations, but have not yet succeeded in establishing another television drama season that would save their programmes from the stark competition that leads to only a few programmes gaining major viewership and thus attracting advertisements. The political economy of Ramadan television drama broadcasting is a complex interplay among advertising agencies, major pan Arab broadcasters (mainly situated in the Gulf) and the drama industry. In Syria, the industry is described as a "cottage industry," lacking the

professional institutional qualifications that would be expected from a successful growing industry (Della Ratta, 2012). Nevertheless, Syrian production remains central to Ramadan drama series, when most Lebanese local and regional channels air at least one Syrian television drama series as part of their Ramadan bundle.

Figure 1: Rawda Café on a Ramadan evening, before the scheduled 10 p.m. airing time of Bab al-Hara.

Ramadan constitutes an attractive month for television drama production for multiple reasons. Initially, the holy month of fasting allows practising Muslims, Ramadan practising Muslims, non-practising Muslims and non-Muslims to engage in Ramadan related sacred, social and leisure practices, which include fasting, engaging in late prayers at the Mosque (*salat al-tarawih*), visiting relatives and neighbours, donating money and food, social gatherings, going out, etc.[27] Ramadan is an exceptional month that allows for dominant routines to be broken so that a different set of routines can take place. Ramadan practising Muslims usually fast from dawn until sunset, when families, friends or acquaintances gather to break the fast (*'iftar*). Consequently, Ramadan reflects both pious religiosity and social and festive meanings that are associated with consumption. What Sabry describes as care-structures that are enmeshed in a "'common experience' and a 'structure of feeling' which reaches beyond the religious to permeate other spheres of

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[27] Salat al-tarawih are non-compulsory extra prayers performed solely during Ramadan. They are based on sets of 4 rakʿat followed by rest.

everyday life" (2010: 190). This thus leads the marketing departments of multinational brands and regional advertising agencies to plan spending budgets for the month of Ramadan. What Armbrust (2002) calls the "Christmasization" of Ramadan, or its association with materialism that blurs it into a mass consumption ritual. Television channels, dependent on advertising, produce and schedule programmes that target individuals and families who are engaged in the entertainment routines of the month. These, however, do not succeed in reducing the month into one set of practices. What is important is to observe the existential or spiritual life, together with the social, the cultural and the economic (Sabry, 2010).

Café Rawda is one of the pioneer coffeehouses that initiated the growing trend of screening Ramadan drama series for clients who follow popular television series while having *suhoor* (the pre-dawn meal) in public. It broadcast Ramadan drama series, including *Bab al-Hara*, on two large screens in 2010. It proved to be the optimal ethnographic place for multiple reasons. Firstly, it met the criteria of allowing engagement with a number of *Bab al-Hara* followers from various ages, classes, genders and sectarian backgrounds. Secondly, and more practically, it offered an accessible and affordable fieldwork site. Thirdly, due to its history (since the '30s) it carries symbolic value to Beirut dwellers. Fourthly, because of its actuality that tells part of the story of the city and its relationship to consuming television, religion, commercial goods and discourses about the other. I spent a minimum of one hour and a half every evening at the Rawda Café, watching *Bab al-Hara* in public. I was in the café twenty-seven days of the thirty days of Ramadan. My strategy was to go accompanied.

During the first nine days of Ramadan, I was accompanied by a total of twenty-six people that I already knew. Participant observation took place among friends, family and acquaintances, whom joined me at the café, in addition to the clientele (*Bab al-Hara* viewers) I approached starting on day one by asking for phone numbers and subsequent interviews that took place (post-viewing) between the second week of Ramadan and the end of September, 2010. On the tenth night, I did my first interview with one of the main interlocutors. Throughout all of the Ramadan evenings, I watched *Bab al-Hara* in the café with a total of forty different individuals (friends, family and acquaintances) practising participant observation, however, I did not interview my entourage, but took notes of the relevant dialogue conducted at Rawda. I conducted open ended interviews with thirteen

café clients/followers of *Bab al-Hara* (7 male and 6 female), the café owner (male), two waiters (male), a well-known artist/regular café client who does not follow *Bab al-Hara* (male), one television journalist (male) and three followers of *Bab al-Hara* who are not Rawda Café clients (1 female and 2 male), that is a total of twenty one people in Beirut with a total of 24 hours and 32 minutes of recorded interview time.

The choice of Rawda Café as an ethnographic site meant that the people being observed and interviewed in Beirut were predominantly urban dwellers and so were their relatives and the *Bab al-Hara* makers I interviewed in Damascus. The sample was a non-representative judgment within context sample. A typology of research subjects is helpful in clarifying the use of different research methods and the variety of contact frequency and intensity that lead to heterogeneous relationships with informants (See Table 1 below). As a means to differentiate between the different interlocutors, I use the term 'low intensity' to signal *Bab al-Hara* viewers that I interviewed once or twice from those I interviewed many times (high intensity).

Damascus Production

Moving to live in Damascus, I rented a house between October 4th and December 13th, 2010. The original plan, to interview six of the production team, was feasible and I conducted interviews with four of *Bab al-Hara*'s main stars (1 actress and 3 actors), the director of Season 5, the writer of the initial *Bab al-Hara* concept, and the costume designer. The total recorded interview time added up to nine hours. However, interviewing *Bab al-Hara*'s makers was not enough to gather an understanding of its relationship to the Syrian drama industry, the various genres and the political/cultural environment. I conducted interviews with a director who is known for directing the "Damascene Milieu" genre drama series, one scriptwriter, three theatre directors and one journalist, for a total of eight hours of recorded interviews. While in Beirut, it happened that a few of the interlocutors had families in Damascus. I followed the network and established contact with a number of these relatives. I conducted eight hours of recorded interviews with one family (father, mother and daughter) and with one young man, who linked me to two more people (one male and one female).

Damascus during the Upheaval

During my second phase of fieldwork, I lived in Damascus during June 2011. Between December and June, the Tunisian revolution forced Ben Ali out, the Egyptian people toppled Mubarak, the Libyan, Yemeni, Bahraini and Syrian people started protesting against their rulers. *Bab al-Hara* was not out of the picture. One YouTube video, entitled *The Arab Revolutions 2011*, was uploaded in January, it used the *Bab al-Hara* theme song edited with images from the Tunisian revolution. A report on Al Jazeera Arabic news channel in May used the *Bab al-Hara* theme song and edited scenes from Season 5 together with footage from the Syrian protests to propose a *Bab al-Hara* Season 6 to tell the stories of loyalist and opposition stars.[28] The mainstream and user-generated media's intertextual use of *Bab al-Hara*'s symbols and lexicon constituted part of the discourse on the politics of dissent and the representation of national identity.

Living in Damascus during the uprising was an intense and destabilising experience for multiple reasons. The first is a personal one, coming from a childhood in war torn Beirut, Damascus constituted the only "peaceful" oasis in a region under fire. Experiencing the transformation of Damascus into a Beirut like city that smelled like violence, I had to deal with my deep need for a secure place. Travelling back and forth to London was not conducive to achieving a sense of balance. Being far from the everyday pains of living in a conflict zone, I was experiencing guilt, and with the increase in human casualties, it became more like a survivor's guilt. The contrast between a "normal" life in London and the threat of violence in Syria and Lebanon, highlighted the power disparities inscribed in place. This also reflected on my epistemological trajectory, searching for ways to understand reality outside a structuralist, or a post-structuralist, worldview.

Being in Damascus during the unrest, I focused on the experience of one star, Muna Wassef, who was accused of disloyalty for signing a petition against the government at the onset of the revolution. I interviewed the actress and two scriptwriters/intellectuals for a total of four hours of recorded discussion. I managed to document her case study, which is reflective of the interplay between *Bab al-Hara* and the politics of the state, television stars and the dissidence movement in flux.

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[28] For more information, see Chapter 8. Abdelhadi, Majed (2011) Bashar al-Asad yaltaqi biʾadad min fanani al-drama al-souriyye [Bashar al-Asad Meets The Syrian Drama Artists]. *Al Jazeera*. Television Report. [Online] Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vd3WPzvuEWA [Accessed 1st June, 2015].

Table 1: Methods used per Categories of Research Participants

METHODS/ Category	Participant Observation	Interviews	Case Study	REMARKS
Friends	X			
Family	X			
Acquaintances	X			
Café Clientele	X			
Audiences	X (Beirut)	X		Post-viewing
Café Staff	X	X		
Bab al-Hara Makers		X	X	
Cultural Producers		X		
Journalists		X		

Table 2: Age and Gender per Categories of Interviewed Research Participants

Category	Age- Under 30	Age- Between 30 & 60	Age- Above 60	Total
Audiences/ Low Intensity	5 M + 4 F	3 F + 2 M	1 M	15
Audiences/ High Intensity	2 M	1 F	1 M + 2 F	6
Café Staff/ Owner		3 M		3
Bab al-Hara Makers		1 F + 6 M	1 F	8
Cultural Producers		7 M		7
Journalists		2 M		2
TOTAL	**11**	**25**	**5**	**41**

Watching Bab al-Hara

I became interested in the question of "selective retention" (Klapper, 1960) during the first year of doctoral studies while preparing for fieldwork. During fieldwork, and while watching *Bab al-Hara* at Café Rawda, I wrote in my field notebook: what remains of a drama series after it is watched? The immateriality of the visual text contradicts the use of the terms "consumption" and "use." Since both terms do not make sense in Arabic when applied to watching television, and my relationship with words is grounded in translation, I choose to use the terms "watch" or "view," since they escape the theoretical bias of active/passive viewers and encompasses consumption, use and non-attentive exposure.

Many people at Rawda watch television while simultaneously eating, smoking, talking and observing. In this section, I reflect on my own viewing experience of *Bab al-Hara*, highlighting the significance of the context, the female insider's gaze, as well as critiquing the dichotomy of professional/lay television viewing.

I have watched and re-watched *Bab al-Hara* since Season 1 was broadcast in 2006. In 2009, I watched the series for research purposes. From my room in London, I watched the first four seasons on pirated DVDs before the fieldwork (summer, 2010). I sat for long hours watching episodes consecutively, sometimes not taking a break between them. The experience of watching four seasons of *Bab al-Hara*, alone, away from home and on a laptop, was an exercise in managing "restorative nostalgia" (see Chapter 4). I used to take notes and observe the production techniques, however, most of my viewing was emotional and lay (not detached). I became drawn to the *Bab al-Hara* narrative and engaged in it like a fan. My experience as a viewer/researcher shifted during the fieldwork. Sitting in the Rawda Café, with friends, acquaintances or informants, to watch *Bab al-Hara* in public did not allow me the suspension of disbelief that was necessary for an emotional build-up. Sitting with others, it was difficult to focus on the details and I was mainly following the action to ensure that I was not missing out on the plot. The bond I enjoyed with the characters was disrupted. This dissociation did not translate into a position on *Bab al-Hara* that thought of it as "low" culture, not worthy of academic research. A position I commonly encountered while in discussion with research participants and friends, one that depended on their claim to an intellectual status and modernist worldview. What is important to highlight is how the context of viewing shifts the experience of viewing. While in London I was developing a fan-like attachment to *Bab al-Hara*. While in Beirut, I was growing critical and even dismissive of it. The entertaining and nostalgic aspects of the narrative were priority factors that influenced my viewing in London. In Beirut, the cultural significance of the narrative took precedence, and *Bab al-Hara* was no longer a simple story but a carrier of meanings within a web of dominant readings, and a potential manipulator of social norms and values.

Reflecting on the perceived non-status of *Bab al-Hara* as an academic endeavour, it is important to emphasise the serious hold of the modernist conceptions of "high" and "low" cultures and their "liberating" or "sedating" influences on the "critical connoisseurs" or "ignorant masses" as potentially impeding any empirical research on watching television.

Almost all informants, acquaintances and friends I met during fieldwork, expressed their surprise at my choice of topic. Subsequently, however, many showed pride in sharing their viewing experiences with me. I reckon that my chance to live the borderline experience of a fan played a facilitative role in my interviews and allowed me to build a rapport with informants, who approach *Bab al-Hara* as a story. It is when I embodied *Bab al-Hara* with tears and sobbing, that I went back to the question, what is left of *Bab al-Hara* after it is watched?

Watching *Bab al-Hara* (Seasons 1-4) in preparation for my fieldwork consolidated my interest in the drama series, while watching *Bab al-Hara* as a critical viewer (Season 5) in the Rawda Café, did not provide me with the same pleasures that were associated with the narrative. During the third phase of re-watching *Bab al-Hara* (Season 5) in London, the experience shared elements with both phases one and two. The third phase of watching *Bab al-Hara* (Season 5) took place during the months of May and June, 2012, and the watching process was accompanied with writing intensive notes on every episode. The notes sought to build the script, describing the scene headings, the action in each scene, the characters' names, extensions, the shots and the excerpts of dialogue (in certain cases), in addition to my own comments on certain scenes. For example, I would note down my emotional reactions to certain scenes and make specific reference to the use of certain music or words (example: on motherhood).

Watching *Bab al-Hara* (Season 5) for the second time, in the individual private comfort of my London room, away from the cultural context that gives meaning to its symbols, allowed me to get into the narrative thrill by suspending disbelief or by accepting secondary belief. Moreover, this attempt at watching *Bab al-Hara* contradicts the stark divide between the lay and professional reading of a visual text. Investigating my notes on the post viewing of selective retention of *Bab al-Hara*, what outlives the viewing experience in memory are visual images of brightly coloured costumes and beautiful accessories, the width of the Damascene courtyard house and the emotional associations of bravery, pride, honour and solidarity. What also remains relates to the contextual experience of watching a story alone in bed, with family in the saloon, or with friends in a café.

Writing the PhD was no less intense than the fieldwork. Moving between cities due to work and financial constraints, meant I lived in Beirut in 2012, Cairo in 2013, London in 2014, and back to Beirut in 2014. The multi-sitedness of the location of "analysis," meant multiple viewpoints, emotional experiences and distances from the object of analysis. Distance from *Bab al-Hara* did not translate into a distance from the Syrian crisis, which was growing more catastrophic by the month. Friends I met in Damascus in 2010, were now relocated in Beirut, Cairo and London. The relationship with the "field" rarely ends after "field work" is implemented, especially for a "native" researcher. The moment of the Arab uprisings constituted a challenge for most researchers in the region. The moments of counter-revolutions that pulled the region into violence were similar. In order to make sense of the multiplicity of levels of analysis in such a context, I became conscious of the writing process as being inseparable from structures of power, inequality and care. Jon Nixon (2015) analyses Arendt's distinction between types of thinking: "pure thought" that takes place in an isolated closed system of unworldliness; the unworldliness of "thoughtlessness" that relates to absence of independent judgement, thus the "banality of evil"; and "thinking together" which "dwells in uncertainty," expressions of care and outside/between disciplinary boundaries. It is this "thinking together" that I was seeking during the writing phase. How could I not work on my thesis as a detached topic and how to make sense of the uprisings as moments of rupture and continuity, not in isolation, but in dialogue? The concept of "slow scholarship", which calls for "cultivating caring academic cultures and processes", is useful for academic writing in times/spaces of war, as well as for the neoliberal regimes identified by the authors (Mountz et al., 2015). A care that connects the researcher to others, thus, challenges all types of exclusions and the colonization of time. In other words, "slow scholarship" supports the production of critical thinking, despite patriarchal, imperial and militarist structures.

The neoliberal changes influencing academia in the world is jeopardising "slow scholarship," which is also crucial for any work on regions suffering modern warfare. Living in, studying and theorizing a place that is dealing with the everyday uncertainties of a war-torn region necessitates the centrality of time, time to read, write, think and engage. In other words, serious critical scholarship on the cultural politics of contemporary Syria and Lebanon requires an engagement with the shared existential instability, insecurity, risk and

loss. I argue that being in the field, whether in Beirut or Damascus, watching *Bab al-Hara*, and writing up the research from multiple localities, I practised sliding through the positionalities of native/foreigner, local/neighbour/other, fan/researcher which proved the importance of not only questioning the subject, object and objective of academic research, but the centrality of the researcher herself and her "care for the world" to the scholarly process.

3.4. Reflections on the Researcher's Positionality

> … we take ethical responsibility for our own subjectivity and political perspective, resisting the trap of gratuitous self-centeredness or of presenting an interpretation as though it has no "self," as though it is not accountable for its consequences and effects. (Madison, 2012: 9)

In this section, and as part of the process of thinking reflexively about my positionality as a researcher, a "native" one, western trained, raised in Beirut (not in the diaspora nor at the margins or borders of the field encounters), I think through my biases, privileges and power, while at the same time recognizing the structures of power that we inhabit, the research subjects and I. I look back at my methods, intentions and their possible consequences. I start my reflection by sharing one incident that took place during my stay in Damascus in 2010.

I was sitting in a café in Old Damascus when the waiter responsible for putting the coal on the *argileh* head (hubble-bubble or hookah) approached me thinking I was a foreigner, he spoke to me in English and I answered in Arabic. "Are you Lebanese?" "Yes, an Arab", I answered. "But I am not an Arab" he added. I asked him whether he was a Kurd, and the conversation continued with him telling me how *Bab al-Hara* ignored the role of the Kurds in fighting the French. He mentioned Hanano and al-Azma, and it was the first time that I had heard the claim that Yusuf al-Azma was a Kurd.[29] In the café that afternoon, I was the only single client sitting among a number of couples. That evening I wrote a Facebook status: Damascus, the city of lovers, in all corners of coffeehouses, this, that and

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[29] Al-Azma was the Syrian Defence Minister in the Independence government of Prince Faisal, before the French invasion of Syria in 1920. Al-Azma fought the invading French army and died in the battle of Maysalun.

the one by the corner, like lovebirds conversing flirtatiously in an old movie! Who vanquished the lovers in Beirut? [30]

This incident brings to light a few of the methodological challenges relating to researching culture in the Levant or Bilad al-Sham. I base my discussion on the four problematics that are faced by "native" researchers, which were raised by Jacobs-Huey (2002). The first is that of claiming "nativeness," and here I would like to emphasise how the researcher's negotiation of multiple identities in the field challenges the legitimacy claims that are associated with being native/an insider (Narayan, 1993). In the incident with the waiter, above, I took on the Arab identity in hope of building a rapport based on the assumption that Arabness is the identity that brings people together in the context of Damascus. This assumption is not the only factor that influenced my behaviour. Reflective effort to think through my Facebook status, where I compare the visibility of couples in public cafés in Beirut and Damascus, emphasises the specificity of my personal gaze. Coming from Beirut, my initial observations and interactions in Damascus were embedded in the Lebanese context and, more specifically, in the internal Lebanese struggle over the Arabness of Lebanon, and the subsequently muddled Lebanese-Syrian relations. [31] My dialogue with the waiter clarifies my intention to dissociate myself from the Lebanese who politically situate themselves as non-Arabs, and possibly as anti-Syrian. This positionality, that "shapes and is shaped by" the relation to other subjects, is termed "relational positionality" and allows for a complex understanding of the fieldwork practice (Crossa, 2012: 115). Crossa argues that positionality is an "epistemological matter that shapes how we see and know the world" as well as "an ontological matter in terms of what we see" (126).

The work of relational positionality also allows for a layered reading of what it means to be native in Beirut, the city I grew up in, my city. In one incident, with one of the main interlocutors at Café Rawda, Nizar (see Chapter 7) expressed that he appreciated a political leader of a right wing Christian group in Lebanon (as a way to build common ground). A bit surprised at this disclosure, coming from a man with an Arab Nationalist political background, I asked, "Why did you infer that I liked his politics?" He smiled and said that he was trying to humour me, since he thought I was from Achrafieh (a predominantly Lebanese Christian neighbourhood of Beirut). I then assumed that he

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[30] Original text: دمشق مدينة العشاق ففي كل زوايا القهوة هذه وتلك والتي قرب الناصية يتسامر العصافير كانني في فيلم قديم. من قضى على العشاق في بيروت؟

[31] For more on the contemporary Lebanese-Syrian relations, see Knudsen and Kerr (eds.) (2012).

suspected, based on my first name that I come from a Christian family, for there were no visible indicators, or so I thought, that would suggest a confessional background. Nizar became more welcoming when he knew that my father came from the Mouseitbeh neighbourhood of Beirut (a Christian-Muslim mixed neighbourhood that is situated in West Beirut). While I was trying to reach out to the waiter in Damascus by situating myself within the "in" group, the interlocutor in Beirut was also reaching out by aligning himself politically to somebody he expected I would support. The complexity of performing identity, in general, and in the context of the region, specifically, leads me to highlight the different shifting roles that both the research participants and I were performing between Beirut and Damascus and the various signifiers that interlocutors were picking up, mostly without me intending them. A Beiruti middle class, Lebanese, Arab, liberal, single woman (should have been married by now), with a Christian name, and a PhD researcher, were just a few of them. While the fieldwork progressed, I became more aware of my dress code, the people I was being seen with, my language (body language and accent). This awareness reveals that I was also the object of the research participants' gaze. The gaze and its associated power dynamics, although they tended to be symmetrical, have been associated with intense emotional anxiety and intellectual uncertainty. To be a "native" in the field meant to negotiate both desires: to be part of the collectivity, and to be a unique individual. My field experience reaffirms Mullings' position on the insider/outsider binary as being a highly unstable boundary that ignores "the dynamism of positionalities in time and through space" (1999: 340). Critical of the fixity of "nativeness", I approached this research with full awareness that, while studying "my society," I am also studying my own conceptions of the self and other.

The second problematic facing "native" researchers and influencing their interaction in the field is the centrality of language and discourse knowledge (Jacobs-Huey, 2002). The language problematic is not major in my experience, maybe because I was working mainly with urban middle class participants and there were no serious language barriers that would prevent me from sustaining or understanding conversations in various contexts. My knowledge of discourse, however, varied and developed between Beirut and Damascus, and it has influenced my ability to resist being "the other" of dominant or marginal identity claims (please check the Watching *Bab al-Hara* section of this chapter as an example of the tactic employed to evade the "educated fool" charge and to gain access to the common experience of watching drama series).

The third problematic that faces "native" researchers relates to failure in the field and the dilemmas of translation (Jacobs-Huey, 2002). I can confidently argue that I have not faced failure in the field and that, although I have encountered two cases where the research participants were not interested in following up the interviews, the fieldwork was, in general, successful in terms of access to *Bab al-Hara* makers and viewers. However, the translation issue that I have also raised at the beginning of this chapter requires careful consideration. Here, I would like to mention briefly a few of the practical strategies that I used to resolve the dilemmas of translation. One practical strategy I adopted was the use of certain key terms in Arabic, for example, *takhwin* (accusation of treason) and *hwaynto* (what a loss). A second strategy is to give space to the informants' voices, independent of my own analysis. I did the translation into English and intentionally tried to keep the Arabic sentence structure and feel to their voices. I wanted as much as possible for the reader to hear Arabic speakers in English, instead of English speakers. Third, is the acknowledgement of the power disparities that are inherent to the academic world, between the different locations in the world and between researchers and research participants, and to examine re-territorialisation and de-territorialisation as an intellectual ethical engagement that would ensure a transparent double critique (Sabry, 2012).

My intention to produce a common identity, mentioned above, was not only driven by the desire for ethnographic immersion, but by a moral commitment to a human project that hopes to link knowing to the politics of doing:

> … what good is thinking otherwise, if we don't know in advance that thinking otherwise will produce a better world? If we do not have a moral framework in which to decide with knowingness that certain new possibilities or ways of thinking otherwise will bring forth that world whose betterness we can judge by sure and already established standards?
>
> (Butler, 2002: 214)

My moral compass was sensitive to conscious acts of othering that allow for polarisation, borders and wars. The process of reflecting on my positionality, values and practices and of challenging my own conceptions of imagined community, my complex identity/ties and my implicit acts of othering, continued during writing the PhD. This leads me to the fourth

topic of concern for "native" ethnographers, according to Jacobs-Huey (2002). "Political stakes", she highlights, are inherent to the work of "native" scholars "working in places that they, in some way, consider to be home" (2002: 793). Jacobs-Huey mainly focuses on the problematics of publishing in two languages and for multiple audiences. The political stakes become exacerbated in situations of societal upheavals, transition and conflict. As a result of being in Syria during the uprising, and while in the process of writing Chapters 7 & 8 and reflecting on the changes taking place, I was faced with the tensions that come with breaking the rules and confronting the established norms and authorities, and it is an ongoing process to make sense of what it means to be a researcher witnessing societal revolts.

A Researcher's Patriotism in Question

Returning to London in September, 2011, after the second phase of fieldwork and months into the Syrian uprising, I was keen on working on the Wassef case study (Chapter 8) as a way to deal with my intense field experiences. Writing the chapter, I became aware that the tensions that accompanied the accusations of the treason campaign that Wassef went through in the public sphere were similar to those I was going through in my private domain. The need to prove loyalty, which in my case had nothing to do with distancing myself from a dissident son, meant answering the question: for whom is this research written, and who would it serve?

De Certeau argues that "intellectuals are still borne on the backs of the common people" and that "a certain power is the precondition of this knowledge and not merely its effect or its attribute" (1984: 25-36). Academia, perceived not to be independent from strategies of control, puts the researcher in the position of looking for tactics that will allow manoeuvring away from paying service to existing power structures. There were a few questions that I had to deal with: what mechanisms should the researcher adopt to build transparency and trust with interlocutors who were aware of the power disparity? What is the methodological implicatedness of the intellectual process of deconstructing romanticized notions, such as the people, the evil regime, legitimate state violence, or fighting imperialism? How does the researcher's situatedness outside dominant loyalties, which renders her "suspect" to both supporters of the regime and the rebels, influence the

research conclusions? Or, how does the researcher's bias to one of the sides of the conflict, the weaker in my case, impact on the research process?

Edward Said's proposal to "speak the truth to power" may provide practical guidance to scholars struggling to redefine the relationships between the rulers and the ruled in a context of globalization (1993: 6). This context is very important when engaging in questions of mediated culture, society and politics that aim to deconstruct the history and practices of postcolonial states in a moment of transition. An attempt at such an endeavour, while situated in a "western" institution, requests the courage to ask whether a researcher can be loyal to knowledge, when knowledge is not independent from the global divisions of power. While speaking about the Palestinian question, Said suggested that the intellectual responsibility "dictates" a complex critique that is context dependent (1993: 100). To voice criticism on Palestinians means, at the same time, that while in New York, Paris or London, a scholar is expected to speak of "freedom and the freedom from terror and extremism of *all* concerned, not just the weakest and most easily bashed party" (1993: 102). To be critical of the authoritarianism and personalization of power is also to be critical of occupation or war in the name of the democracy brought to save the eastern other. The Syrian uprising exposed all discourse in- and outside of academia and this forced me to seek the exigency of the "double critique" in times of conflict.

While Said speaks about what ought to be done at the global level of power disparity, Butler discussing gender, explains the challenges faced by the individual while attempting to challenge the defining social order at the local level:

> This is not easy, because the 'I' becomes to a certain extent unknowable, threatened with unviability, with becoming undone altogether, when it no longer incorporates the norm in such a way that makes this 'I' fully recognizable. There is a certain departure from the human that takes place in order to start the process of remaking the human. I may feel that without some recongnizability I cannot live. But I may also feel that the terms by which I am recognized make life unlivable. This is the juncture from which critique emerges, where critique is understood as an interrogation of the terms by which life is constrained in order to open up the possibility of different modes of living; in other words, not to celebrate differences

as such but to establish more inclusive conditions for sheltering and maintaining life that resists models of assimilation. (Butler, 2004: 3-4)

I, the researcher, living the conflict, was facing accusations that challenged my patriotism and I had to employ tactics that would save me from becoming subject to scrutiny. My first reaction, while in the field, was to engage in a process of "intellectualization," asking what it means to be loyal and to whom, and who has the power to render a person suspect? This process did not manage to release my bodily anxieties. The second phase was to problematize my experiential dilemmas. I asked if it were possible for a researcher, a "native" one, situated within the conflict, not to be a player in it? Who would the knowledge produced by this thesis serve? How, practically, is it possible to counter the discourse that imposes a false dichotomy between the neo-empire and its victims or tyranny and the people? How to think of both the cognitive and affective when one's being is in question? The cognitive/affective process of "remaking the human" is a process that accompanies the research trajectory. To detach from one's proclaimed truths, the established authorities and the unquestioned norms, and to dialogue with the self and other is, I suppose, an essential of every scholarly effort. It is an endeavour that requires courage, humility, curiosity and dedication.

Chapter 4

BAB AL-HARA COURTYARD HOUSES: CONSTRUCTING THE MORAL HOME

Do you know what it means to live in a bottle of perfume? Our house was that bottle. I am not trying to bribe you with an eloquent metaphor but trust me this metaphor gives justice to the perfume bottle, but not to our house. And those who have lived in Damascus and penetrated its neighbourhoods and narrow alleys, know how heaven opens its arms when they least expect it. A small wooden gate is open and then starts the night walk on the green, red and lilac, and then starts the symphony of light, shade and marble. The bitter orange tree embraces its fruits, the vineyard is pregnant, and the jasmine gave birth to one thousand white moons dangled on the window rods. The swallow swarms never spend summer except at ours. Marble lions around the middle pond fill their mouth with water then blow it, continuing with this game day and night, neither the fountains get tired nor the water in Damascus depleted.[32]   (Nizar Qabbani, 1970)

In June 2011, I rented a room in the Bab Sharqi area of Old Damascus. The room was in a house I shared with two young women who came to the capital from their family towns in the northern parts of Syria to study. The house was a section of what used to be an old Damascene courtyard house. To reach my room, I used to open two main iron doors. The first door opened from the alleyway to a roofless space that looked like an internal alley, which we shared with our first floor neighbours. The open space with a tree was what remained of the courtyard – not spacious from our side – cut off from its rest by a wall. The second door took us from what remained of the courtyard to our three roomed house, a common space, kitchen and shower/toilet. The house was obviously remodelled to fit the "modern" lifestyle of nuclear families and/or students sharing flats. Both my flatmates

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[32] Excerpt from Our Damascene Home (Prose) translated by author. Original in Arabic:

هل تعرفون معنى أن يسكن الإنسان في قارورة عطر؟ بيتنا كان تلك القارورة. إنني لا أحاول رشوتكم بتشبيه بليغ، ولكن ثقوا أنني بهذا التشبيه لا أظلم قارورة العطر .. و إنما أظلم دارنا. و الذين سكنوا دمشق، و تغلغلوا في حاراتها و زواريبها الضيقة، يعرفون كيف تفتح لهم الجنة ذراعيها من حيث لا ينتظرون... بوابة صغيرة من الخشب تنفتح. و يبدأ الإسراء على الأخضر، و الأحمر، و الليلكي و تبدء سمفونية الضوء والظل والرخام

شجرة النارنج تحتضن ثمارها، و الدالية حامل، و الياسمينة ولدت ألف قمر أبيض وعلقتهم على قضبان النوافذ..وأسراب السنونو لا تصطاف إلا عندنا.. أسود الرخام حول البركة الوسطى تملأ فمها بالماء.. و تنفخه.. و تستمر اللعبة المائية ليلاً و نهاراً..لا النوافير تتعب.. و لا ماء دمشق ينتهي

نزار قباني – دارنا الدمشقية

64

were happy our old house did not include an inner courtyard. They had lived in courtyard houses before and were keen not to relive the annoying experience of having to leave the shower during winter to be faced with the roofless cold space of the *ard al-diyar* (the courtyard) before re-entering the heated space of the room. In that June of 2011 we were not worried about the cold, but about preventing all the insects living in our small open yard from entering the house. I was also irritated by my daily morning dose of car exhaust fumes, circulating into my room from our neighbour's automobile, which was parked under my window. Added to the nuisance of air pollution, I was annoyed by the pains of waking up earlier than I fancy, due to the high pitched, repeated, morning calls of peddlers passing by. Everyday hassles aside, my flatmates and I were anxious watching the news coming from various regions of Syria. Three months into the upheaval, the future that Syria was moving to was not clear. Living in an old Damascene house in the 21st century distorted my imagining of the courtyard house constructed in *Bab al-Hara* as an idealized place.

I watched five seasons of *Bab al-Hara* without noticing the centrality of courtyard houses to the drama series. It was only after analysing interviews with informants that I started looking into the meanings of courtyard houses as: shooting locations, places of memory, heterotopias, houses for the poor and carriers of moral values. In this chapter, I tell the story of these houses: the one that resembles the "bottle of perfume" that was described by Qabbani, the one that belongs to a social order that was lost, the one still standing in a modest shape, the museum-like boutique hotel and the one on the screen. I study the various representations of courtyard houses to explore the shifting values inscribed in the real and imagined houses of Old Damascus, to understand the structure of *Bab al-Hara*'s fictitious world. I base my analysis on media ethnography I conducted in Damascus in 2010. In the first section, I study the way two interlocutors relate to their destroyed childhood courtyard houses as "sites of memory." I build on the concepts of reflective and restorative nostalgia to distinguish between the critical position of interlocutors who had experienced living in courtyard houses and the processes of restoratively producing Old Damascus between 2000 and 2010. Then, I approach the courtyard house from an architectural and urban perspective and use the concept of "heterotopia" to analyse the function of the courtyard house existed in Old Damascus, 2010. In the fourth section I move to *Bab al-Hara* to describe how the domestic utopia is grounded in the museum-like courtyard houses of wealth that function as shooting locations.

I argue that *Bab al-Hara* constructs a "moral" home that is composed of the courtyard house and the set of relationships that values kinship, gender segregation and communal solidarity against the French Mandate forces. Television drama constructs the "moral" home that is grounded in both memories of the courtyard house as "site of memory" (Nora, 1989) and imagination of a courtyard house as a monument that helps to reproduce Old Damascus. The "moral" home of *Bab al-Hara* is constructed to signify wealth, chastity and patriotism. I distinguish between *Bab al-Hara* courtyard houses as utopia and courtyard houses of Old Damascus as "heterotopia" (Foucault, 1986). I situate the "Damascene Milieu" drama genre within a set of complex processes that include discourses on domestic morality and the production of Old Damascus as a heritage site that is attractive to tourists and investors part of a globalised tourism network until 2010, before the start of the Syrian crisis. Based on media ethnography, I start the chapter by introducing Leila's nostalgic autobiographical longing for her childhood Damascene courtyard house. I build on critical nostalgia theories to identify how different nostalgias are at play in constructing the real and imagined courtyard houses and, consequently Old Damascus, into a moral monument of the past, a moral home.

4.1. Damascene Courtyard Houses: The Place of Nostalgia

> ... Many of my dreams take place in the Arabic house, how we were and how we used to sit. The weather was not like now, it was very beautiful, it was not hot. Maybe because we had water. We didn't feel the heat. We used to sit among trees and if we felt warm we would play with water.
>
> (Leila, 2010)

Born in Damascus in 1935, Leila is the eldest daughter of a wealthy Damascene family of landowners and traders. Her father, a landowner who lived off the profits he made renting his land, was married twice. His first marriage was to a woman much older than him, with whom he did not have children. His second marriage was to Leila's mother, a beautiful woman 17 years younger than him. The father, being jealous, used to accompany her to the souk to buy the thickest cloth to cover her face. The mother, annoyed with the cloth's thickness, used to damp it with water then iron it until it got thinner. Leila, proud of her father and full of love for him, sometimes called him "civilised" and "open minded",

while at other times she called him "semi-civilised", meaning semi-open minded or semi-modern. His modernity materialised in the way he believed in his five girls' education as a priority, and he used to spend his afternoons assisting with their homework. They were amongst the first girls in the neighbourhood to wear a scarf that covered sections of their hair before going completely without a head cover. They were also amongst the first to graduate with baccalaureate degrees. Leila later finished a diploma in education and was appointed as a public school teacher in a village in the southern Syrian governorate of Houran. Leila was not enthusiastic about being on her own in the rural under-served district, and the father, having never allowed his daughters to sleep away from home, asked his cousin, a single woman in her fifties, to relocate with his daughter to Houran. [33] The next year, Leila moved to the capital of the governorate, Daraa, rented a room in a family's house and lived on her own for two years before moving to serve another year in the countryside of Damascus. In total, Leila served four years in three different neglected peripheral locations in Syria before being appointed to the city of Damascus. Although Leila's father believed in education, supported his daughter's career aspirations and was interested in fashion, he remained conservative, or "semi-civilised", which was the term she used, when it came to certain practices like his daughters wearing sleeveless shirts, short skirts, or being with men unaccompanied.

I met Leila in her house in Damascus in 2010. At her place she introduced me to her daughters who asked her to recount to me specific stories they had heard about her past. Leila's husband had died years ago and she was still regarded as being avant-garde, having married a non-Damascene she had known for eight years before agreeing to marry him. She met him while volunteering at the ministry during her summer break. He was a handsome gentleman, a law graduate of Palestinian origin. He fell madly in love with her. She left him twice, and each time he got engaged but never succeeded in marrying another woman. Leila was fond of her husband-to-be, but was not in a hurry to leave her family's comfort to take responsibility for a house with a man who was still trying to secure himself financially. To be able to buy a house in Damascus, he went to work in Saudi Arabia and returned in the fourth year to remain with her after her father passed away. Leila regrets wasting these eight years not living with her husband under the same roof. He died "early", at the age of 58, from a heart attack, leaving her with two daughters to

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[33] A practice borrowed from the French public system, public employees in their first few years of service were requested to relocate to underserved locations in the country outside their governorate.

raise. While she was raised in a family of landowners, her daughters were being raised in a family of employees. In Leila's parental house there were two house helpers. In her house, in 2010, there was one helper and another visited once a week to do the main cleaning. The live-in house helper had been with Leila for many years. She helped her raise the daughters while she continued her career as a public school principle. Both of Leila's married daughters are stay-at-home mothers. One of her daughters lived on the same street, while the other lived in the suburbs because she and her husband could not afford to buy a house in Damascus. Leila wanted both her daughters to be geographically close to her. The daughter living in the suburbs spent five days out of seven at her mother's place. Leila did not blame anyone for the economic changes her family was witnessing, but was convinced that if her father had been alive he would not have accepted her daughter living in the suburbs.[34] She constantly invoked how different things were in the past. Talking about *Bab al-Hara* brought back memories of her father and of being raised in a Damascene courtyard house in al-Bahsa neighbourhood.[35]

By relating to the past, Leila was not expressing the desire to go back in order to live in the past, but she was critically assessing what was lost and critiquing the present. *Bab al-Hara* prompted Leila to specifically talk about her father and childhood house. In her recollection of the old Damascene family courtyard house of the now demolished al-Bahsa, she invoked an emotion of loss that was embodied in the word *hwyanto*.[36] The main characteristic of this loss was in its anchoring in a place and its aesthetics, in the loss of the physical house that occurred in the fifties and which was re-evaluated years later, when symbolic value was given to what was lost.[37] In the excerpt below, Leila describes the beauty of that lost place, perceived as a garden, which she still saw in dreams.

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[34] Hinnebusch explains that by the mid-2000s "the urban real-estate speculation unleashed by the influx of Gulf capital, together with an end to rent controls- a concession to the bourgeoisie-drove the cost of housing beyond the means of the middle strata" (2012: 102).

[35] The extramural neighbourhood of al-Bahsa was demolished in 1956 as part of a Damascus modernization master plan.

[36] So far, I have not been able to locate this word in an Arabic or Aramaic dictionary. It is used in the Damascene dialect to signify sorrow or heartbreak over what is lost. The word itself carries an affective meaning associated with the letter ha' that is the first letter of the words love, loved ones, life and nostalgia in Arabic. It might bear connections to Aramaic: life (hayot) or Arabic: its time has come (han waqtuh).

[37] In his master's research on the social displacement that took place in the fifties from the courtyard houses of the old quarters of Damascus to modern buildings in the newly established upper and middle class areas, the architect Muhammad Al-Mufti describes the social effects as "disorientation" or "social shock." For more information please see Al-Mufti, Muhammad (2001) *Testimony of the Past and the Place of Today*. Masters Thesis. ENSAV.

... the neighbours have each gone to a different corner, and al-Bahsa is gone. It has been demolished and rebuilt. I feel sad when I see old Damascus. If you go to old Damascus and see the Arab houses, the Arab houses are similar to the one we owned, and the houses in our neighbourhood were so beautiful. *Ya* hwaynto that which is lost. It was ours, our house when we were children. It didn't occur to us that this would happen. Downstairs was a big reception room called the Salle [French for hall], where we used to host guests, it was huge. Another room was called the *murabaʿ* [square], its floor was made of something – I can't tell what it was, neither ceramic nor glass, each tile contained five to six different colours and geometric shapes that used to shine. Ya hwaynto – these tiles that we will never see again in our lives. The window glass was of various colours. Each panel of a different shape that changed its colour with the light. It is mind blowing. Ya hwaynto – how it was lost. The door handles, now we use cylindrical, it was all like porcelain, some white others long. How was all of this lost? Ya hwaynto – how did it never occur to us to take them with us, the stairways and banisters[38]! We used to go up the stairs to the second floor, which was made up of four rooms and a big hall. There is a place called *mushriqa* [bright], roofless seven metres by seven, on its contour a jasmine tree and covered with a grape vine. The fence around it was all wrought iron work. Fences these days are not worked. Ya hwaynto – now cut up and discarded. It was a hundred times more beautiful. Its value was not known. Now when they find old fences they buy them per kilo, now it is different. It was more beautiful, and with more *baraka* [blessings]. We had two *naranj* trees [bitter orange- citrus aurantium] and one lemon tree. Each orange was this size [and she showed me with her hand], my mother used to pick them to make naranj marmalade. Naranj is not an orange, but is similar to an orange with a bitter skin. Now we buy the naranj from the market by the kilo. We used to pickle lemons. My mum would empty its inside and fill it with nuts and peppers, like stuffed aubergine. We used to make tomato juice. We would sit as if playing, and our mother would say: 'cut', and we would cut and squeeze.

Sitting in her urban apartment in 2010, talking about *Bab al-Hara*, which was set in the 1930/40s, Leila was inspired to go back in memory to her childhood family house of the 1940s and to use it to evaluate the present. The characteristics of the *Bab al-Hara*

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[38] Made of fer forge (wrought iron).

fictitious domestic space, the site of memory, are important to think through. By stating that the past was more beautiful, Leila was indirectly objecting to the present state of affairs. In the past, she was a producer, and not solely a consumer. In the past, the house was constructed as a private dwelling place and not as a profitable business for real estate developers. Her value-charged emotional recollection of the past is not a simple lament of lost blessings, plenitude, aesthetics and the synergy between environment and nature, but an indirect critique of profit making as an alternative value. In her account, Leila was not confined to a view of the past as being synonymous with "beauty" and "blessings", linked to material wealth and plenitude, but it invoked multiple pasts, not all of them embodying her view of happiness. Leila not only romanticises the courtyard house of the past as a place of refuge and dreams, but stressed that it was a field of "agony" and "hassle", associated with the labour that the women endured before electrical house appliances were introduced to the domestic space. She mentioned, for example, that they used irons that worked on coal and they washed clothes manually. She recounted that well-off families, like hers, used to hire the services of a female domestic worker who would do the laundry once a week. This privilege did not prevent Leila from emphasizing the toil associated with the domestic labour that was allocated to women. To remember her individual history meant also reflecting on her gender, class privileges and limitations. The sense of loss she highlighted was personal as much as collective.[39] It was also localised in place and gave more value to the material than to the set of relationships that the place harboured.

The autobiographical experience and the mood of homesickness that Leila describes is specific to nostalgia, defined as "a certain sort of recollection or experience of the past – not any past" but a past that is recognized and remembered as one's own "being-in-place" (Malpas, 2012: 180). Malpas emphasises that place is as essential to nostalgia as time, where "neither comes to presence without the other" (2012: 175). Boym differentiates between a reflective nostalgia that is based on temporal loss (algos) and a restorative nostalgia contingent on the concept of a national past and future, or a "delusionary homeland" (nostos) (2001: 43). In his criticism of Boym, Malpas agrees that restorative nostalgia is similar to "mythophilia", or a longing for myth, which is intrinsic to essentialist ideologies (2012: 174). He, however, argues that an acknowledgment of "the

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[39] For more information please see the work of novelists like Tergeman, Siham (1969). *Ya Mal al-Sham* [Oh, Bountiful Damascus]. Damascus: Press of the Directorate of Moral Instruction in the Ministry of Defence.

finitude in place" allows for an understanding of reflective nostalgia or productive nostalgia to be composed of both elements: nostos and algos (2012: 180):

> ... While nostalgia, at least of the reflective sort that recognizes itself as nostalgia, may transport us back into our past, and into the places that belong to that past, it does so in a way that does not allow us to escape the present. In the nostalgic experience of the past we thus also experience something of the continuity and the discontinuity of temporality, and so of past and present; we also experience something of the essential discontinuity, estrangement and uncertainty that is to be found every place – the uncanniness that is to be found even 'at home'.

The analytical distinction between the two nostalgias is necessary in order to differentiate between the autobiographical nostalgia of the generation/class who have enjoyed the situated experiences of the courtyard house, and the restorative attempts of another generation/class. Here, I mention class in contiguity with generation, not to indicate one thing, but to signal a dimension of class that is not to be ignored when the generational perspective is highlighted. My research on Old Damascus distinguishes between restorative nostalgia that builds on reflective nostalgia or, in other words, it divides the contemporary production of Old Damascus into two stages, the first initiated by those who have lived in these houses and who have, for various reasons, experienced an "Exodus from Paradise" and the 21st century phase that built on the nostalgia of those who have experienced loss to increase the scope of commodification of the Old City into an ahistorical utopic past.[40] This does not mean that the two nostalgic processes no longer take place concurrently, but to give more emphasis to one type of nostalgia during every stage. This said, in the sections below I am more interested in the interplay between the "real" courtyard houses that still exist in Old Damascus, and their "imagined" representations on the screen. I understand the processes of memory, imagination and nostalgia as being central to the production of the "real" and "imagined" courtyard houses. However, I focus less on remembering place and seek to show how courtyard houses, as places of nostalgia, are transformed into real and imagined symbolic monuments of a moral past. The changing status of the existing courtyard houses in Old Damascus and the drama industry, as in the case of *Bab al-Hara,* is telling of the production of Old

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[40] Exodus from Paradise is one of the books written on Old Damascus by Nadia Khost. For more information please see Khost, Nadia (1989) *Al Hijra min al-janna* [Exodus from Paradise]. Damascus: Al-Ahali Press.

Damascus as a perceived, conceived and lived space, as a spatial symbol of time immemorial.

4.2. The Production of Old Damascus

The old quarter of Damascus, which is among the oldest continually inhabited cities in the world, survived for thousands of years before the intramural city was declared a heritage site, with preservation laws set to protect it.[41] Walking in the alleys of Old Damascus, a visitor interested in accessing a courtyard house has the choice between a number of well-known houses that are open for public use. One example is *Azm* Palace, built in 1749 and turned into a museum in 1954, eight years into Syria's independence. Another example is *Bayt Nizam*, built in 1760 and expropriated for public use in 1974, following the "Corrective Movement" in 1970. Similarly, *Bayt al-Sibai,* built in the 18th century, was expropriated in 1974. However, the majority of courtyard houses in the old city are still privately owned and there are few of them, like the one belonging to *al-Naasan* family, which was built in 1607, have a section that is open to visitors. A visitor's other option is to visit a courtyard house that has been turned into a restaurant or café that was easily accessible in 2010.[42] In the 1990s, the first old courtyard houses were transformed into upscale restaurants in the Bab Sharqi district of Old Damascus.[43] Back then, these investments attracted new clients into the still neglected old alleys. The trend of converting the old city into a leisure site kept growing in scope until it boomed between 2007 and 2010. Salamandra explains that this trend is "linked to a process of economic liberalization" that was "profoundly reshaping social, cultural and economic life in historic Damascus" (2007: para. 1). Syria was opening up to neoliberal reforms during the pre-conflict era of Bashar al-Asad's rule (2000-2010), which was initiated with the slogan "development and reform," and tourism was increasingly becoming a major source of income for the country.[44] Concurrently, the Syrian drama industry was growing in scope

[41] In 1979, UNESCO designated the ancient city of Damascus a World Heritage Site (WHS). In 2013, the ancient city together with five other Syrian WHSs, were inscribed as World Heritage Sites in Danger, due to the civil war. The ancient city is protected by laws dating back to 1948, and through Syrian public institutions. For more information please see UNESCO (2015) *Ancient City of Damascus- UNESCO World Heritage Centre*. [Online] Available from: http://whc.unesco.org/pg.cfm?cid=31&id_site=20 [Accessed 13th July, 2015].

[42] For more on restaurants in the old city please refer to Chapter 5 "Khay! Now We Pay to Enter a Bayt ʿArabi" in Totah, Faedah M. (2014) *Preserving the Old City of Damascus*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

[43] Oral accounts mention that Le Piano Bar and Vino Rosso were the first two upscale restaurants to open in Bab Sharqi in 1992 and mid-1990, respectively.

[44] Hinnebusch states: "Investment was predominantly in tertiary sectors, as Gulf capital has little interest in

and the Damascene milieu genre was becoming a trend. In the old city, more courtyard houses were being renovated into upscale restaurants, cafés and boutique hotels, courtyard houses were perceived as being treasures to be saved, preserved and restored.

What are courtyard houses, and what makes them attractive to investors and the television industry? Salamandra (2004) and Totah (2014) studied the élite politics that contributed to the preservation of the old intramural city. Both scholars highlight how preservation efforts reflect the distinction claims of "Damascenes" versus the "regime" (Salamandra, 2004), or urban dwellers versus rural migrants (Totah, 2014). The political discourses on Damascene-ness by the Syrian "urban élite" are undeniably a factor influencing the social production of Old Damascus. However, I propose to think of the production process as being reflective of the converging interests of multiple actors, and to situate discourses and practices of social distinction within the dialectic of spatial production (Lefebvre, 1991). Here, the frame is not confined to Syria's internal power dynamics, linked to processes of remembering and imagining the past, but are inclusive of regional and global politics of nostalgia. I thus approach the production of Old Damascus between 2000-2010, since it falls at the intersection of the global tourism industry and the economics of the commodification of tradition (AlSayyad, 2001, 2006), the global south human-security states (Amar, 2013) and the moral regimes that are associated with patriarchal world views, and the local Syrian socio-political context. These processes contribute to the production of Old Damascus as a "heterotopic" monument that accumulates time and that commodifies the past as moral. In this layered view, the architectural and social specificities of the courtyard house are central to the production of Old Damascus. Now, I briefly introduce these specificities of the courtyard houses of Damascus.

A traditional courtyard house is an individually unique introverted space enclosing a walled garden or courtyard (Bianca, 2000: 61). The house structure is commonly composed of a basement floor, a ground floor as the main living area and a first floor of private areas. The house entrance is usually a modest space that leads into an open courtyard, which is beautifully landscaped and ornamented (Zein Alabidin, 2010). The courtyard, a "conduit for air and light in the midst of the crowded urban fabric," is decorated with a central fountain, plants (trees and roses) and frescos or facades worked with geometric patterns and shapes, visually inaccessible from the alleyway, to ensure

manufacturing: up to 20$ billion was invested in luxury housing and hotels" (2012: 101).

visual and spatial privacy (Rabbat, 2010: xxii). Modesty is demonstrated in the lack of decorations on the small external windows, doors and entrance space, making it difficult to judge the wealth of the house dwellers from the outside. The degree of ornamentation of the courtyard house commonly relates to the house owners' level of wealth. Courtyard houses, like Bayt Nizam and Bayt al-Sibai, are composed of three courtyards and thirty-five rooms and four courtyards and 13 rooms respectively.[45]

Stefano Bianca theorises on the courtyard house by discussing the three arabic words relating to dwelling: 1) *'iskan* or *sakan* or *sukn* or *sakina*: meaning a place for peace, 2) *harim* or *haram*: meaning a protected territory or sanctuary, both physically and symbolically, and 3) *dar*: meaning circularity (2000: 73). In addition to the three features of peace, protection and circularity, Bianca adds a few characteristics that emphasise the moral codes ascribed to courtyard houses. The courtyard house is traditionally a home for the extended patrilineal family of several generations that uses the space in a polyvalent way (the space allows for the different functions of sleeping, living and dining for multiple nucleus families). The courtyard house also belongs to a culture that values contiguity (being a good neighbour) and the social code of modesty, or the aversion to ostentatious display of wealth and power.

Ard al-diyar is the Arabic term for courtyard in colloquial Damascene.[46] It is composed of two words: *ard* meaning land or earth and al-diyar, the plural of *al-dar,* the noun for house, country and/or tribe, which is derived from the verb *dar,* meaning to circle or spin (orbit or swirl).[47] Ard al-diyar's literal meaning, land of the homeland, is distinct from its shared meaning in Damascene dialect, as a courtyard. Al-dar is a very interesting word in Arabic because it has a number of genitive constructions of sacred symbolism, such as: heaven, literally house of peace (*dar al-salam*), the Hereafter (*dar al-baqa'* or *dar al-qarar*) or the Here and Now (*dar al-fana'*). Al-dar (the house) called also *bayt ʿarabi,* or Arab house, is thus built around a garden-like open space ard al-diyar (the courtyard).

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[45] For more on the old Damascene courtyard houses see Weber, Stefan (2009) *Damascus: Ottoman Modernity and Urban Transformation 1808-1918*. Vols. 1 & 2. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press.
[46] In classical Arabic the term s*ahn,* meaning centre, is used to signify the courtyard.
[47] *Dar* (verb) also means *taf,* a word with spiritual and religious significance relating to sufi spinning, and *tawaf,* the act of walking around the *Ka'ba,* which is performed during pilgrimage to Mecca.

To think of the courtyard is to think of the garden as in Foucault's analysis of heterotopia, where he introduces the Persian garden, a microcosm with a water fountain as a centre that represents the world's "umbilicus", and a rectangular shaped open space that corresponds to "the four parts of the world" (1986: 25). The concept of heterotopia can be useful to enrich our understanding of courtyard houses existing in Old Damascus and to analytically differentiate them from the *Bab al-Hara* representations on the screen. Heterotopia is a real place, or a counter-site, or "effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites... are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault, 1986: 24). The symbolism of the garden and the fountain is mentioned by Bianca, who argues that in the "Muslim" city, the private house has "acquired a degree of sacredness which is probably unique" and which means that the sacred does not "stand out in concentrated and isolated form but spread[s] over the urban fabric as a whole" (2000: 36). This understanding of the "sacred" as being infused into the urban fabric partly helps to explain the resistance that faced Ecochard's master plans of Damascus (during the colonial period between 1932-1934 and during independence 1964-1968), where his legacy is described as having privileged the Islamic monuments and the Roman heritage, at the expense of the vernacular urban fabric (Verdeil, 2008: 13).[48] However, the colonial and postcolonial logic of modernisation helped to preserve the old intramural city (Salamandra, 2004; Totah, 2014). This preservation of intramural Old Damascus correlates to the transformation of élite courtyard houses into museums (like the example of the *Azm* Palace, which was composed of multiple courtyard houses). A museum, differently than a garden, constitutes a heterotopia of the multiplicity of time, specifically that of accumulation. In 2010, museums, museum-like restaurants and the hotels of Old Damascus share this multiplicity of accumulation, where the past is embedded in a place that is concurrently in and out of time. In this preserved intramural city, the growing number of courtyard houses that serve as a garden within a museum-like entertainment space constructs a network of heterotopias forming a heterotopia. It is as if Old Damascus is the biggest courtyard house

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[48] Michel Écochard (1905-1985) is an archaeologist, architect and urban planner. He started his career in Syria under the French Mandate in 1931. He was involved in a number of restoration projects for France's national archaeology service, including the Azm Palace in Old Damascus. From 1932 to 1934, Écochard helped to develop the 1936 Damascus master plan. In 1938, he took charge of Syria's Service d'Urbanisme. In 1940, he designed Damascus' national museum. He participated in the development of the Beirut urban master plan. The protection of historical monuments was central to his vision for both Beirut and Damascus during the '30s and '40s. After independence, he was involved in the development of the Beirut master plan in 1963, and the Damascus urban plan between 1964 and 1968. For more information, visit Archnet (2014) *Michel Écochard: 1905-1985*. Aga Khan Trust for Culture and Aga Khan Documentation Center at MIT Libraries. [Online] Available from: http://archnet.org/collections/29/authorities/33 [Accessed on 12th June, 2015].

among hundreds of courtyard houses, its alleys and cul-de-sacs are like corridors connecting rooms, and the ruins of the city gates draw the boundaries of an introverted peaceful, protected and circular sacred city. In this representation, the city is a heterotopia, a monument of the past that others the present, that dwells in the values of an extended family.

Heterotopology thus allows us to analytically differentiate between courtyard houses still inhabited by a class that cannot afford to maintain museum-like houses and the heterotopic house, a modernity-constructed space achieved when a class of Damascenes, as Foucault captures it "sort of" arrived at an "absolute break with their traditional time" (Foucault, 1986: 26). In other words, even when all of the houses that constitute the urban fabric of protected Old Damascus are heterotopic, some houses are considered more heterotopic than others, based on whether they carry the aesthetic potential of becoming a museum, a hotel or restaurant.

In the section below I look at how the representation of the courtyard house in *Bab al-Hara* has contributed to emphasising or inverting certain social values that belonged to a time-place set in the past and made utopic. I focus on the dislocation of the meanings embedded in the house, which are mainly linked to the display of wealth and power and the mastery of men over both private and public territories. To put it differently, I first look into how *Bab al-Hara*, by ahistorically representing the privately enjoyed wealth of a bygone class, has reversed the social value of modesty, into boastfulness, and the self-made artisanal private aesthetics into commodities of the global tourism industry.

4.3. Damascene Milieu Fantasia

Watching *Bab al-Hara*, the drama series is set in the three main geographies of the *hara* (neighbourhood)- exterior, the Damascene courtyard house- interior and the *Ghuta* (the lowland around Barada river)- exterior. The *hara* in the drama series is dubbed *Dabʿ* (hyena) and is situated in a privately owned, permanently built backlot, the Sham village.[49] The *Bab al-Hara* section of the Sham village resort is composed of alleys with house

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[49] *Bab al-Hara's* exterior shooting took place at the Sham Village Resort, a private entertainment complex situated on the Damascus airport road. The resort contains a special section that recreated Old Damascus, where the fictitious Dabʿ neighbourhood named *Bab al-Hara* is situated. *Bab al-Hara* (the series) succeeded in attracting tourists and fans to the *Bab al-Hara* (set) at the Sham Village Resort.

doors, a coffeehouse, the exterior of a mosque, a barber's shop, empty stores, and a *madafa,* or a hosting saloon. The fictitious built hara is located in the eastern suburb of Damascus*,* contrary to Old Damascus neighbourhoods that still exist within or outside the *sur* (wall), is sealed off with a private gate, a practice common to neighbourhoods falling outside the sur (the extramural city), or to certain neighbourhoods of the intramural city in the 19th century. The Dabʿ neighbourhood was supposedly imagined in reference to al-Salhieh neighbourhood, which falls outside the city wall where the scriptwriter grew up.[50] The interior shooting, unlike the exteriors, took place in the existing courtyard houses within the old city. The lifeworld stories of the Dabʿ neighbourhood of *Bab al-Hara*'s Season 5 focused mainly on five fictitious families.[51] The houses chosen by al-Malla brothers as residences for these fictitious families are Bayt Nizam and Bayt Sibai, amongst the most beautiful restored and well preserved old courtyard houses in the city.

Among all the *Bab al-Hara* viewers I interviewed during this research, Leila (born 1935) was not the only one to specifically argue that there was a discrepancy between the wealth of the fictional families and the houses they inhabited. Damascenes and Lebanese, with experiential or propositional knowledge of that historical period, observed that *Bab al-Hara* "deviated from reality." I met Toufic (born 1949) in his apartment in the extramural al-Midan neighbourhood of Damascus, through Nizar, his wife's brother and cousin, I interviewed him in Beirut at Rawda Café (please see Chapter 7). Toufic and his wife, Nawal, are cousins on his father's side and her mother's side. Nawal's mother moved to Beirut, where Nawal was born and raised, until she moved to Damascus when she got married. On our first encounter, she told me that their family is descended from the Prophet. "Hassanieh", which meant they believed they were descended from al-Hassan, the Prophet's grandson, Toufic added to this and explained that their family name referred

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[50] Marwan Qaouq, interview with the author, 1st November, 2010.

[51] The main family is headed by Abu Issam (Abbas al-Nouri) and Umm Issam (Sabah el Jaza'iri). Abu Issam (meaning the father of Issam) or Shawkat is portrayed as a "respectable" father who is a reference for his family and community. He works as a barber and Arabic doctor (meaning a medicinal herbs expert, who traditionally also performs circumcision on young boys). His wife Suad or Umm Issam (the mother of Issam) is presented as belonging to a family of pedigree ('*usul*), with her two brothers as main figures in the fictional neighbourhood. The plot of *Bab al-Hara*'s Season 2 centres on the couple's two time divorce and remarriage. In Season 3, the neighbourhood receives news about Abu Issam's death while participating in resistance activities. However, his body was never found and so was not buried. In Season 5, the elder son Issam (Milad Youssef), the neighbourhood barber after his father, with his younger brother Muʿtaz (Wael Charaf), appointed ʿaqid following his murdered uncle, receive a letter written by Abu Issam indicating that he is still alive and imprisoned by the French. Although Abbas al-Nouri doesn't participate in Season 5, many incidents rotate around the plans to locate the prison where he is detained in order to set him free. (Please see Annexe 1).

to the name of a profession and showed me the family tree, which was hung on the wall of their living room. Their great grandfather came from the Arabian Peninsula to Damascus around 570 AH and they have been in al-Midan since then. Similarly to Leila, Toufic lived in a courtyard house as a child, specifically until he was 12 years old. Their family courtyard house used to stand in place of the building where I visited them. The external courtyard house was connected to an internal courtyard house that still stood behind the building, now abandoned and serving as a warehouse. Toufic's brother and mother lived in the same four storey building. Four nuclear families used to live in the two courtyard houses. It was mainly the men who used to use the demolished external courtyard house for receptions, whereas women in the internal courtyard house used to place food on a turning wheel that delivered the plates to the other side for men to serve their guests. Toufic is named after his grandfather, who was an expert on horses and who served as a regional arbitrator on disputes relating to horses. This is why their family hold the title *agha*, which is an Ottoman title given to military and civilian personnel regarded as being of value to the empire. Al-Midan, is an important extra-mural neighbourhood of Damascus because it fell on the pilgrimage route to Mecca, as well as to Palestine and Egypt. The gate that used to lead to the road south was named the Gate of God, or the Egypt Gate. Toufic's first comment on the times of *Bab al-Hara* was that the population size was nothing similar to now. He specified that Damascus grew from 500-600 thousand people in the 50s, tripled to 1,700,000 in 1967, around doubled to 4 million in the early '90s, and it is estimated that during 2010, it hosted 7 million during the day and 5 million by night. [52] Toufic said that al-Midan was able to conserve its social fabric because it was geographically difficult to expand.

No matter how senior the rank or stature of Abu Issam, the barber and druggist, became, he would never have owned such a house or such furniture [as they show in *Bab al-Hara*]. The barber's profession was regarded as inferior during that time, and a barber/druggist could not have been one of the neighbourhood leaders

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[52] The official figures published on the web page of the Central Bureau of Statistics under the Presidency of the Syrian Council of Ministers do not confirm Toufic's figures, but they do not seem to be reliable. I was not able to find census figures before 1960, when I found the total population of Syria to be 4,565,000, with no published regional distribution. Damascus figures were published, starting in 1981, as 12.3% of the total Syrian population of 9,046,000, and in 1994 as 10.1% of the total Syrian population of 13,782,000, and in 2004 as 8.7% of a total Syrian population of 17,921, 000. In other words, the estimated population living in Damascus grew from 1,112,658 in 1981 to 1,391,982 in 1994, to 1,559,127 in 2004 and to 1,733,000 in 2010. For more information please visit The Central Bureau of Statistics- Syria (2014) Total Population Statistics. *CBS Syria*. [Online] Available from: http://www.cbssyr.sy [Accessed 18th December, 2014].

because he used to do demeaning things like shave men at the hammam and pull bad teeth and treat with leeches and cupping and, as a result, his profession was not desired and not chosen, except by those with no other choice. Barbers were not among the neighbourhood or country's leaders. In *Bab al-Hara* you find the blacksmith's house furnished with the most luxurious furniture, and he is a blacksmith. During that time, smithing did not give a good income and a wealthy person would not work as a blacksmith. There is no accuracy in the portrayal of social groups in *Bab al-Hara*. If Abu Issam had been a grain or sheep trader, then he could have acquired that house. … All professions are honourable, but not all are at the same social level. The notable ones are property and business owners. There is a discrepancy between the drama series and reality, and while watching it, I used to say 'this is not correct!' and it annoyed me that they were not presenting a truthful image, because the drama series is now a document that represents Damascus for the new generation that does not know how it used to be, and *Bab al-Hara* is full of mistakes of this sort. … There was nothing called ʿaqid. There were the seniors, ʿaqid was like an *abaday* [strongman].[53] *Adadayat* were controlled and linked to a social group. Changes during the French Mandate led them to get loose and start making trouble, but, before that, the *aghawat* (singular agha) and the seniors and notables were there to solve problems, and abadayat followed these leaders.

In the Damascus of the 1930s and 1940s, it is then difficult to believe that families whose head's main profession was some sort of tradesman could have been living in Bayt Nizam, the house Umm Issam and Abu Issam occupied in the fictitious Dabʿ neighbourhood. The same applies to Abu Bachir's family, who is the hara's baker, and Abu Hatem, who owns the café, and Abu al-Nar, who is supposed to head the rival neighbourhood and is a blacksmith. Marwan Qaouq, owner of the *Bab al-Hara* concept and scriptwriter of first three seasons, stated that they had "exaggerated" the "wealth", "costumes and

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[53] In his research on Beirut, which holds similarities to Damascus during the first half of the 20th century, Johnson defines the *q/abaday* to have an analogous role as a popular leader, "a man of the people, a helper of the weak and poor, a protector of the quarter and its inhabitants and a communal champion," as well as "a potential threat" for the "za'im and the political system as a whole" (1986: 83). This led to the development of a relationship of political loyalty in return for official protection between the q/abaday and za'im. Johnson clarifies that what made men qabadays "was their strongarm 'style' of leadership" (1986: 85). As a result, q/abadays existed within a political system where "the urban za'im's strength rested largely on his ability and willingness" to give them protection and use them as intermediaries. (88). For more information, please see Chapter 3 'Clientelism and Gangs: Qabadays in Beirut' in Johnson, Michael (1986) *Class and Client in Beirut: the Sunni Muslim Community and the Lebanese State 1840-1985*. London: Ithaca Press.

accessories", as well as the practice of "generosity" and "goodness" amongst neighbours so as to construct what the director, Bassam al-Malla, called the "'Damascene Milieu' fantasia":

> Beautiful heritage accessories were used in *Bab al-Hara*. Exorbitant costs were paid to show this beautiful image.... We have indeed exaggerated the use of accessories, we have exaggerated a lot. We made the community look very rich, but it was not like that except for a few people. We even exaggerated the way people behaved with each other in generosity and kindness. During those days, poverty was dominant, except among the few who owned capital, and, just like now, the Damascene society is class structured. ... The overstated use of expensive accessories and the exhibition of richness was a result of the director's desire to show the Shami house in a good light. This helped a lot with tourism, for many tourists travelled to Damascus especially to visit the Shami houses.

The "exaggeration" Qaouq mentions is also visible in the use of expensive Syrian furniture, made of walnut wood and inlayed with mother-of-pearl, and in the choice of old courtyard houses as shooting locations. The courtyard houses, homes of the series' five main families[54], belonged to the capital's most affluent families and were put into public use (the house of Abu Issam, Issam and Ma'moun Beik were shot in Bayt Nizam, while Abu Khater, Abu Badr were shot in Bayt Sibai). The use of rich people's restored courtyard houses as shooting locations in *Bab al-Hara* helps to create a visual illusion that instead of exposing real everyday places, distorts the past by tampering with the representation of wealth as an indicator of social class. In other words, *Bab al-Hara* constructs a fantasy by situating lower middle class characters in wealthy old houses-turned shooting locations. *Bab al-Hara*'s aggrandisement of visible wealth results in the construction of a close to ideal community, impossible to achieve in "reality", however, one that was *once* "available" and now "lost". This *once* attainability of the non-attainable, a paradise-like state of domesticity, stands in contrast to the "real" lost past and the troubled present.

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[54] There are seven courtyard houses of the five main families; Abu Issam's family (including Issam's house), Abu Hatem's family, al-Zaʿim's family (Feryal and Ma'moun Beik's houses), Abu Bachir's family and Abu Khater's family.

The *Bab al-Hara* fantasy is not limited to an illusion of the past-as-wealth but includes a framing of the past-as-chaste, with no signs of contested patriarchy. *Bab al-Hara* omits scenes exposing any of the gender oppression associated with living in that period, the absence of modern services in courtyard houses (e.g., hot water on tap, or refrigerators), and the pains of domestic labour. It nevertheless romanticises scenes of housework, cooking and other domestic chores, by showing women actresses always appearing beautiful and fresh throughout the day. Although the second generation women characters sometimes complain, or try to escape the household tasks assigned to them, their protest is dismissed as an expression of a "spoiled new generation." The few scenes that show women working, for example, watching Umm Issam's daughters (Anahid Fiad or Dana Jaber) clean the courtyard, seem to imply that the work was a source of enjoyment (using water and wasting time until lunch time). Other chores that involve sewing in poor light, or pickling large amounts of vegetables, or hours spent cooking, etc., are omitted from *Bab al-Hara*'s reconstruction of domestic life.

4.4. Domestic as Moral

Marwan Qaouq states that he wrote *Bab al-Hara* with the aim of producing a drama series that contributes to confronting the "weakening moral fibre" in Syria and the Arab region.[55] The causes of decline, according to Qaouq, exist in the spheres of socio-economics and globalisation. He argues that "poverty" and "Western influence" are leading to immorality. He links this influence to an increased desire for consumption and competition which, in their turn, lead deprived individuals to committing "evil." He also highlights that differences between western and Arab countries exist not only at the level of practice, but at the level of legal codes that govern the practice of homosexuality and prostitution, as well as drugs and alcohol consumption. Although, according to Qaouq, Arab societies used to be "pure," "virtuous" and "innocent" before the "entry" of the "abnormal" influx of homosexuality, prostitution, drugs and alcohol, he locates responsibility within, on the "us" that is influenced by peer pressure. "If each home has its morals regulated, then the society is well," Qaouq commented.

Similarly to Qaouq, Mo'men al-Malla, the director of *Bab al-Hara* Season 5, considered *Bab al-Hara* to have partially answered a prevalent moral "emptiness and void":[56]

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[55] Marwan Qaouq, interview with the author, Damascus 23rd November, 2010.
[56] Mo'men al-Malla, interview with the author, Damascus 2nd December, 2010.

It seems we are hitting on a sensitive nerve. There is huge moral emptiness in these times of consumption and globalization. It seems that this family trend is also special, and that we have lost it- lost it because of women working. For sure, I am not against women working. I am very enlightened, and the woman should put her hand in that of the man. But there is a certain particularity to the family that is being eroded: the relationship between the man and the woman, how the woman provides warmth, tenderness, tranquillity and security, and, in his turn, the man gives her support and the power needed for them to live – in addition to protection. I don't want to dwell on that, so I don't appear to be defending an old pattern, but this old pattern has its charm and influence.

al-Malla does not explain why the "non-enlightened" pattern of social relations might have a charm or influence. However, he shares the secret formula behind *Bab al-Hara*'s success. First, to adopt a moral language of "chivalry, honesty, generosity and collaboration". Second, to embrace patriotism "defending the dignity and sovereignty" of the land, mainly against colonial power. Third, to advocate social relations that are grounded in the familial and domestic.

This formula, which al-Malla reached by "coincidence", is the basis of mythophilia (Malpas, 2012), or restorative nostalgia, that is grounded in place (nostos) and that symbolises "lost home" and "characterises national and nationalist revivals all over the world"; which returns to "national symbols and myths and, occasionally, through swapping conspiracy theories" (Boym, 2000: 41). Here we need to distinguish between two homes and two nostalgias: a restorative nostalgia that seeks a restored home, symbolised by *Bab al-Hara*'s reconstruction of Old Damascus as a polished monument of the past, and a reflective nostalgia, based in the personal search for the security of the lost house and, eventually, making peace with this loss.

Bab al-Hara's constructed desired object, the courtyard house, is situated within a network of other houses that constitute a fictitious neighbourhood that is "under siege and requiring defence against the plotting enemy." In other words, *Bab al-Hara* comforts individual longing by allowing it to feed on the cultural intimacies of the everyday, the complicit slogans, stereotypes and memories of historical Damascus, and to commemorate an Arab imagined community. *Bab al-Hara*'s restorative nostalgia, or mythophilia, lives on

reflective nostalgia, like the kind shared by Leila. *Bab al-Hara*'s restorative nostalgia not only depends on the nostalgia of a generation, but also on the heterotopic Old City, which Salamandra (2004: 22) terms "commodified nostalgia." The museum-like existing courtyard houses and the backlot permanent set of *Bab al-Hara* that are attractive to tourists and investors, are commodified nostalgia. These places, serving as shooting locations, are purposefully free of all signs of old age. Restored courtyard houses and *Bab al-Hara*'s permanent set show no patina, cracks or imperfections. The courtyard houses (museums, hotels and boutique hotels) are restored to look as if unaltered by time, and the fictitious *hara* is always cleaned to perfection. The interplay between the fictional representations of the old city and the gentrification taking place in certain neighbourhoods of Old Damascus seems to be reinforcing a certain polished image of the past. Old Damascus, as "heterotopia", contributes to the illusion created by *Bab al-Hara* and other "Damascene Milieu" drama series which, in their turn, contribute to how old Damascus is being constantly re-imagined, a place accumulating time, but also existing outside it.

In 2010, friends from Beirut visited Damascus and stayed at a boutique hotel on Straight Street for around 200USD a night. It was not my first time in an old courtyard boutique hotel, rich with meticulously constructed interiors, but my first experience, then unconscious, of economic accessibility as a factor influencing the workings of compensation and illusion that are embedded in heterotopic places. To scrutinize courtyard houses from the angle of the heterotopic function of compensation or illusion, means to look at the penetrability of the courtyard house. Whom do these courtyard houses include or exclude, and in which instances?[57] Unlike my friends, but like many middle class individuals, I could not afford to stay at courtyard houses turned hotels in the Old City, and I sought occasional compensation in courtyard houses functioning as restaurants and cafés. Restaurants provided a partial experience of courtyard houses as domestic spaces, in comparison to hotels. However, both restaurants and hotels were designed to exhibit past grandeur and to harbour an illusion of the courtyard houses of wealthy Damascenes, back in time, as being penetrable. The Old Damascus hotels and restaurants, renovated during the first ten years of the 21st century, throw into sharp relief the two houses mentioned above in this chapter: Leila's old house of wealth — destroyed, and my rented old house

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[57] Trying to survive 2011 on their 2010 pre-conflict-rates (average 150-200 USD per room), hotels in Old Damascus started offering their rooms for 30-50 USD per day in 2012. In 2013, the same hotels rented their rooms on a monthly basis for internally displaced Syrians who could afford to pay 400 USD per month.

— crumbling (not enjoying fixtures, fittings, finishes or furniture similar to boutique hotels). This function of illusion also exposes the realities of living in the flats of modernised neighbourhoods in Damascus or Beirut. This is an illusion that changes its target when the heterotopic Old Damascus is represented as utopia on the screen – especially for the majority with no situated experience of the courtyard house. Instead of being an illusion that exposes real places, courtyard houses on the screen (transformed from heterotopia to utopia) expose real places, only to create an illusion that is difficult to expose. This approach of perceiving the old courtyard house as utopia also raises questions on dwelling, in the practical and poetic sense of the word, closeness to nature, environmental conditions (air circulation, access to water, etc.), community relations (with extended family and neighbours), and the individual relationship to place and placelessness. This chapter engages with the communal and individual dimensions as conceived worldviews that are embedded with moralized values. The moral as practice will be discussed later in this work.

4.5. Conclusion

In this chapter I have built on interviews I conducted in Damascus to identify the courtyard house as the place of the nostalgia of a certain generation, who experienced living in courtyard houses during their childhood. I introduced the two types: reflective and restorative nostalgia, to differentiate between the situated experience of this generation and the processes of restoratively producing Old Damascus between 2000 and 2010. I used the concept of heterotopia to analyse the function of the courtyard house in present day Old Damascus before the crisis. I then showed how the museum-like houses are represented on the screen as utopia. The symbolic production of Old Damascus through *Bab al-Hara* is grounded in the interplay between the socio-cultural value of Damascene courtyard houses, standing in the intramural city, and their representation on television, mainly in the "Damascene Milieu" drama genre. The mediation of these courtyard houses has contributed to the augmentation of the museum-like features of boutique hotels and restaurants. This imagination of the "past as wealth", which is visible in the courtyard houses functioning as tourist attractions in the Old Damascus of 2010, coupled with the "past as chaste", visible in the "Damascene Milieu" television drama genre representations of the old quarters, is the culmination of the intermarriage between a moralistic worldview and a neoliberal economy. The ostentatious display of wealth on the

screen made visible what it was once hidden and considered arrogant to exhibit, thus reversing the moral code of modesty in an ahistorical utopia set in the past. In the next chapter, I continue to explore this idealized world of a moral home as it is viewed by *Bab al-Hara* audiences during Ramadan in Beirut. I introduce the context of viewing, *Qahwat al-Rawda,* as a neo-traditional place of viewing, before I juxtapose the moral home (on the screen) to the "moral leisure" taking place in Café Rawda.

Chapter 5

WATCHING *BAB AL-HARA* AT Q/AHWAT AL-RAWDA

My relationship to *Q/ahwat* al-*Rawda* (hereafter Rawda) dates back to my childhood in wartime Beirut. My parents and their friends used to take us to play there as it contained one of the few open playgrounds that were then accessible. My cousins, neighbours and I climbed small rocks by the shore, played in the waves, and sought to reclaim the sea with our little pebbles. The Mediterranean, stronger than our attempts to tame it, left us standing on the shore jealous of the fishermen on the islets we could see. After a few years of absence, I returned to Rawda in the mid-nineties, without my parents, cousins or neighbours, this time with friends from university. We were rediscovering the Ras Beirut café culture of our parents' generation in the wake of the civil war.[58] The first day, I walked down the shore of Rawda, I found my foot size almost doubled and the rocks that hosted our little adventures looked more like a waste dump. Becoming an adult meant that my relationship to Rawda gained another layer, that of engaging in discussions over a cup of coffee, or a glass of cold beer, under the sun. That was the case until 2008, when the café's management took the decision to stop serving alcohol, and, consequently, most of my friends boycotted Q/ahwat al-Rawda.[59]

Raed, a friend who had decided to boycott Rawda since it stopped serving alcohol, confided that he still finds it "frustrating" to visit Rawda, except when people coming from abroad ask him to sit by the sea. For him, Rawda evokes a rise in moralising and an increasingly conservative clientele. His one-time confrontation with the emergent moralising in Rawda overpowered the wealth of memories he enjoyed from his childhood and youth. In 2008, one week before the announcement of the alcohol ban, he was sitting on the shore with his wife-to-be, her head on his lap (not a common practice inside cafés

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[58] For more information on the Ras Beirut café culture of the 1970s, please check Sawalha, Aseel (2010) *Reconstructing Beirut: Memory and Space in a Postwar Arab City*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

[59] In 2008, before returning to Beirut during Ramadan, I joined numerous Facebook groups calling for a boycott of Rawda if it did not alter its decision to ban the serving of alcohol. Supportive of the boycott calls, I nevertheless could not resist joining my friend Rima and her friends one evening to play cards and smoke argileh. That Ramadan, Rima and her friends became new Rawda clients and spent their evenings outdoors, noticing for the first time a huge screen erected in order to air Season 3 of *Bab al-Hara*, and I became a *Bab al-Hara* loyal viewer. In 2010, Rawda's decision to ban alcohol remained contested by a number of previous and regular clients who did not, approve of the ban, but who either considered the ban a private "right" of the café owner, who may have changed his beliefs (and consequently his practices) on his return from pilgrimage to Mecca, or who continued to boycott Rawda.

in Beirut, but acceptable in many locations on the coast) when a man approached him and asked him to sit properly since the owner did not allow "indecent" behaviour on the premises. The young "non-official moral policeman" introduced himself as a friend of the new manager and the dialogue between the two continued. The "moral policeman" referred to a sentence from a leaflet quoting Sayyid Qutb, and went to his car to bring it as evidence. Raed remembered the sentence to convey the following: "a modern woman is a Zionist production." Faced with moral disciplining, which uses treason as a form of accusation (see Chapter 8), he defended his "morals" by accusing the Gulf States, which are regarded as having contributed to the Islamic revival movements (Mitchell, 2011), of pretending to be representative of Islam while embodying "behind closed doors' moral degeneration." Raed's experience underscores how *Rawda* became a contested space, where social struggle over values, worldviews and spatial control takes place. This anecdote, however, does not imply a reductionist binary of Islamists and Secularists. Instead, this chapter aims to explore and reflect on the complex inseparability of Islam and Secularism, which forces us to move beyond Islam as the dominant frame of analysis (Zubaida, 2011). In 2008, the new management prohibited alcohol and established the Ramadan mood to attract clients to spend Ramadan nights in the garden-like café. This took place concurrently with screening *Bab al-Hara*. Rawda, as a context of *Bab al-Hara* viewing, should be read in the context of these shifts.

In this chapter, I examine café culture, located on the sea front that constitutes a historic space of leisure for Beirut's inhabitants, and the month of Ramadan, a sacred month that is associated with socio-religious rituals and consumption practices (including television drama series). I study the materiality of the café screening, to explore the contestations over Rawda as a moral space, in order to understand how *Bab al-Hara* is positioned within this field. I unpack the relation between television drama and a public context of television viewing. I examine how contemporary dynamics construct a fantastic past that is embedded in the politics of security that empowers moral control and liberal consumerism. In the first section, I introduce a short history of Rawda and situate it within the context of café culture in Beirut. I show how Rawda's symbolic value, as a place of security, stability and diversity, is contested. I explore this contestation and the multiple and shifting meanings that Rawda exposes. I highlight the specificity of Ramadan in Rawda as it contributes to a complex multi-layered space of drama viewing. I argue that

notwithstanding all the changes, Rawda continues to be a space of non-exclusive public encounter and contestation.

5.1. The Sea Café

Q/ahwat al-Rawda (English for garden café) is an open space café with two paved and parallel walkways separating seating areas between plants and trees. The left walkway leads to a children's play area, and the right walkway to a northern sea-view terrace overlooking the Military Beach. To the western side, there are two sea-view terraces, one on the roofed ground floor and the second on a roofless first floor seating area, used mainly during Ramadan. In the middle of the western terrace, a flight of stairs leads down to the seashore, where fishermen usually stand on their typical barrel-shaped spots.[60] Rawda is also known as Shatila, the name of a well-known Beirut family that owns the land in the area.[61] The grandfather, Ahmad Shatila, opened the café in 1935 and after his death left its management to his wife, who died in 1996. His children took over the management after her death and they retain the right to the café, but not to the land. The rights to the land are shared among a larger number of inheritors "whose names fill seven pages," according to Muhammad Shatila, the grandchild and the current manager of Rawda.[62]

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[60] Contrary to Sawalha (2010), I do no use Qahwa to name popular coffeehouse and café to name "western" style ones. In this chapter, I use Qahwa and café interchangeably and consider café to be the English translation of the Arabic Qahwa (which literally means coffee in English).

[61] Rawda and the café adjacent to it ʿArus al-Bahr (English for mermaid) are sometimes referred to as Shatila, in attribution to the Shatila family who owns the rights to the land. Similarly, one of Beirut's Palestinian refugee camps is also named Shatila after the Shatila family who owns the land the refugee camp is built on.

[62] Muhammad Shatila, interview with the author, Beirut 25th August, 2010.

*Figure 2: Rawda Caf*é *on a Ramadan evening during the airing of Bab al-Hara.*

Lebanese Anthropologist Shawki Douaihy classifies the popular cafés of Beirut between 1950 and 1990 into four different types that are based on location. The first two types are situated in Beirut's city centre or downtown (destroyed during the war), the third type is found in residential neighbourhoods across the city, and the fourth type are called "sea cafés" (2005: 10). Douaihy's study is a historical ethnography of the first three types of male-only popular cafés, with little mention of seaside cafés. According to his definition of what constitutes a popular café (*maqha shaʿbi*), the seaside cafés are a special type as they meet the first two of the three characteristics: playing card games, smoking *argileh* (hookah) and hosting male-only clients (2005: 13).[63] Seaside cafés, in contrast with the other three popular café types, are family spaces that attract people across gender and generations, including intellectuals, artists, politicians and journalists (2005: 118). Douaihy specifies that seaside cafés also served as restaurants and provided play areas for children (2005: 119). Of the nine seaside cafés he identifies in his book, Q/ahwet al-Rawda and its adjacent ʿArus al-Bahr are the only two remaining.[64] Multiple factors differentiate Rawda from other cafés in the city in general, and ʿArus al-Bahr and new seaside cafés in specific. It is an open space by the sea in a city with few public gardens and a privatized coastline. Its simple rustic design has been maintained, despite changes in

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[63] Argileh is Lebanese colloquial for English hookah, Egyptian shisha and Turkish nargila.
[64] The following seven cafés have been replaced by investment projects by the coast: al-Bahri, al-Bahrayn, Hage Daoud, al-Amircan, al-Hamra, al-Ghalayini. Please see Douaihy (2005: 118).

management. It provides a calm atmosphere away from the busy streets and an unpretentious ambience for coexisting extended families, lovers, friends, political activists, artists and intellectuals, from all generations. Its location enjoys open access to the shore, more than just a bird's eye view, and it is especially present in the memory of those raised in Beirut before and during the civil war between 1970 and 1990. Deeb and Harb (2013) differentiate between the popular cafés studied by Douaihy (2005) and the "modern public spaces" of Hamra that were studied by Sawalha (2010). For the purpose of this study, I build on Douaihy's definition to differentiate between three types of cafés that are common in Beirut today: (1) the male-only popular cafés that still exist in residential neighbourhoods, (2) the modernized popular cafés or "neo-traditional" cafés, that host both men and women, serve argileh and allow clients to play card games (*Rawda* belongs to this category), and (3) the modern "western"-style cafés that do not serve hookah or allow card games, for example the *café trottoire* style cafés, like Café Younes, or the lounge style ones like Café De Prague, among others.[65] While Rawda does not belong to the type of "western"-style cafés that continue to proliferate in the Hamra area, its clientele and ambience belong to the Ras Beirut mixed confessional and class environment.[66]

The category of "neo-tradition" includes cafés that offer a fusion between media presence (screen and Wi-Fi) and an atmosphere of invented tradition. Hobsbawm defines "invented tradition" as a "set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past" (1983: 1). He differentiates between "official" or "political" invention of tradition that is created by "states or organized social and political movements", and "unofficial" or "social generation" of tradition created by "social groups not formally organized" or groups that are "not specifically or consciously political" (1983: 263). In the case of "neo-traditional" places, like *Rawda*, both market and social forces contribute to creating a hybrid tradition

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[65] Note: Deeb and Harb (2013) study a number of cafés in Beirut's southern suburb and one of them is called café *Bab al-Hara* (named after the television series/ object of this PhD research). *Bab al-Hara* café is not a seaside café but similarly to Rawda belongs to what I group under "neo-traditional" modern popular cafés serving hookah and permitting card games while also serving food and open to clients from all gender and generations, what Deeb and Harb (2013) call spaces of "moral leisure" within the Muslim Shi'a community, I use to describe spaces of "moral leisure" belonging to the Muslim Sunni piety movement.

[66] Rawda is bordered by two privatized beaches, to the right the Military Beach and to the left Long Beach. To the east it is adjacent to Beirut's only Luna Park, ʿArus al-Bahr café (owned by the Shatila family), Ghalayini café and al-Nijma football court.

of watching Ramadan drama series while smoking *argileh*, playing cards and eating *suhur* (the predawn Ramadan meal).

5.2. Islams in the Beiruti Café

To understand the specificity of Rawda as a contested "neo-traditional" space, I explore the discourse of one of the regular artists at the café, Ahmad Qaabour. Qaabour is a well-known Lebanese composer and singer, whose main work is labelled as being heritage or committed art (patriotic songs and children's plays and music). In 1993, he joined Future Television, a private pan-Arab satellite television station based in Lebanon and owned by the millionaire, assassinated Prime Minister, Rafik Hariri. During his work for the station from 1993-1995, he produced television promotions, of which the most well-known is a sequence of jingles under the title *La ʿyunak* (For Your Eyes) which are accompanied by video clips showing men playing music, wearing the *tarbush* in a set of an old Lebanese house.[67] These images, the lyrics and the tunes, contributed to the construction of the post-war image of the Future Movement and the Beiruti, embracing modernity, but connected to the "authentic" tranquil life of a pre-war era.[68] Qaabour revealed that the songs were originally written for his children, but then came to represent the new Hariri Future Movement.[69] Qaabour used the tarbush on the screen because it reminded him of his father.[70] While the *tarbush* was commonly worn by Qaabour's father's generation, its use had dwindled by the mid-20th century. This image of the "traditional" Beiruti, wearing a tarbush and sitting in a café smoking argileh, became the cultural face associated with the Hariri political and economic modernist project during the nineties.[71] In his description of Rawda, Qaabour started by defining Beirut as a cultural space of experimentation and a political space of struggle. He emphasized the contrast between Beirut facing a "domination project" and undergoing "extremely rapid changes", on the one hand, and

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[67] Tarbush is the Turkish fez popularized in Lebanon and Syria as the official head-wear under Ottoman rule and worn until the mid-20th century.

[68] Qaabour, an ex-member of the Lebanese Communist Action Organization, was criticized by some of his ex-comrades on the left for joining the neoliberal project of Hariri.

[69] I was able to locate three songs/jingles produced before the assassination of Rafik Hariri. All three end with the refrain *La ʿyunak* (For your eyes). The first is subtitled *al-mustaqbal la ilak* (The Future is Yours). The second is subtitled *bitmun* (which literally translates as: you are in a position to demand) and the third featuring Zoya Saqr, Miss Elite Top Model, both produced in 1995 during the time when the ownership of the Beirut Central District was being expropriated by Solidere, the private company established by Hariri.

[70] Ahmad Qaabour, interview with the author, Beirut 16th September, 2010.

[71] A review of the video clips brought to my attention the invention of tradition that took place in parallel to the Hariri project that governed Lebanon in the nineties. A high ranking manager at Future Television during that period, told me in an interview that the vision of these three jingles was discussed by Ahmad Qaabour and Rafik Hariri personally. This topic requires further research.

Rawda as its antithesis, a space of "Beiruti-ness" that was composed of the sea, stability and the celebration of diversity, on the other hand.[72]

> Why do we come to Rawda? Because this place gives us the impression of a lost [political] stability, especially as it is in front of the sea. It is still standing by the shore. The sound of the sea is still, still witnessing us. That is why we come to Rawda, especially for me, the Beiruti. I have been coming here for more than 45 years, from the early days of Rawda. Yes, it has undergone change, a wall repainted, a tree was cut or grew taller, the cloths covering the tables changed, but the place remains for what it symbolizes: stability, quietness, repose and steadiness in a time of rapid change. Rawda also looks like the country, with all the diversity it holds. Knowing that the decision to ban alcohol has disappointed me, I would have liked its Beiruti Muslim owners and patrons not to be bothered with beer because Christians, seculars, and tourists have the right to drink alcohol... The place has not changed, except during Ramadan and the World Cup and the screen that is turned on all the time. I feel it is a violation of what Rawda represents to me, a chance to meet, dialogue and reflect, and not to be present in a consumerist society that drains my attention and increases my anxiety by what is shown on screens. I don't want to watch *Bab al-Hara*. (Qaabour, 2010)[73]

Qaabour's Beirut and Rawda café are his own, as much as they are collective, imaginings of these places: Beirut as turning its back on the sea, a scene of multiplying skyscrapers and thinning urban fabric, and on Rawda, as the symbol of the "simpler life" of the past, of the security embedded in "sites of memory." Qaabour expressed an attachment to the city and its cafés and criticised its inability to meet his expectations. He highlighted two main visible materializations in which a break with the past had taken place: the introduction of the giant screen(s) and the alcohol ban.[74] This break did not prevent Qaabour from insisting on Rawda as a place of security and tranquillity amidst the chaotic present. Qaabour resisted the unwelcomed change by being at Rawda. Or, he accepted being in Rawda without alcohol, and with possible changes in social relations, in order to safeguard

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[72] The "domination project" that Qaabour mentioned is a topic of contestation. Although Qaabour criticised the market system in one section of his interview, by the domination project he was signalling Lebanese internal politics and not the neoliberal economic system.

[73] Ahmad Qaabour, interview with the author, Beirut 16th September, 2010.

[74] The screen in the middle area is composed of a white plexiglass over a wooden stand. The screen size is approximately 3 metres wide and 3.3 metres long. The total height of the screen is 4 metres.

his relationship with the place that holds memories of Beirut's cosmopolitan intellectual past. The "stability, quietness, repose and steadiness" that Qaabour identifies are reflective of a general sense of ontological security (see Chapter 9) that is associated with places like Rawda for the generation who lived in Beirut before the intensification of neoliberal policies and their impact on spaces in the city (Fawwaz, 2009). Other ex-clients (mainly from younger generations) were less open to this change. They boycotted Rawda and migrated to new cafés with like-minded circles.

*Figure 3: Clay Armature of Rawda Caf*é *by Future Television.*

Qaabour argued that Beirutis were "returning" to religion without "necessarily becoming fundamentalists": it is the failure of national or leftist liberation thought and the emergence of religious thought or what is known as "Islamic revival".[75] This analysis is not specific to Qaabour, who believed that Rawda caters for the same clients, who have grown more religious. This is echoed by an informant, who remarked, "Rawda is Islamized". Her observation was not based on visible signs of Islam, like the veil, since covered women were a minority among the sleeveless women, but on her past experience of Rawda and the continuous contestation of the café.[76] By not serving alcohol, Rawda has become

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[75] Ahmad Qaabour, interview with the author, Beirut 17th September, 2010.
[76] Visiting *Rawda* on the 29th October, 2014, around four years after the fieldwork during Ramadan, 2010, I observed that the number of veiled women corresponded to approximately half the number of women in the café that evening (13 unveiled to 12 veiled). This means an observed (non-representative) increase in the

"Islamized", in the sense that it has joined the "Islamic Milieu" and has become a place of "moral leisure" (Deeb and Harb, 2013).[77] Deeb and Harb (2013) studied moral spaces of entertainment in the Beirut suburbs among the majority Shiite Muslims. Rawda, however, is more difficult to frame in a spatio-sectarian boundedness, and it is an example of the contestation of spaces in Beirut between self-identified seculars and Muslims (of both Shiite and Sunni denominations, knowing that Rawda is thought to attract more Sunni than Shiite Muslims). Informants of a secular inclination, belonging to the younger generations, who consume alcohol or who hold a political position vis-à-vis political Islam and/or religious practices, criticized Rawda's decision to ban alcohol and identified the post-2008 clientele as being more "religious." The claim that Rawda is being "Islamised" is rather difficult to defend, since I distinguish between religiosity as a private relation with God, and the practice of religion as a socially-bounded performance.

Qaabour is among the very few who not only objected to the alcohol ban and commented on the "religiosity" of Rawda's clients, but who also criticized the loud sound of television and expressed disapproval of its presence.[78] It was remarkably more common for clients in Rawda to problematize and scrutinize Islam and to exclude capitalist consumption from their criticism. The majority of comments directly criticised the practices taking place in Rawda at the religious and moral levels, but not at the class and consumption levels.[79] It may be that, in Lebanon, showing public support of multi-sectarian "coexistence" irrespective of secular conviction, is expected. To explain the visibility of a criticism of "Islamisation" and the invisibility of a critical evaluation of the commodification of religious rituals, the synergy between socio-religious practices, consumption, profit-making and media genres does not necessarily reveal secular inclinations among loyal Rawda clients, but it may be reflective of a kind of political correctness exhibited in front of the researcher, based on a certain evaluation of her positionality within the Lebanese context (see Chapter 3). In the section below, I describe the subtleties of Ramadan profane/sacred, everyday practices in the contested place of consumption, Rawda. I set the stage of Rawda as a complex multi-layered space of neo-traditional consumption.

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number of veiled women among Rawda's clients.

[77] By Islamisation, I am referring to form and not content. In other words, I address people's display of commitment to Islamic symbols (Islamic performance), whether marked by clothes, facial hair, hand gestures, public prayer or other visible practices, rather than how this is related to the Islamisation of thought.

[78] The other person who mentioned this topic is an academic friend from Oxford, who joined me for an evening in Rawda during my fieldwork.

[79] I paid an average of $18-$20 per person per evening for a light snack and a non-alcoholic beverage.

5.3. Consuming Neo-Tradition

During Ramadan, the city of Beirut, like other cities in the Arab region, acquires a daily rhythm that is distinct from the rest of the year. Fasting from dusk until sunset, even if not practiced by the majority of Muslims, is followed by post-'iftar (post-breaking-the-fast) encounters around food with friends and family. Fasting during the shorter days of winter is easy for those who are used to it, but fasting during the long days of summer remains a tough commitment. In 2010, Ramadan fell between August and September, and although my friends were able to stay without food, staying without water was particularly tasking. A holy month of the Muslim calendar, Ramadan is lived as both a religious and a social experience.[80] I joined my friend Rima and her friends at *Rawda* for the first two nights of Ramadan, 2010. Rima's friends enjoy playing cards as a leisure activity, mainly during Ramadan (during the rest of the year they occasionally play gambling card games). After the first two nights, Rima chose not to make Rawda a regular venue for meeting her friends during the rest of Ramadan, because she did not enjoy watching drama series and found the loud sound of *Bab al-Hara* very obtrusive.[81]

I asked Muhammad Shatila, Rawda's manager, about this decision to screen *Bab al-Hara* during 2010, and he said it was based on *Bab al-Hara*'s number of viewers during 2007 and his experience with the series' ability to attract more clients to Rawda during Ramadan, 2008, and 2009. The extreme success of *Bab al-Hara*'s Seasons 1 and 2 led the café's owners to regard the Ramadan drama series as a social event, similar to the World Cup, which attracts viewers to their premises. *Bab al-Hara* was thus transformed from a Ramadan drama series to a daily event that was intrinsically linked to Ramadan routines taking place at home or performed in public spaces. For these reasons, Muhammad Shatila installed two large screens during the World Cup and Ramadan, 2010. Muhammad explained that the decision to show *Bab al-Hara* on a huge screen was purely commercial, while the decision to ban alcohol was both religious and commercial. By commercial, he meant his desire to reach out to a new clientele in a city with a growing number of people

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[80] For more on the complexities of practicing Ramadan in an Egyptian village, see Schielke, Samuli (2009) Being Good in Ramadan: Ambivalence, Fragmentation, and the Moral Self in the Lives of Young Egyptians. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute.* Vol.15, Islam, Politics, Anthropology, pp. S24-S40.
[81] In 2008, *Bab al-Hara* was broadcast on the screen but the episodes were kept at a low volume. In 2010, *Bab al-Hara* became the main event and the volume was raised as if in an open-air cinema. Note: The volume was not lowered during advertisements, a common practice inside homes. The difference between the volume of *Bab al-Hara* in Rawda in 2008 and 2010 is reflective of the difference between *Bab al-Hara* as a background experience in 2008 and as a central attraction in 2010.

who are uncomfortable in a place serving alcohol.[82] In other words, previous clients were only allowing the café to break even, while finding new clients for a new Rawda required looking for the more "conservative" crowd and the younger generation. The changes taken on by Muhammad, included introducing new menu items, and this led to an increase in profits between 2008 and 2010 and, in certain cases, "sales increased 600 to 700 percent".[83] By implementing his vision, Muhammad proved to his father, uncles and aunts that Rawda could survive and make good money. During Ramadan, 2010, he was given a suitable budget to decorate Rawda with plastic lights in the shape of palm trees, crescents and stars, which gave a slight resemblance to the "Ramadan tents" that were famous during the 1990s.[84] Historically, in Beirut's neighbourhoods, people used to gather small amounts of money from each other to buy street decorations for Ramadan. In contrast, the plastic silver Ramadan lamps (*fanus/fawanis*), the neon lights in the shape of crescents, stars, palm trees, and the congratulatory Ramadan expression "*Ramadan Kareem*" (generous Ramadan), were private decorations bought by the owner of a profitable business. These decorations established a mood of commodified heritage and made Rawda an object of neo-tradition that was attractive to those who want to meet, impress, celebrate and consume after breaking their fasts.

Rima likes to consider Ramadan a special month in her life that is otherwise "away from God" or "open-minded". She tries, as much as possible, to follow what a practising Muslim is "supposed" to do. She stops wearing a swimsuit to the beach, stops drinking alcohol, fasts on most of the days and tries to perform as many *sala* (ritualistic prayers) as possible. In 2010, she was more relaxed than in the previous years about being in places where alcohol was served, and her commitment to fasting the entire month was interrupted by a short trip to Istanbul to attend a U2 concert. Similarly to Rima, many otherwise non-practising Muslims stop consuming alcohol during Ramadan, a month that moves crowds away from pubs towards living more spiritually or to consuming piety and going into cafés

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[82] For more on the politics of alcohol consumption, see Deeb and Harb (2013) *Leisurely Islam: Negotiating Geography and Morality in Shi'ite South Beirut*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
[83] Muhammad Shatila, interview with the author, Beirut 25th August, 2010.
[84] The first "Ramadan tent" in Beirut was established in 1995. It was a modified imitation of an Egyptian custom that was popular in the Hussein district of Fatimid Cairo. The tent spread used in Egypt, a famous colourful cloth, was also borrowed for tents in Lebanon so as to decorate outdoor spaces or the indoor halls of restaurants and hotels. These tents organised evening shows that hosted singers, monologists and storytellers. Television stations seldom covered these daily Ramadan entertainment shows. This custom has lost momentum since 2005, with the assassination of Rafiq Hariri and the deterioration of the security situation in Lebanon. For more information see, Mallah (2005) and Rihan (2008).

displaying a Ramadan mood.[85] Although Ramadan is a month of fasting, discipline and frugality, it is also a ritualistic month, a festive month for families meeting, going out and consuming. It is interesting to observe that this month, which does not conform to work routines, in the sense that people work less and allocate more time for sociality and spirituality, is also a month of consumption and expense through increased socialization with family and friends. Most informants mentioned that the rate of family meetings, both by being invited and by accepting invitations to indoor and outdoor gatherings, tends to increase during Ramadan and, with it, Ramadan expenses. It is noteworthy that the prices of food items also increase during Ramadan and this puts pressure on families with low and medium incomes. Conservative Muslim discourse problematizes consumption by "good" Muslims during the holy month and calls for "modesty". Rawda complicates the distinction between modest and festive Ramadan practices, for its clients tend to be a mix of practitioners and non-practitioners of Islam (Muslims and non-Muslims alike).[86]

Although Qaabour and Rima were annoyed with *Bab al-Hara* loudly "occupying" Rawda, it remained fully crowded, resonating with the recurrent outdoor scene in the city: people seated in various types of cafés, around screens with the argileh water-pipe in hand. It is a common joke that smoking argileh has become the "national sport" or a "national duty" that binds the collective. In his epilogue to Khalaf (2012), Hage theorizes argileh smoking as a metonym of the culture of escapism that has engulfed Lebanon during the post-war period. He narrates his experience of shifting trends of argileh smoking between the 1970s, when it was associated with adult working-class men frequenting popular coffeehouses, and the post-war 1990s, when everyone seemed to be smoking argileh and "everyone, particularly young people, seemed to think that it was a really hip thing to do" (2012: 7). He explains this phenomenal growth as a desire to withdraw from Lebanese politics while reproducing political, social and environmental degradation through this very act of withdrawal. He provides a psychoanalytical reading of the argileh as a regressive experience that produces a womb-like effect (2012: 9). Another explanation may be that smoking argileh signifies a "return to tradition," a "neo-tradition" that is both modern and traditional, hip and secure in the past, a sign of the authentic modern.

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[85] See Schielke (2009).
[86] Rawda is considered to be an affordable café, on average. A middle-income family is expected to afford visiting Rawda more than once during Ramadan.

It is important to stress that the experience of Rawda during Ramadan is different from the experience of Rawda during the rest of the year. In 2010, the presence of *Bab al-Hara* made its own special imprint. The co-presence of the moral home of *Bab al-Hara*, in congruence with the neo-traditional space of Rawda, effectively led to an augmented dominance of domestic morality. The screening of one object of morality, *Bab al-Hara*, coincided with the "moral leisure" taking place in the "neo-traditional" Rawda. Television public viewing during Ramadan changes the viewing experience from one of viewing to one of mutual gazing. You look and are looked at, and, in this context, where you are being looked at, *Bab al-Hara* constitutes the visual and moral reference, gaining its legitimacy from the past.

5.4. Viewing Damascus in Beirut

Viewing Damascus in Beirut, is not only about the presence of the idealized Damascus of *Bab al-Hara* on the two plexiglass (3 by 3.3 metres) screens in Rawda. It is also about the multiple connections with Damascus that I kept encountering in Rawda (Massey, 1994). On the 8th evening of Ramadan, I went with an old friend, Jamil, who had not been at Rawda since they banned alcohol. The headwaiter recognized him, greeted him warmly, and thanked me for bringing him back. That evening, and after a conversation with the headwaiter, I realised that most of the workers in *Rawda* are from Syria. Muhammad, the man carrying the burning coal, jumping around and distributing fire from one argileh to the other, wearing sports pants with the logo of an Italian football team; Mahmoud, the shoe cleaner who carries his chair in one hand and his set of polishes on the other shoulder, roaming around waiting for someone to call him for a shoe shine. It takes him around eight minutes to render a pair of shoes like new and he charges 3000 L.L. ($2). He is a white haired, well-built man, originally from Daraa in Syria. Born in 1964, he came to work at Rawda in the '70s, when he was 12 years old. He left for years during the eighties to serve the mandatory military service in the Syrian army, and then returned to find that the café's manager, Madam Shatila, had passed away. Most of the head waiters have worked at Rawda since the '90s. I observed that almost all of the waiters followed the events of *Bab al-Hara* while on their shift. I interviewed two junior waiters, who came from northern Syria. One of them told me that his wife is dressed in a *Milaya* (full-body garment), similarly to the women in *Bab al-Hara*. The wife, however, works, lives

independently from his family, and raises their children on her own, not similar to the women of *Bab al-Hara*.

The Rawda of 2010, was both connected and separated from the space of my childhood. By ordering beans with cumin and apple juice, I was connecting to a happy past. Clients and friends who consistently chose certain plates or juices they liked were similarly motivated. *Bab al-Hara* sometimes seemed to be like a yummy ingredient from the past. It is, however, much more complicated than a lifestyle choice. The women in Rawda 2010, during Ramadan, were all dressed very nicely and wore make up. I considered that this was overdressed for a Rawda style outing, where they smoked argileh, and met their family and friends. They were looking at women on the screen, similarly well dressed and wearing make-up. None of the men, however, wore the *Bab al-Hara* attire. That evening, I reflected with Jamil on the multiple spacio-temporal dimensions of our experience. We sat in Rawda in 2010, watching a story, set in the '30s and '40s, where the storyteller sat in a men-only café in the fictitious Dabʿ neighbourhood recounting the story of Zir Salim.[87] We learn through the drama, that the men go home to recount to their wives the drama updates set in the pre-Islamic Arabian Peninsula about a war between brothers.

5.5. Conclusion

In this chapter I have traced, by choosing the Rawda café as a context in which to view *Bab al-Hara* in Beirut, two complementary changes at the level of the production of space and the role of media in these changes. I demonstrate the complex contestation of the display of religiosity and the consumption of neo-tradition in public spaces. I introduce the meanings of Rawda as a "site of memory" for Beirut dwellers, I compare it to other cafés in the city and describe spending Ramadan nights at Rawda. I argue that the presence of *Bab al-Hara* in Rawda inscribes space with an idealized moral domesticity. Then I expand on this by explaining that this inscription is not fixed, but is susceptible to histories, dialogue and conflict. I contend that Ramadan at Rawda reveals the conservative shift in the morality and religiosity of public spaces in Beirut, but that this shift falls within the complexity at the level of the production of space, the commitment to piety and

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[87] For more on the story of Zir Salem please check Al-Barghouti, Tamim (2004) The vital illusion: the war of Basous and why we tell tales. *The Daily Star*. 21st February. [Online] Available from: http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Culture/Art/2004/Feb-21/95485-the-vital-illusion-the-war-of-basous-and-why-we-tell-tales.ashx [Accessed 24 May 2015].

consumption practices complicating any generalisation on media or Islam. In the next chapter, I focus on the intersection between *Bab al-Hara* and the moral stories articulated by informants in Rawda. I track mediated and biographical narratives of different age groups in order to identify two readings of the past, one without contradictions or economic hardships and clear boundaries between the masculine and the feminine, and one full of contradictions and gender struggles yet with more economic justice.

Chapter 6

QAHWAT AL-RAWDA GENDERED SPACES OF MORALITY

I was at home with my friend Malak, when a little before 'iftar (breaking the fast in Ramadan), the sounds of machine-gun fire and rocket-propelled grenades filled our soundscape. We checked the news to learn that there was a "problem," still not clear, between two political parties in Burj Abu Haidar, an area of Beirut close to my neighbourhood.[88] Malak and I did not want to stay locked in. She wanted to go back to Ras Beirut where she lives, and I wanted to meet a friend visiting from Damascus at 9.00 p.m. in the Rawda Café. We contacted Rima, who was ready to pick us up, but we had to walk farther away from my house (because by car the traffic direction would take us into an area of my neighbourhood considered to be in political alliance with one of the fractions involved in the fighting and we were worried that the clashes might spread). Malak and I walked like as if we were in an action film, our backs to the walls, crossing the empty streets under the sounds of exploding gunfire, running out of fear of stray bullets.

Figure 4: Rawda Café on 24th August, 2010.

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[88] On the 14th day of Ramadan, the 24th August, 2010, clashes took place between Hizbullah and Al-Ahbash (The Association of Islamic Charitable Projects) in Beirut. English language reporters highlighted the sectarian identification of each group, both politically aligned with the Syrian government. For more information, please check Karouny, Mariam (2010) Senior Hezbollah Member Killed in Beirut Clashes. *Reuters*. [Online] Available from: http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/08/24/us-lebanon-clash-idUSTRE67N5F820100824 [Accessed 11th March, 2014].

I reached Rawda at 9.50 p.m. and *Bab al-Hara* had already started. The place did not resemble itself during the past thirteen days. I took my camera expecting an almost empty café and wanted to document how spaces shifted between being vibrant, deserted, then came back to life again. Living in Beirut means living close to death, and Rawda was in a close to death situation that night. I sat with Suheil, from Damascus, and Malak on the side and ordered beans with lemon and cumin, in addition to an anise infusion that relaxes the muscles. I was feeling anxious and started talking about courage and fear. I told them a proverb that used to annoy me during my early twenties but that made complete sense that night. The proverb roughly translates as: [Let it be said of one] hundred times a coward, but not once may her soul rest in peace.[89] Meaning it is better to behave as a coward than to be dead. Malak intercepted with Nietzsche's opinion on cowardice. She said that Nietzsche wrote that brave men are stupid men, and that feeling afraid is associated with thinking. Until now, I have never checked whether he really said that, but he probably said it more eloquently, for sure. That night, luckily, I felt I had the support of Nietzsche to relieve all of the fears I encountered as a result of the street fights. I was supposed to interview Hassane, but he sent me an SMS saying he would stay at home as it is not safe to commute.

The fear and cowardice I felt created a clear contrast with the utopic bravery of the *Bab al-Hara* men and woman during episode 14. The drama series continued the plot of the antagonist Lieutenant Nimr (a Syrian enrolled with the French army) in his false disguise as Ma'moun Beik, or Abu Kamel (the son of the neighbourhood's deceased leader). In the developments, Ma'moun Beik bribes the police chief to keep Abu Hatem in jail for the night, and he sends his men to attack the neighbourhood guard and sabotage Issam's shop. In the night he wakes up from a nightmare in which Abu Hatem is killing him. In a cliffhanger, Abu Hatem, in captivity, tells his companion that he suspects Ma'moun's Beik is betraying the neighbourhood. The espionage/patriotism action plot takes place within the unfolding lifeworld of kinship and marriage. Umm Joseph, rescued from detention in the military hospital by the young men, headed by Muʿtaz, is in hiding under medical supervision in Abu Bachir's house.

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[89] Proverb translated by author. Another possible translation is: "It is better to be said of one that one is a coward than to pay condolences." مئة مرة جبان ولا مرة الله يرحمه.

In this chapter, I juxtapose the moral ideal with the rhetoric on actual practice. I build on interviews with young informants, who have not lived in an old courtyard house yet seek the ontological security of home ownership that is promised by real estate. I revert to the gender question and the value of protection that is embedded in the Damascene courtyard house. I then introduce the generational perspective, to explore how informants with experiential knowledge of the epoch that is represented in the media challenge the dominant moralizing masculinities that are legitimated through the use of heritage. In this way, I argue that spatial and symbolic processes of "neo-traditioning" are contested through situated experiences of the past.

6.1. The "Real" Man

I joined Nadia and her two friends Rana and Diala (all born in 1990) at Rawda when *Bab al-Hara*'s episode 17 was screening.[90]. Nadia came across as a strong and opinionated young woman. She was studying both psychology and education at university while working as assistant manager in an international lingerie company. Nadia regarded Muʿtaz as the ideal prototype of a "man" who takes "decisions independently" and protects "his loved ones." She deemed him romantic, even if he does not show much tenderness towards his wife. During the episode, Muʿtaz does not appear, but we follow other characters who inquire about his safety after the firing incident.

Muʿtaz (Wael Sharaf) is one of *Bab al-Hara* heroes and "attributed" young stars.[91] In the drama, he is the youngest son of *Bab al-Hara*'s central family, headed by Abu and Umm Issam. His character is a stereotypical representation of the q/abaday or the tough man whose courage is his capital.[92] Muʿtaz's character is contrasted with that of his older brother, Issam, who is generally weaker and who faces problems asserting himself with his wives.[93] An incident of Muʿtaz's character that is telling takes place during episode 15,

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[90] Following our first encounter, I did not meet the young women at Rawda again for Nadia kept postponing our next meeting until she cancelled it altogether. I have no clear explanation as to why the café provided me easier access to male informants. I found it more difficult to approach women sitting with their families and although I spotted one woman sitting on her own while I was involved in an interview, most women were in groups while more men sat on their own or in smaller groups. Nadia told me on the phone that they moved to a "chic" upscale café in one of Beirut's seaside hotels and no longer spent Ramadan evenings in Rawda.
[91] For more on forms of celebrity status, please see Chapter 8.
[92] Please see footnote 53.
[93] For more information on series adopting the q/abaday trope please see Chapter 5 Fantasy of the Qabaday Fighting the Colonial Power in the Bi'a Shamiyyeh Genre of 2000 Onward, in Joubin, Rebecca (2013) *The Politics of Love: Sexuality, Gender, and Marriage in Syrian Television Drama*. Plymouth: Lexington Books.

when he theatrically runs towards the French soldiers who are standing at the neighbourhood gate. Given military orders to remove the gate, the soldiers are confronted by Muʿtaz, asking who wants to remove bab al-hara (the neighbourhood door) and shooting twice at the soldiers accompanied by the melodised sentence "our neighbourhood is our dignity" playing in the background. A number of men run back towards the *hara* together with Mu'taz, in order to save him from the French soldiers, who are not allowed in by the remaining men. During episode 16, the French soldiers are searching the neighbourhood houses in a quest to find Muʿtaz before the viewer learns that he is safe in the Ghuta with the rebels. Senior interlocutors have described this incident as "foolish heroism" or "irrational courage," since Muʿtaz neither succeeds in preventing the hara's door from being removed, nor does he save himself from becoming a fugitive.

Figure 5: Rawda Café on 25th August, 2010.

The younger generation did not criticize Muʿtaz's exaggerated bravery but considered him a *rejjal/rajul,* a "real" man. Their idea of manhood was described through terms such as physical strength, prowess, protection of weaker individuals and pride. Peteet defines "Arab masculinity or *rujulah*" as a performance of bravery, risk-taking and assertiveness. She clarifies that it is attained through vigilant action "to defend honour (*sharaf*), face (*wajh*), kin and community from external aggression, and to uphold and protect cultural definitions of gender-specific priority" (2002: 321). This performance of manhood is dependent on public approval, and Muʿtaz is appointed ʿaqid of *Bab al-Hara*, or the chief

of the q/abadayat, after his uncle is murdered in Season 4, when he succeeds in leading an operation to free *Umm Joseph* from captivity at the military hospital during episode 6.[94] The symbol of Muʿtaz's social standing is a knot in his scarf (*hatta)* made by Abu Hatem, the senior amongst the hara's men, who charges Muʿtaz with the responsibility for the hara until doomsday. Effectively, the ideal construction of masculinity in *Bab al-Hara* is that of the strongman, be it the father or the son. The figure of the father is strong and wise (Abu Issam or Abu Hatem) and the figure of the ideal son is mainly as one who is strong and brave (Muʿtaz). Men and women of all generations watching *Bab al-Hara* had a limited choice of characters to identify with or relate to. Chatting with his mother, the day he was appointed ʿaqid, Muʿtaz gives a description of ideal manhood as being a supernatural gift, by stressing that God made him who he is.

6.2. Beyond the "Real" Man

In the discussions among the younger generation, although I could trace an idealization of the strongman-mediated construction of masculinity, wealth, as the ability to provide, was an important attribute of the idealized man. Nadia, for example, spoke of femininity as an action that women perform in order to gain "control" of their men. Accordingly, women take the "subordinate position" and treat men as more powerful and "sacred". Nadia defended this performance of "self-inflicted" subordination as being necessary, because only men are able to provide women with the support they need in society. She framed her views as pragmatic, and based on her experience, arguing that working women receive neither "their rights" nor "praise and gratitude" for playing the roles of both "men" at work and "women" at home. She appreciated the respect women receive in *Bab al-Hara* and how it translates materially into a "much nicer" arrangement, where women have everything provided for them while at home. Nadia supported arranged marriage and criticised progressive relationships that do "not lead to marriage" in "today's society". Throughout the conversation, Nadia practised verbal dominance and opposed her friend Rana, who expressed a resistant reading of *Bab al-Hara* in regard to its construction of femininity, but not of masculinity. The following is a discussion between Rana and Nadia:

> **Rana:** The Arab man is known, known for his power and character.

> **Nadia:** He is the adored one. Even in Europe he is liked, the oriental man I mean.[95]

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[94] For more on Umm Joseph, please see Chapter 8.
[95] It is interesting and telling that Nadia felt she needed to refer to Europe to support her claims but further analysis of Europe's symbolic power as a reference point is beyond the scope of this chapter.

Rana: Because he maintains his customs and traditions. But surely we want to have a career and have an independent personality.

Nadia: From my experience, working and being financially independent from my parents, not needing to request pocket money from them, is beautiful. You attain a level of independence, but if you find a man who is able to provide you with all that you want, on the condition that you will quit your job, yes, I will quit.

Rana: But this is very rare (to find a man who is able to fully provide for his wife).

Nadia: Fine, when I find a man, I am not requesting the life of a princess, but a good decent living.

Rana: I disagree. I am with a woman working, even if her husband is wealthy enough to provide her with a good life, because work is the means to self-actualization and to strengthening her personality in front of him, especially these days.

The two friends' reading of fiction and their negotiation of hegemonic masculinity reflected the limits of contestation that are embedded in gender structures. The girls suggested that *Bab al-Hara*'s imagined men "no longer exist," but they "might have existed" during their grandfathers' times. Their opinions were supported by articulations of mediated experiences, rather than situated ones. The construct of the "man", although not physically "existing" in their everyday lives, persisted as being both desirable and expected. The disagreement between the two friends was neither around the desired attributes of the man, nor was it around their actual independence at twenty years old, studying, working, owning a car and commuting alone to Rawda at 10 p.m. I left around 11.30 p.m. and they were still there. The main point of the debate was around the pragmatic choices for acquiring a good life. The following is another excerpt from the discussion that continued between Nadia and Rana, which exemplifies how the promise of the traditional is covering up for the unmet promises of modernity:

Nadia: When you are with someone, based on love, you stay with him for a long while only for him to leave you for another woman, who is more appropriate for him to marry.

Rana: This is one out of multiple different cases.

Nadia: This is the ugly case, and it happens quite a lot. The woman loves and sacrifices, only to be deserted by a man who moves on to another woman with

more prestige or wealth, or any other merit. … There [in *Bab al-Hara*] it is not the case. They are looking for nothing but stability.

Bab al-Hara Season 5 does not provide an idealization of love but of stability. The young women grew up with images of the idealization of love. This idealization did not succeed in changing their reality of heartbreaks, material interests and a search for stability. Nadia framed her conceptions as being grounded in her situated experiences and failed expectations of the "modern" concept that marriage is the fruit of love. She used her mediated experience of watching *Bab al-Hara* to support an imagined past that was free of class considerations and materialistic values. This reading was shared among a majority of informants of the younger generation, who perceived the past as being morally superior. Rana was the only one on the table to criticize *Bab al-Hara*'s construction of femininity and its rosy representation of the past. She brought up the subplot relating to Issam (acted by Milad Youssef), who gets married for the third time, and to the problems associated with his multiple marriages in the fiction. She specifically mentioned episode 11, which depicted Bachir (acted by Oussama Halal) taking his wife Jamila (acted by Dana Jabr) to her parent's house in retribution for his brother-in-law taking his wife, Bachir's sister, Hoda (acted by Najlaa Al-Khamri), to their parents' house, a form of punishment through separation but not a divorce (episode 10). The incident is complicated as a result of exchange marriage, whereby Bachir is married to Issam's sister and Issam is married to Bachir's sister. Rana argued that she is against this full control over women that harbours disrespect. She thought that *Bab al-Hara* portrays women as "role-less," "valueless" and "without dignity". She is thus refuting a representation of tradition as providing a solution to exploitation, inequality and unfairness. Nadia's counter-response to Rana was based on two arguments: firstly, that there is no disrespect because the husband, Bachir, apologizes to his wife's mother, Umm Issam, and seeks her approval of his action, which was a result of Issam's misbehaviour. Secondly, that women have no one but their husbands and new family, because their own family "will no longer be there for them," and the "status of a divorced woman in Arab societies is demeaning."[96] Nadia did not argue that the past was

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[96] It is important for me here to briefly reflect on my role as a researcher in potentially contributing to *Bab al-Hara*'s gendering processes. During the interviews, I asked questions that could be regarded as being critical of the hegemonic discourses but that remained "moderate" or unchallenging enough so as not to use the power of the researcher, or to give informants the impression that certain answers are requested in accordance with my own position.

utopic, but that it was much better than a present where women lost the privileges granted to them through tradition without gaining the promises offered by modernity.

Nadia repeated a few times that superior intelligence is what allows a woman to "play with affairs as she pleases" and to "have her opinion respected." She articulated a common tactic among the oppressed in general, who find ways to deal with hegemony without confrontation, a tactic that encourages women to be "clever" and to hand in the "reins" in order to have "control" without being "on top". This tactic is a paradox, defended by the claim that "it is nicer if a girl remains with someone above her." Nadia's arguments revealed the regenerative power of gender structures that are associated with *Bab al-Hara*'s imagined masculinity. This is a gender performativity that is also shared by Rana who explained how a woman's reputation works as a means to control her sexuality.[97] She highlighted that "society would not show mercy on a woman who betrays her husband", while the man, "whatever he does" before or after marriage, "is granted the support of society." The young women agreed that, in the face of societal discrimination, reputation is the most important advantage for a woman to "own," together with the "wit," which would help her "handle different situations."[98]

A critical reading of Nadia's position on marriage, thus, exposes the interplay between the masculinity/femininity constructs and the economic processes of production that limit social mobility to marriage, and force women into the workforce as a result of the market substitution of individual wages by family wages (Harvey, 1990). Whether the young women agreed or differed on tactics to deal with gender structures, they remained within the frame of the masculine construct and did not engage in its denigration or in a conscious questioning of the womanhood ascribed to them. In other words, although the young women regarded chastity as a tool with which to confront their unequal standing and to gain access to material benefits through upward marriage, they did not criticise the structure that created their context. They did not challenge chastity and materialism as values, and, together with the young men described below, they regarded Muʿtaz as an

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[97] Here I understand gender to be 'performative' in Butler's sense whereby gender "can be neither true nor false" but is "only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity." (1990: 186). In another sense, it ought "not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*." (191). For more information please check Butler, Judith (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge.
[98] Interview with the author, Beirut 27th August, 2010.

icon. The young men refused promiscuity and opposed the socio-economic transformations, discussed by the young women, and placed the economy of marriage as being reflective of an increasingly materialist and consumerist worldview.

6.3. Idealizing the Past: Negotiating the Present

I met Hassane, Adam and Nader (all born 1990) in Rawda. They used to sit in a group of four or more to play card games requiring a minimum of four players. Similarly to the young women, they imagined the past as being "morally superior." Adam and Hassane were very good friends and I met them for chats before *Bab al-Hara* started. I met Nader, Hassane's school friend, less often. Adam worked for his family business, a food processing industry, while studying for his bachelor's degree in business administration at a private university. Hassane attended the same university, and in parallel to studying for his bachelor's degree in finance, he worked full-time at a bank. Nader was completing a degree in pharmacy at another private university. Adam's lifestyle differed from that of his friends, Hassane and Nader. Hassane and Nader partied more frequently, and Adam spent a lot of time with his family. Although both Hassane and Adam worked while studying, Adam held a more serious work engagement as he woke up at 6 a.m. during the week to be at the factory before going to classes in the afternoon. In one conversation between Adam and Hassane, Adam complained, "... all of the problems started during our times. Life was simple. Our parents didn't have as many worries as we have now. If you have seen the Bank Audi advertisement, it explains everything, they used to do much more than us."[99] The Bank Audi advertisement is an example of restorative nostalgia that plays on the reflective nostalgia of the generation that lived in the Lebanon of the 1960s. Entitled "The good old days of Lebanon," the advertisement is shot inside an old house, where the father shows his son old photographs while recounting stories heard as voiceover on old coloured footage of Lebanon during the 1960s. The advertisement encourages people to use a MasterCard named "Lebnani" as a way to contribute to the value of the Lebanese currency.[100] The official Lebanese utopic past is set during the 1960s, when Lebanon was the "Switzerland of the Middle East." *Bab al-Hara*, however, situates the Syrian utopic past before the establishment of the postcolonial state. When I asked Adam and Hassane

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[99] Adam, interview with the author, Beirut, 25th September, 2010.
[100] 'The Good Old Days of Lebanon' a Commercial by Bank Audi (2010) *The Good Old Days of Lebanon-Commercial by Bank Audi*. [Online] Available from: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCKhbKLY4ZE [Accessed 6th March, 2014].

which past era they would choose to live in, Adam answered "Lebanon in the sixties" and Hassane emphasised "Before Israel, I want to know how life was before Israel was established."[101] This relation with the past is not one of longing for a lost personal home, but of belonging to a cultural memory. On another occasion, Adam and Hassane discussed the contemporary obstacles to marriage:[102]

> **Adam:** In the past, if someone wanted to get married, they would help him find a wife, not ask him to have a car and an apartment and a substantial salary before being able to propose to a girl.
>
> **Hassane:** It is no longer as easy as it used to be.
>
> **Adam:** Everything has become materialistic.
>
> **Hassane:** Yes, now life has become so materialistic. Now the person needs to be financially at ease (*kamil mukammal*) to be able to start a family. Before, they used to help him to build himself and to build a family, now no one helps one another.
>
> **Adam:** Now even the brother doesn't care about his brother while, in the past the whole neighbourhood was as if one family.

Adam and Hassane criticised the present by comparing it to an imagined past, similar to that of *Bab al-Hara*. They condemned materialism that has changed even family bonds. Adam reiterated the dominant reading of *Bab al-Hara*, where the neighbourhood in the past is a family that is juxtaposed to the present, where the brother is not necessarily family. The dialogue continued on another evening when Nader joined Hassane and Adam at Rawda. Nader was not a *Bab al-Hara* fan and kept making fun of its simplicity. He only watched it under peer pressure, mainly that of Hassane, the leader of the group, as he wishes to be introduced. In Nader's view, the important house is not the one that resides in the past, but the one that they cannot afford to buy. The young men repeatedly spoke about their need to secure themselves and to be able to start a family, and, more generally, the impossibility of making a decent living in Lebanon:[103]

> **Nader:** How can I live in Lebanon? If you get a good job in Lebanon, you will earn 1000-2000 USD/month. If my degree costs me 150 thousand USD over 5 years, and after 5 years of suffering and after my parents have paid with the blood

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[101] Adam and Hassane, interview with the author, Beirut 25th September, 2010.
[102] Interview with the author, Beirut 30th August, 2010.
[103] Interview with the author, Beirut 6th September, 2010.

of their hearts, do I accept working for 1500 USD/month knowing that working outside Lebanon earns me 3000 USD a week as a starting salary?[104] Would I stay in Lebanon? Think about it. How much time do I need to save up to buy an apartment (100-150 m square) in Beirut, which costs no less than 300 thousand dollars? And If I start earning 1000USD a month, I will need 300 months. … I will not stay in this country, I might be back but I won't start here. I plan to come back when I am around 35-40. I will be married to a woman who is ready to sacrifice and join me in emigrating. We will travel to ensure a living. That means we need to build a house together, live together and raise children together and work hand in hand. ... In Lebanon, if you start from zero, you will stay at zero, and you will not grow unless your dad is able to support you financially and open doors for you. Someone needs to assist a person to be able to make it. ... This is the reality, if you don't have money, you can't do anything in Lebanon. … *Bab al-Hara* is "the" dream.

Hassane: Where everything is provided, "the" dream, yes.

Nader: "The" dream, but *Bab al-Hara* surely needs further development in terms of social relations and living conditions. The particularity of *Bab al-Hara* lies in its social relations. I keep making fun of *Bab al-Hara* because the biggest problem is resolved over a cup of tea. You kill someone and then you make peace over a cup of tea. The greatest worry is to reach the bakery before the bread runs out.

Hassane: Because it is a small community, now we are a huge community and we need the state to play its role... "The" dream is contentment and stability.

Nader: "The" dream is to be able to achieve your dream. It is becoming impossible in Lebanon. It used to be possible.

Nader has very practical calculations on how to ensure a good life, clearly outside the borders of Lebanon. The pressure of being expected to succeed as the providers, led the young men to criticise the system that requires them to be financially stable before thinking of partnership. They, however, sought individual solutions. The need to earn

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[104] Nader was born and raised in Canada before moving back to Lebanon. The figure of $3000/week is slightly exaggerated. It is true, however, that pharmaceutical jobs in Canada are among the highest paying jobs and that pharmacists receive overtime and bonuses in addition to their hourly wages. The average annual income of Canadian pharmacists ranges between C$62,629 and C$114,116. Nader mentioned that he is ready to live in the areas of Canada that grant him the highest hourly rates. For more information please see Pharmacist Salary (Canada) (2015) Pay Scale: Human Capital. [Online] Available from: http://www.payscale.com/research/CA/Job=Pharmacist/Hourly_Rate (Accessed 23rd February, 2015).

enough money to provide meant that *Bab al-Hara* is an antithesis to: the right to dream. They did not agree whether the dream is to accomplish stability or whether it is to achieve dreams in general. *Bab al-Hara* allowed this imagination of an accomplishable dream that resided in the past, to circulate.

6.4. Beyond Chastity

Adam continued to legitimate his worldview by recounting his grandparents' biography. His maternal grandfather, a paediatrician from Damascus, got married, when he was sixteen years old, to his grandmother, who was fourteen years old. After the couple's first baby, he travelled to Britain to continue his medical education as a paediatrician, while his wife stayed in Damascus for more than a year before following him. Adam's mother, a dentist, was born in Damascus, while her sister, Rabih's mother, who is a fashion designer, was born in England. I met Adam's cousin Rabih in Damascus after Ramadan. Rabih was raised in Saudi Arabia, where he attended British schools, and, unlike Adam, was interested in photography and art. When we met, he was studying graphic design at a private university in Damascus and did not consider himself to be pious like his father or grandfather. He suspected that his upbringing with "foreigners" in Saudi Arabia had led him to become more open-minded and more interested in western cultural production than Adam. Rabih did not watch *Bab al-Hara* and his only relation to it was manifested in the name of his preferred café, which was called *Bab al-Hara* and was located in the Bab Srijeh neighbourhood of Old Damascus. He also once visited the *Bab al-Hara* shooting location, the Damascene Village, with his family, for lunch. Their grandfather did not watch *Bab al-Hara* either, and preferred documentaries and books. He did not visit Beirut with his wife, the grandmother, during Ramadan. I met the grandmother, along with Adam's mother, both veiled, while watching *Bab al-Hara* at Rawda evenings after I heard the story. Adam considered his grandparents' epoch to have enjoyed fewer temptations and to have exhibited higher moral values in comparison. He believed that, in the past, men were confident in travelling alone, without fear of their wives cheating on them, while women today "cannot be left alone", as his married friends were facing problems caused by long-distance marriages.

Adam used the past in order to legitimate the value of non-materialistic personal relations that are jeopardised in the present. In his case, the labels "pious" and "conservative" do

not necessarily explain the ways and the complexity with which value systems are claimed and articulated in dialogue. In other words, in the case of the informants I met at Rawda, piety and conservatism were not used as rigid identity claims, and most people combined self-identified degrees of conservatism and open-mindedness. For example, Adam regarded his family as being "conservative," but not "fundamentalist." His cousin Rabih, defined him as "pious," but Hassane thought that he changed from "reserved" to "open" while at university. Adam offered his sisters' lifestyle as an example. One sister met a serious potential partner and the couple interacted privately online, but were not allowed to go out unaccompanied before their formal engagement or *katb kitab*.[105] His sisters, one veiled and one not, enjoyed the right to freedom of movement and his sister may have met her fiancé without Adam knowing, but he trusts that she did not. Adam wanted to share his attitudes towards home and society with the woman to whom he he commits to, and imagined her to be: "educated, have limits, not closed minded, wants to raise children, supportive, loyal, and beautiful, not skinny, but not fat, sportive." Similarly to the young women, Adam and Hassane did not mind arranged marriages.[106] Adam fell in love with a girl at university who was disliked by Hassane. Adam said their relationship ended because the girl was not happy with the amount of time he was able to offer, since he was not out regularly like the other guys.

Hassane's love story reflected a similar tension between the expected and the desired image of the romantic partner. Nine months into a relationship that was starting to turn serious, the ex-girlfriend confided to Hassane that, before she met him, she had had an extramarital sexual experience and that she was not a virgin. Hassane "could not help feeling furious" and broke off the relationship.[107] Months later, he evaluated his behaviour retrospectively and considered himself to have been "childish" and "patriarchal." He asked himself why he accepts that men, but not women, can be sexually active. He said that he questioned himself for a long time before he was able to entertain the possibility of his future wife not being chaste. Hassane's attitude on the subject revealed contradictions that are embedded in the oppositional expectations around women's sexuality. Although he had

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[105] *Katb Kitab*: literally means the writing of the book or the legal signing of the marriage contract. Even when it is an official marriage, it is socially considered to be a formal engagement and usually the marriage is only "consummated" after the wedding party and the bride's move to the groom's house.

[106] They explained arranged marriage to mean being introduced to potential future wives through "traditional routes" with the knowledge of both families, but this introduction does not necessarily mean a commitment on their own behalf, or on that of the girl, but an opportunity to meet and decide which is based on mutual liking.

[107] Hassane, interview with the author, Beirut 30th August, 2010.

reconsidered his position, he nevertheless advised his colleague at the bank to remain a virgin until she married and he defended his ex-girlfriend's "loss of virginity" from within the construct of the chaste woman. He contended that she was "tricked into sexual activity" by an "older guy" who was "exploiting" her for his "sexual pleasures." Both love stories reveal a conflict between expected and lived values, as well as a conflict between disparate circulating values.

When asked about the past, the young women and men I met watching *Bab al-Hara*, articulated a narrative made up of *Bab al-Hara*'s moral anecdotes, as well as stories they heard from their family members about an imagined moral past. This creative weave of the biographical and the mediated process; a coherent moral story of a past without contradictions that legitimates clear dichotomous boundaries between the masculine and feminine. It became another layer of my experience of Rawda during Ramadan as a place of neo-tradition. For my informants, the past, as perceived through *Bab al-Hara*, as an ideal, moral, domestic utopia, became a reference for what is to be expected. At the same time, however, everyday experiences continue to confront the young people with a moral reality that is very different to that of *Bab al-Hara*. The discussions with the younger generation show that this age group watching *Bab al-Hara* tended to re-articulate a moral past and gender constructions that conform with the morality that is present in "neo-traditional" spaces, like Rawda during Ramadan, and in drama series, like *Bab al-Hara*. Adam and Hassan, who were interested in *Bab al-Hara*, unlike Rabih, used it as a reference to an imaginary that explains how things were in the past and how the future should be. They negotiated the present with reference to moral values that had acquired legitimacy through association with the past. Nevertheless, they repeatedly mentioned that life cannot "go back" to how it "used to be." *Bab al-Hara* does not provide the younger generation with a critical reflective view of the past and its gendered moral constructs. It creates a precedence of a mythic utopia that is drawn from a moral past and influences, and in the case of the younger generation who watch *Bab al-Hara*, their assessment of the present and imagination of the future. *Bab al-Hara*'s moral past, grounded in an imagined Old Damascus, confronts the socio-economic realities of young people living in Beirut in 2010. Interested in mediated representations of the past, the younger generation is left with a contested disjuncture between space as lived, conceived and perceived (Lefevbre, 1991). Based on an assessment of discrepancies in expectations that is grounded in the multiplicities of mediated and situated experiences, this generalization can be complicated

through a generational perspective. In the subsection below, I introduce two older informants, Samira and Huda, who, unlike the younger generation, shared a nuanced view of the past.

6.5. Beyond *Bab al-Hara*

> Times have changed. Life's requirements were much simpler. Nowadays, if a woman stays at home, she will complain and make demands… and the salary of an employee is fixed, and she needs to fix her hair and do her nails. If the salary of a young man is, say one million Lebanese Lira a month (approximately 660 USD), and if he needs to pay the electricity bills etc., you do the calculations. If they have a child, then it is much more difficult, how would they manage? And not all employees have social security and health insurance. There is no evenness between what you earn and the cost of living. In the past, I used to work and earn enough to give my mother and to live and go out and buy clothes and save aside. Now the rent is more than what you earn per month. How is this possible? Where is justice? Is this right? This is not right. But what can a person do? That is why women are working now or else how would they manage? Only the rich are able to buy and be satisfied and do what they want, and if you come back to us, we are no longer middle class, there is no longer a middle class, the sheltered (*masturin*) are those who have owned their houses for a long time. God protected them, and they eat with what they earn. Before, my mother used to be at home and my grandmother used to be at home, and I am not very old and my aunt was at home, not everyone had education, and when a woman received a marriage proposal she would consider her new house to be her veil or shelter (*sutra*) and, without education a man's income was enough to raise a family.   (Samira, 2010)[108]

Samira (born 1967), like Nadia and Nader, linked *Bab al-Hara* and its gender roles to a socio-economic question: how are people making do with their lives? I met Samira in Rawda. She was sitting with her sister, her friend and her sister's daughter and fiancé. Samira was the only woman with a head cover and black *ʾabaya* (cloak) on the table. After our café encounter, I visited her few times in her house in Beirut. During my first visit, she opened the door wearing a white silk baby-doll and invited me into the sitting room where

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[108] Samira, interview with the author, Beirut 7th September, 2010.

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the image of Saad Hariri, the son of the assassinated ex-prime minister Rafik Hariri, sat atop the television set. Samira lived in Saudi Arabia for ten years before moving to Beirut with her three children while her husband continued to live in Saudi Arabia. Samira is not employed. She donned the veil around twenty two years ago while in Saudi Arabia. Her family has Syrian and Palestinian roots. Her paternal grandparents moved from Hama in Syria to Lebanon before Lebanese independence in 1942. Her dad was born in Beirut, as a Lebanese citizen. Samira visited Syria often, but it had been six or seven years since she last visited. She did not attribute the waning of her visits to the political tension between the two countries following the assassination of Hariri, but to the marriage of her eldest daughter and the various financial constraints it engendered. Her daughter fell in love with a young man in the neighbourhood and both of them worked hard and saved up in order to be able to "open a house" in one of Beirut's suburbs. Samira did not finish her secondary education, and her life philosophy is that education is very important, but not sufficient. She encouraged her two eldest children to work while studying at private universities in order to help with the tuition fees and to become life-tested (*madʿukin)*. She valued general culture and continuous learning and preferred that her married daughter remained a working woman in order to preserve financial independence from her husband. She argued that families who used to be middle or lower-middle class were barely surviving until the end of the month.[109]

Samira was not impressed with Muʿtaz and she watched *Bab al-Hara* as a result of her neighbour's pressure. When her husband and his male friends joked and imitated the *Bab al-Hara* accent and asked their wives to learn from the series how a woman should behave and treat her husband, Samira would tell them to "buzz off".[110] Samira did not express any need to negotiate further the pressure to perform as a woman that is imagined by *Bab al-Hara*. Her kids were already mature and she was not dependent upon pleasing her husband. The social relations in Samira's home cannot be compared to those existing between young women and men in their early twenties. It is difficult to generalize, based on those young generation that I met, that Muʿtaz is the ideal masculine character for an

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[109] UN ESCWA report states that "between 2000 and 2010, inequality between the 'rich', calculated using national final household expenditure, and other population classes, based on household consumption expenditure, increased in Arab countries. This implies that the share of national income commanded by the middle class, the poor and the vulnerable declined over time." (2014: 61).

[110] *Bawja'a* is the colloquial Damascene word used to describe the popular Damascene accent used by majority of *Bab al-Hara* characters and still in use in certain neighbourhoods or socio-economic groups in Damascus.

entire generation. It is safe to say, however, that most of the older generation considered Muʿtaz to be a dramatization of manhood, where the performance of masculinity is focused on physical strength. Similarly to Samira, Huda (born 1936) preferred the characters of Abu Issam (Seasons 1 to 3) and Abu Hatem (Season 5). Abu Issam specifically reminded Huda of her father, and this memory did not evoke emotions alone, but also a critique of how men used to be.

The situated experience of Huda's struggle, with the support of her mother, to change her university specialization to English literature without informing her father, who wanted her to study a scientific subject, is not part of *Bab al-Hara*'s representations. Huda recalled how her father attended the university play in which she acted, but did not say a word of encouragement afterwards. Huda continued to negotiate the limits with her father, and later with her husband, who could not force her into a mould. Older generation women expressed admiration for, but also criticised the "man" Abu Issam or Abu Hatem construct as being ideal. Interestingly, Huda, similarly to the young women discussed above, argued that men like her father "no longer exist".[111]

Huda, a Lebanese citizen born in Palestine, is one of the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who were forced to flee their homes in the wake of the establishment of Israel in 1948. She was twelve years old when her family escaped their hometown, Yafa, to finally settle in the Ras Beirut area, a five-minute walk from Rawda. Huda's upper-middle class family owned pharmacies and enjoyed relatives and acquaintances in Lebanon. Huda's class privilege did not protect her from experiencing the pain of forced exile. "Even if we had another house, moving from one house to another, it was still very difficult, the way you are looked upon.... Who leaves their house, loses their status", she stressed.[112] The neighbourhood alleys of *Bab al-Hara* reminded Huda of her grandfather's old two-storey house in Ramleh, Palestine, where her eldest uncle used to live.[113] The following is an excerpt from what she liked and did not like about *Bab al-Hara*:

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[111] Huda, interview with the author, Beirut 29th September, 2010.
[112] Proverb: Who loses their house, loses their standing (status). مثل شعبي عامّي: من خسر (او خرج من او ترك) داره قلّ مقداره
[113] Ramleh is a city in historic Palestine. It is located on the road between Yafa and Jerusalem. It was occupied by the Israeli forces on 11th July, 1948.

... [I like] the way they make a community in the neighbourhood and people become responsible for each other. What inspires me is how people help each other, even though this help crosses certain limits. I mean, they want to marry this girl to this man, and they not only offer help but also interfere in issues. In addition, they do care that no outsider infiltrates the hara so as not to cause harm, but amongst them were people who were causing harm.... There is a lot of social pressure in *Bab al-Hara*. If you want to help, you will end up imposing your way.... Everything has a price. One day, we may go back to the extended family and everyone living in the same house. The way houses were built did not allow privacy.... Sometimes I wish we had a similar neighbourhood to theirs, that there were people I could go to in times of need, but, of course I don't want to be forced into an arranged marriage. (Huda, 2010)[114]

Huda's critical view of the "lost community" lies in her personal experience of sharing her house with her husband's family after his early death caused by a heart attack. Huda lived with her mother-in-law and brother-in-law for years and her experience led her to question the utopia of the extended family that is constructed by *Bab al-Hara*, and to criticise how it affects the life of a woman. Huda's compromised privacy in her own house exposed the paradoxes of a discourse that advocates familial solidarity. Contrary to Dalal (Anahid Fayad), Abu Issam's daughter in *Bab al-Hara*, lost her husband, Ibrahim, and lived with her widowed mother-in-law, Huda lost control of her private domestic sphere only to gain the chance to focus on her career as a secondary private school English teacher. The premature death of the husband settled battles that might have been looming. The husband argued that if Huda went back to work (she used to work before becoming a mother), people would talk about him as being unable to provide for, and financially satisfy, his wife. Huda emphasized, "I would have fought to be equal and to make him realize I am equal. I was always slightly the rebellious type. I would have become an equal in the man's mind. You need to change the attitude; you need to change the point of view".[115] In 2010, Huda had been living alone for years. Her two children were long married and while her son lived in Beirut, her daughter lived with her family abroad. Since her retirement, Huda has spent an extensive amount of time at home. She enjoyed being in her house after she had spent a lot of time outside during her working years. Staying at home introduced

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[114] Huda, interview with the author, Beirut 22nd September, 2010.
[115] Huda, interview with the author, Beirut 17th September, 2010.

Huda to watching the Syrian television series that she picked up after following a number of Turkish drama series dubbed into Syrian dialect. Huda's construction of the past is not an idealization.

6.4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored the consumption of morality through the case of the Q/ahwat al-Rawda context of *Bab al-Hara* viewing during Ramadan, 2010. I studied viewership in the café to explore the moral constructions so as to understand the renegotiation of the meanings of masculinity and femininity and the nuanced readings of the workings of mediated experiences in public space. The older generation of *Bab al-Hara* viewers who I met did not construct the past as moral, but merged autobiographical anecdotes with selected elements of *Bab al-Hara* in order to comment on the present. Similarly to the younger generation, they wove the real (situated) and unreal (mediated) together, not to tell a coherent moral story, but rather to flag up the contradictions and injustices that legitimate masculine domination. The older generation questioned the past, as it was constructed through *Bab al-Hara*, as a moral utopia. Age and situated experience are major factors that influence the viewing of a television drama which is set in the past. More so than older men, older women opposed the construction of the past as legitimating conservative gendered moral values. This critical position on *Bab al-Hara*, influenced by age and gender, however, does not translate into a critique of the politics and socio-economics of moralization during Ramadan. The generational critique, albeit based on a restricted number of informants, thus prevents a generalisation that reads *Bab al-Hara* as strictly advocating a moral past. The older generation introduces a nuance between what the younger generation saw as a simple and economically less exploitative past and a male privileged past. Younger informants, not having lived with the likes of Abu Issam and Abu Hatem, as their fathers and mothers before them did, did not separate economic communitarianism from male domination. In fact, Nadia debated whether a comfortable economic life is only available to women within the old patriarchal system. In general, the younger generation idealized the past as if it were void of oppression and evaluated the present based on an expectation of a future that gains its inspiration from a mythic moral past that is free of power dynamics, while the older generation revealed the oppression they witnessed in the past. In the next chapter, I juxtapose *Bab al-Hara*'s idealization of

unity with the informants' articulations on sectarianism between Beirut and Damascus, 2010.

Chapter 7

HOME UNDER SIEGE: THE THREAT OF SECTARIANISM FROM WITHIN

On the evening after the street clashes, Rawda went back to its normal Ramadan mood. The manager, Muhammad expected the café to need three to four days to pick up regularity, but it was pretty crowded for a Wednesday. I met friends of my parents, who were sitting at a table behind the screen amongst the greenery, but who were not interested in watching Bab el Hara. I interviewed three young men for the first time before *Bab al-Hara* started. I engaged Nizar in a conversation while sitting with the young men on the adjacent table. I found them rude in the way they talked to Nizar, a much older man. I then observed them from my table. Each of the guys ordered a *muʿassal* (honeyed) argileh and drank Fanta. They shared French Fries and watched *Bab al-Hara* while using their phones extensively to chat. One of them was checking out every passing woman, the same one who told me all women are now indecent. They ordered the bill 15 minutes before *Bab al-Hara* ended, paid and waited till the last scene before leaving – fast. Nizar asked for the bill after the episode was over. He had his regular argileh with heavy *ʿajami* (non-Arab, or Persian) style tobacco, with a small bottle of water and coffee. Nizar preferred ʿajami tobacco to muʿassal, where the tobacco leaves are mixed with a fruit or vegetable flavour and sugar. Nizar explained that the sugar with the tobacco makes the oesophagus as black as a car exhaust. When I joined his table, we exchanged opinions and stories about what had happened the day before. He called the men engaging in the fights *zuʿran* (thugs or yobs), then analysed the incident as a sign of conflict between Syria and Iran, since one of the fighting groups was linked to Syria and the other to Iran.

While in Rawda, I did not ask any personal questions on sectarian belonging or background. The information, however, always came unrequested. Most people I met disclosed their sectarian identifications and were comfortable to ask me about mine after trying to relocate me within the political map of Lebanon. One of the young men I met that day, told me that he was in love with a woman from another sect. His friend commented that the men from their sect are marrying women from the other sect, but the men from the other sect are not marrying women from their sect. He asked a question: who will marry the women of our sect? His friend answered that he changed after falling

in love with his girlfriend. Similar discussions expressing the fixity, porousness and malleability of the borders defining the in-group and the out-group were recurrent. In this chapter, I build on the interviews I conducted in Rawda to identify how the ideal of unity is implicated in everyday life in Beirut. I then move to Damascus, 2010, to explore the *Bab al-Hara* rhetoric on unity through the fictional character of the traitor, and the rationalisations of the actor who personifies the character. By juxtaposing the rhetoric on unity between the text and its circulation among its makers in Damascus and viewers in Beirut, I trace the similarities and differences in how this notion is used to manage sectarianism.

I start in Beirut, Rawda, where I explore the manifest sectarian discourse through encounters with four interlocutors. I introduce Nizar, from the older generation, and continue the conversation with the young men, Hassane, Adam and Nader. I explore how *Bab al-Hara* constructs an imagined unity between Arabs, believed by some Lebanese to be representative of the Syrian regime and/or people. I then move to the Syrian capital before the upheaval, to learn through the interplay between the fictional character of the traitor, Ma'moun Beik, and the life experience of the *Bab al-Hara* star who played the traitor, and the underlying sectarian discourse that only became obvious a few months later with the start of the upheaval. I argue that the *Bab al-Hara* binary: unity/sectarianism, is manifest in real life politics in Beirut and Damascus. By juxtaposing sectarianism with unity in *Bab al-Hara* and within conversations in Beirut and Damascus, I trace how it constitutes a dominant frame that limits the understanding of sectarianism and politics. The idealization of unity serves political power through its ability to contribute to controlling dissent but, it has its limits. The symbolic value of unity within a protected collectivity is not enough to manage the manifest problem that renders each person within this collectivity a potential suspect.

7.1. Resisting Sectarianism

Based on Makdisi, I understand sectarianism in Lebanon, beginning in the 19th century context, as a modern rupture, or as the "birth of a new culture that singled out religious affiliation as the defining public and political characteristic of the modern subject and citizen" (2000: 174). This view of sectarianism as a modern expression that is situated in a historical experience, contradicts the official nationalist narrative that perceives

sectarianism "as an illegitimate and divisive force, more [of] a deviancy" (2000: 166). To explain the culture of sectarianism in the Lebanese context, Makdisi argues that it depends on two myths: "a myth of communal homogeneity – that there is such a thing as a Maronite or a Druze nation that can or should be represented – and on a myth of traditional religious tolerance and harmony" (2000: 163-164). *Bab al-Hara* adopts both myths: that of traditional religious tolerance and harmony, and the myth of communal homogeneity. The drama's situatedness in the Mandate period, leads it to reproduce the colonial encounter, where Ma'moun Beik is an expression of the colonial power, and Umm Joseph is an expression of religious tolerance. In this historical narrative, clear boundaries are drawn between the harmonious 'us' and the foreign 'them', who are responsible for introducing sectarian divisions. The view of sectarianism as a divisive force is the subtext of *Bab al-Hara*'s representation of unity.

In contrast to *Bab al-Hara*, where the plot revolves around the patriotic insider versus the foreign outsider and the traitor as foreign, the precariousness of everyday life in Beirut is explained through the sectarian frames of one group against another, where each group claims patriotism and accuses the other group of treason. An analysis of the discourses before and after the violent street clashes in Beirut (described in Chapter 6, above) reveals a continual shift between a sectarian explanation of reality, a public bashing of sectarianism, and a call for unity. In Beirut, public expressions of sectarian identifications, although often confronted as being inappropriate, are permissible and constitutive of the regime of rule. Violent street clashes, even after being resolved, continue to provide spaces for discussions that are based on a mix of sectarian and political power struggles.

The history of the formation of the Syrian state diverges from that of Lebanon. While both territories knew the Ottoman millet system and the French Mandate, the Syrian decolonisation process challenged the six sectarian states that were established by the French between 1920 and 1936. They lost the province of Alexandretta to Turkey, and succeeded in forming a unity of the four states: Damascus, Aleppo, Druze Mountain and 'Alawites Mountains. The State of Greater Lebanon gained its independence to become the State of Lebanon, established on the principles of confessional democracy. The Syrian State, after years of coups, fell under the rule of the Ba'th Party in 1966, leading it to adopt an Arab nationalist ideology. In the official nationalist Arab discourse, sectarianism is

understood as an extension of colonial "divide and rule" and is, therefore, an act of treason against patriotic loyalty.

In Syria, before 2011, sectarian discourse in public was regarded as a taboo and was legally considered to weaken nationalist sentiments: an act of patriotic betrayal. Sectarian identifications and politics among citizens were prevalent in the private domain and in closed circles of trust. Sectarianism was not used publicly to manage or explain political conflict, but was used privately to refute official patriotism and calls for unity. Hajj Saleh (2015), similarly to Makdisi (2000), understands sectarianism in Syria as being a modern phenomenon of power and social privilege, an instrument of rule, and the result of certain political policies. He analyses the Syrian state as a dual formation: an "overt" public non-sectarian state, and a "covert" private sectarian state (2012: para. 34). He regards sectarianism to be absent at the level of the powerless, "overt" state, where "Syrian publicness" is based on "national unity" and claims that to understand the uses of sectarianism one needs to look at the power dynamics at the level of the "covert" state (2012: para 30-37). Hinnebusch (2012) explains how sectarianism played a mobilising role in the construction of a fierce opposition among Nasserites, Islamists and Liberals to the army-party's symbiosis during Hafiz al-Asad's rule. He adds that during Bashar al-Asad's rule, sectarian networks filled gaps and constituted an alternative to state structures that had been weakened as a result of economic reforms that aimed to integrate Syria into global capitalism. The role of Arabism in constituting the "main basis of cohesion," thus consolidating linkages between the Syrians belonging to various groups or sects, and legitimising the regime, faced a serious paradox during Bashar al-Asad's rule (2012: 96). Hinnebusch questions the possibility of reconciling an Arab Nationalist identity, advancing a nationalist foreign policy and a populist social contract, together with the requisites of integrating Syria into the world economy. He describes this conundrum (2012: 111):

> If at the end of 2010 Syria had managed to escape from its international isolation, by late 2011 not only was it isolated from the West, but the alignments with Turkey and the Gulf that had allowed it to evade the western embargo in 2005 were now in tatters. Indeed, a new 'struggle for Syria' was under way; Syria is the pivotal Arab state, and when it is united, as under Hafiz al-Asad, it becomes a regional player able to punch well above its weight; when it is divided, as now, it becomes an arena for the struggle of external forces, all seeking to shift, through it, the regional

balance of power in their favour. Currently at stake is the balance between the pro-western Sunni axis and the Shi'i-leavened 'Resistance Axis', especially after opposition spokesman Burhan Ghallioun said a post-Asad government would break with Iran and Hizbullah.[116]

Within this multi-layered, highly charged reality, where the local, the regional and the global are inseparable, and where the sectarian rhetoric is emotionally charged with resentment and nourished with narratives of historical injustices and media incitement,[117] I approach Makdisi's (2000) analysis as an analytical frame within which to juxtapose *Bab al-Hara's* idealization of unity with the sectarian rhetoric that I encountered between Beirut and Damascus, 2010.

7.2. Encountering *Bab al-Hara* in Beirut: Between Unity and Sectarianism

I joined Nizar (born 1939) to watch *Bab al-Hara*, in Rawda on the 15th night of Ramadan, the evening after the violent clashes (described in the introduction to Chapter 6). Nizar was born in Beirut to Syrian parents, and received his Lebanese citizenship in 1971 (at the age of 32). Nizar had family in Damascus, however, he had not visited Damascus in years.[118] Nizar was an active member of the Arab Nationalist Movement until it was dissolved in 1969 to form the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). He did not join the PFLP, but he remained fond of its leaders: Dr. George Habash, Dr. Wadi' Haddad, and the writer/journalist Ghassan Kanafani. Nizar defined himself as a Nasserist and still carried a keychain with the face of Abdel Nasser inscribed on a half Egyptian pound (*Gineh*). I observed Nizar in Rawda on more than half of the Ramadan nights, sitting alone, smoking his argileh and watching *Bab al-Hara*. Twice, he was accompanied by his daughter's family, and a third time with his extended family, including his wife. That evening, they brought him a cake and after he blew out the candles, he turned his back on them and faced the screen to watch *Bab al-Hara*. Nizar explained the reason that he watched *Bab al-Hara* in Rawda by using the proverb "I would not set a foot in heaven

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[116] Burhan Ghalioun is a Syrian/French professor of political sociology at the University of Paris III, the author of a number of books and a long time oppositional intellectual to the Syrian regime. He took on a political leadership position as the first Chairman (August, 2011, until June, 2012) of the oppositional Syrian National Council (SNC) that had been founded in Turkey.

[117] For more on the role of media in inciting sectarianism, an example is the thesis by Valentine, Colin (2014) *Sectarianism in Arab Media: An Analysis of Al-Arabiya and Al-Jazeera Narratives in Syria, Iraq and Arabia*. Princeton University.

[118] Please check Chapter 4 for more on Nizar's cousin and brother-in-law in Damascus.

if it is devoid of people."[119] Meaning that being alone, even if in heaven, is not pleasurable. I learnt, with time that his wife, who was still working, slept very early and left him alone during the Ramadan evenings. Nizar was retired and spent his days meeting friends in cafés, visiting family members and following drama series. His two single young sons lived and worked in the Gulf.

Whenever we met, we discussed both *Bab al-Hara* and politics. On various occasions, he insisted that Lebanon is in danger and that it should be independent of all regional and global axes. He said he was feeling more Lebanese that he had twenty years ago. Nizar's analysis of the political situation led to a discourse on *Beirutiness* that translates to giving priority to the "original" inhabitants of Beirut. This Beirut includes Sunni Muslims, Christians and a number of Shiite Muslim families, but excludes Shiites who migrated internally or who were displaced to Beirut during the 1975-1990 wars. Similarly to Qaabour and Hassane's discourse on *Beirutiness,* Nizar was sensitive to the use of sectarian framings. His use of "us the Sunnis," accusing "them," Hizbullah, was framed as an objection to political injustice, rather than as an expression of an anti-Shiite sentiment, or an essentialist presentation of all Shiites. When wanting to comment on the Shiite/Sunni divide, he went back to the times of the Imam Ali Ibn Abi Talib and the Caliph Umar Bin al-Khattab to dismiss any enmity between them. He told me stories idealizing the times of the Rashidun Caliphs (the Righteous) and the strong character of Umar. He chose to go back to living during Umar's times, had he the chance to travel in time.

In all our discussions, Nizar took a political that was position critical of the "Syrians." In Arabic, the term Syrians might be understood as the Syrian people but, on getting to know him, it was clear that he meant the Syrian authorities. Nizar's disagreement with the "Syrians" went back to 1961, a time long before the current regime, when unity with Egypt was broken and the United Arab Republic failed to exist. He was among those who refused the separation, and his ex-comrades "put his name on the border" which meant that whenever he tried to legally cross the borders, the security officers would take him in for interrogation. Since then, he has been smuggled into Damascus, illegally, only once.

When I asked Nizar about the differences between Lebanon and Syria, he answered that in every family there is an older brother who gets to have a bigger share of everything.

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[119] Proverb translated by author. Original in Arabic: "الجنة من غير ناس ما بتنداس"

Moving away from direct politics, *Bab al-Hara* was Nizar's doorway into remembering the generosity and nobility of the Syrian people who had hosted him and his friends in their houses when they went, in many full busses, to attend Abdel Nasser's visit to Damascus in 1958. He recalled the pride in being Arab that he felt during that period. He compared it to the sense of chivalry he noticed in *Bab al-Hara*. Nizar affirmed that it is possible to still find *Bab al-Hara*-like popular neighbourhoods in certain parts of contemporary Damascus. However, *Bab al-Hara*-like neighbourhoods only existed in the pre-war Beirut of his memories, when q/abadayat were a prominent feature of the everyday.[120] In 2010, Nizar identified more with being Lebanese than with being Syrian or Arab, but his discourse on being Lebanese did not contradict with his being Arab. He also raised political criticism against big sister Syria, whom he accused of wanting to liberate its land through Lebanon:[121]

> In the past, there were problems between the neighbourhoods in Damascus, some of them might turn bloody, as you saw with Abu al-Nar in previous *Bab al-Hara* episodes.[122] But when the story became that of a confrontation with the French, they united. Us too, when our struggle is with Israel in the south, all the people unite with the resistance, whether the national or Islamic resistance, but when the resistance and its arms move to Beirut, it all changes.[123] … *Bab al-Hara* reminds me of my nostalgia for Arabism and the lifestyle in Damascus. Arabism, to me, means unity. Arab unity is the only solution to all the problems of the Arabs. … *Bab al-Hara* grants me this feeling of nationalism and Arabism, since I am an Arabist, who believes in the Arab and national cause, and the pride associated with it. When you have a young man like Muʿtaz, who becomes the leader of the neighbourhood and joins the rebels in Ghuta and takes leadership roles there, this is an expression of national sentiments.[124]

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[120] Please see footnote 53.

[121] Nizar, interview with the author, Beirut 21st September, 2010.

[122] It is important to note here that Nizar's cousin in Damascus insisted that the *Bab al-Hara* fights between neighbourhoods are exaggerations and were not a common feature of Damascene life between the 20s and 40s. Nizar, although born to Syrian parents, has family in Damascus and has visited the city a few times, has no situated experience of the historical phase.

[123] By the national resistance he means the Lebanese National Resistance Front, and by the Islamic resistance he means Hizbullah. The resistance and its arms' move to Beirut signals the May, 2008, political conflict, which resulted in the 7th May Hizbullah military control over Beirut. For more information, please see Crisis Group (2008) Lebanon: Hizbollah's Weapons Turn Inward. *Middle East Briefing.* No23. 15 May. [Online] Available from: http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq %20Syria%20Lebanon/Lebanon/b23_lebanon_hizbollahs_weapons_turn_inward.ashx [Accessed 1st May, 2015].

[124] In the wake of the Great Syrian Revolt against the French Mandatory Power in 1925, rebels from across

Nizar situates himself as a supporter, but not as a member, of the Future Movement and the 14th of March alliance in Lebanon.[125] He regards them as being reflective of a Lebanese national line that wishes to be independent from Iran and the US. He does not mention anything about their relationship to Saudi Arabia, except in passing, when telling a story about Saad Harriri. Nizar's nostalgia for Arabism, enforces his analysis of Iran and the USA as being potentially harmful to the Arabs. He perceives *Bab al-Hara* as being symbolic of Arab unity, which stands at the polar opposite of sectarian conflict. Nizar is critical of Iran and Hizbullah, but situates himself at the defensive, and confirms that he will emigrate, if a Sunni-Shi'i violent conflict erupts in Lebanon. His description of the role of the external enemy in building unity, and the comparison between *Bab al-Hara* and the Lebanese war with Israel is interesting. Nizar differentiates between popular and political élite will. He argues that the resistance in *Bab al-Hara* is not organised party politics but popular insurgency that is motivated by the *nakhwa* (gallantry). Nizar, fully aware of geopolitics, still expects military resistance to hold an uncorrupted popular unitarian dimension. His worldview does not fit within a sectarian or unitarian dichotomy. He moves between both drawing arguments from Arab nationalism and the Sunni sense of injustice to prove his point. What is important for us here, are two points: the first, that *Bab al-Hara* is evaluated as an example of a desired unity; the second that the sectarian dimension falls within a complex regional and global political scene. Sectarianism, in this case, is not solely a political arrangement devised to rule Lebanon, but is a continuously perfected tool that succeeds in fragmenting the region. In this case of Nizar, an ex-Arab nationalist, *Bab al-Hara* provides an emotional compensation for a lost Arab nationalism, but can it provide an alternative to its institutions and ideology? To put it differently, can the rhetoric on unity constitute a solution to a structural void? Nizar mentioned that the Camp David Accords constituted the moment when he lost faith in politics. I now move to the younger generation, who were born twenty-two years after the Egyptian President, Sadat, addressed the Israeli Knesset on November 20th, 1977.

Syria controlled the Ghuta, or the lowland around Damascus. They tried to seize Damascus in October, however, the French bombarded Damascus, killing hundreds of people and destroying whole neighbourhoods, thus preventing the rebels' control over Damascus. In 1926, the French army initiated a military campaign to pacify the rebels. The Syrian Great Revolt ended in 1927. For more information, please see Neep Daniel (2012) *Occupying Syria under the French Mandate: Insurgency, Space and State Formation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[125] The Future Movement is a liberal political party, founded by Rafiq Harriri. After Harriri's assassination in 2005, his son Saad was selected as president, and his nephew, Ahmad, as secretary general. The 14th of March Alliance, is named after the date of the mass demonstrations that took place on the one month memorial of Harriri's assassination. The alliance brings together a number of political parties and independent figures who advocate Lebanon's independence from the Syria-Iran axis.

7.3. Negotiating Sectarianism

It was common to hear Beiruti informants talking about Syrian people as being family, even when criticizing the Syrian regime. It was less common, however, to hear political criticism from the younger generation, who seemed to be less politically committed and more cynical in regards to the shifting stances of Lebanese political élites on Syria. Hassane, a frequent Rawda client, (introduced in Chapter 6), participated in the 14th of March protest, requesting the Syrian army to withdraw from Lebanon in 2005, following the assassination of the Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafik Hariri. He stated that his antagonism towards the Syrian state ended with its military withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005. The following is an excerpt from an interview I conducted with Hassane (born 1990):[126]

> I was raised in an environment that is away from politics. My dad is not interested in political topics. He thinks it is trivial, especially as in Lebanon most politicians ridicule the people who keep electing them. … Lebanon is sectarian. In *Bab al-Hara* they are all one colour. Umm Joseph played the most beautiful role.[127] … Umm Joseph's role is very powerful and it empowers the position of Christian women by giving her a central role. In many drama series, they forget the role of the Christians and this is wrong. Like there were Muslims with the revolution [against the Mandate], there were also Christians with the revolution. … *Bab al-Hara* alone won't change people's perceptions, because there is just one character, but there should be more than one character. In earlier seasons, we met her relative, Abu Youssef, who died. He played a beautiful role and helped the neighbourhood. … I am observing the way people around me, at work and in my entourage, are behaving, everyone is going back to his/her sect and this is very wrong. … When someone needs a service, he will need to go back to his sect, if he wants to get married, he will go back to the sect, sometimes even if he wants to date, he only dates from within his sect. We should have surpassed this, but it has come back, as you have seen on the 7th May, it all came back. … I have no problem marrying someone outside my sect.[128]

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[126] Hassane, interview with the author, Beirut 23rd August, 2010.
[127] The character was criticized in the press as an exaggeration, see Soueileh (2010).
[128] Hassane similarly to Nizar, mentioned the 7th May as a turning point. Hinnenbusch considers that "Hezbollah's 2008 power play in Beirut demonstrated the futility of trying to isolate Syria and broke the

In this interview, Hassane situated himself as non-sectarian and blamed others for their sectarian practices. He positively evaluated the Muslim-Christian unity that *Bab al-Hara* constructs, and he emphasized the need for additional expressions of unity. He described sectarianism as being newly on the rise, linked to the past, but contextualised in the politics of the present. He considered sectarianism and sectarian marginalisation to be immoral. In a later interview, Hassane was joined by his good friend, Adam (introduced in Chapter 6). In this encounter, Hassane's views shifted from being anti-sectarian, to speaking against Hizbullah as a sign of Shiite power, and disagreeing with Adam on the position of Beirut as a city for all its dwellers, or for Beirutis only. Beirut's dwellers include a growing number of Shiite, while Beirutis are mainly expected to be Sunnis and Christians, with a smaller number of Shiites. Hassane told me the story of internal migration from the south to Beirut by sharing his grandmother's anecdote explaining to him that they helped those coming with their economic hardships but that their help did not seem to obliterate the bitterness of economic injustices. Although Hassane shared many elements of his opinion with that of the 14th of March political alliance in Lebanon, his position remained difficult to package within one rhetoric. For example, he criticised Lebanon as being sectarian and he evaluated the official Arab nationalist ideology of Syria as being an advantage. He considered *Bab al-Hara* to be a warning for "unaware" Arabs that there is "danger at the door" and regarded the Arab identity as being the countermeasure to sectarianism:[129]

> **Hassane:** You feel it in Syria if you have lived or visited, you feel that they are more Arab nationalists than we are. We do not have Arab nationalism. First of all, because of the many sects, and sects mean political sectarianism. They do not have political sectarianism. You feel that Bashar al-Asad alone is the ruler, and you feel the Syrian Arab nationalism. We, on the other hand, each one of us, have our foreign belonging. ...
>
> **Adam:** *Bab al-Hara* Season 4 was emulating Gaza under siege, and I think it also spoke of the Lebanese context, because Season 5 was about the story of traitors in Lebanon.

Hassane: I think *Bab al-Hara* hints at Hizbullah before they interfered in politics in 2000. Before they interfered in politics, everyone supported them.[130] In *Bab al-Hara*, they do not interfere in politics. That is why I do not compare the Ghuta rebels to Hizbullah.[131]...

Adam: There is a saying by Abdel Nasser: What is taken by force is only gained back by force.

Hassane: But what is our force to theirs?

Adam: It is the least we can do. In Algeria they lost one million martyrs. Sunnis are falling between two mentalities, one that resists Israel and another that accepts Israel. Between Hizbullah and the Lebanese Forces. The Lebanese Forces have no problem in coexisting with Israel.[132]

The young men linked *Bab al-Hara* plots to the Palestinian question at the two levels of Gaza under Israeli siege and the internal Lebanese conflict over its position on the issue of Palestine. They evaluated *Bab al-Hara*'s politics of unity as being Arab nationalist and thus Syrian, and juxtaposed it to sectarianism in Lebanon. *Bab al-Hara*'s representation of the Syrian anti-colonial rebels of the Ghuta led to a discussion on Hizbullah and resistance, as a useful tactic in which Abdel Nasser and the national liberation struggle in Algeria were used by Adam to strengthen his argument in favour of resistance. It is interesting that Adam used an Arab nationalist political motto that was countered with Hassane's pragmatic question on the Arabs' real power to confront Israel. The two university friends did not fight and they managed their political disagreements. None of them seemed ready to lose the other over this debate. Both, however, described

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[130] Hizbullah is a Lebanese political party that was officially founded in 1985. It currently holds 12 seats in the Lebanese parliament. Its ideology is based on Islam, and the majority of its members are Shi'a Muslims. Hizbulla's military wing has participated in military resistance activities against the Israeli occupation of Lebanon since 1982, until its withdrawal in 2000. As a result of Rafiq Hariri's assassination in 2005, Hizbullah became part of what was known as the 8th March Pro-Syria Coalition. During February, 2006, they signed a memorandum of understanding with the Free Patriotic Movement, a majority Christian Party that is the rival to the Lebanese Forces, thus enforcing a sharp horizontal division of pro- and anti-Syria within the Lebanon. For more information on Hizbullah see Saad-Ghorayeb (2002) and Harb (2011).

[131] Please see footnote 125.

[132] "Lebanese Forces" was established as the umbrella coalition of the Christian fighting militias under the lead of Bachir Gemayel in 1976, at the beginning of the Lebanese civil war. These militias were the military wings of Christian parties that were coordinated under the Lebanese Front. The Lebanese Forces participated in the civil war in alliance with Israel until the assassination of Bachir Gemayel in 1982. The Lebanese Forces, under the leadership of Samir Geagea, continued to participate in the Lebanese war until its end in 1990, when it was registered as a Lebanese party. The Lebanese Forces Party was banned between 1994 and 2005 and Geagea was charged and sentenced to life in prison. He was released in 2005, and the party currently holds 8 of the 128 seats in parliament. For more information, please visit LebaneseForces.com [Accessed 20th January, 2015].

sectarianism as being the polar opposite to Arab nationalism, and they used *Bab al-Hara* to discuss regional politics. The young men, similarly to the older generation, read *Bab al-Hara* as a symbol of unity that is present in the Arab past, and specifically in Syria, which stands in opposition to political sectarianism in Lebanon. The construction of "unity" and "sectarianism" as being dichotomous kept recurring in *Bab al-Hara* and in the discussions at Rawda.

The two young friends also allow us to read the continuities they share with the older generation. It is as though Hassane carries the political cynicism, while Adam carries the Arab nationalist sentiments, expressed by Nizar. What is interesting is that Hassane is usually the one who convinces his friends to watch *Bab al-Hara*. Hassane, although critical of an Arab Nationalist rhetoric and abiding more closely to a liberal worldview, is still interested in a drama series that he identifies as advocating Arab identity and unity in times of sectarianism and political unrest. I would like to propose here that ideological inclinations are not the main factors influencing a person's choice to watch *Bab al-Hara*. I deduced that viewers share the reading of *Bab al-Hara* as a historical materialisation of unity. None of the viewers was critical of the two myths raised by Makdisi (2000). Communal homogeneity and traditional religious tolerance and harmony were used to explain the past and the present. Now I move to Damascus, to juxtapose the *Bab al-Hara* imagined unity, not only with what is said, but also with what is not said.

7.4. "Acting" *Bab al-Hara* in Damascus: The Politics of Suspicion

Who wants to defy, this neighbourhood is beyond challenge, with its hearths' fires protected and borders safeguarded, its people courageous and patient, the collaborators insulted and humiliated and the traitor punished by God, the traitor punished by God, God God God.[133]

Last Verse of the *Bab al-Hara* Opening Song

I recorded in my field notes the lyrics of the last verse of *Bab al-Hara*'s opening song before going to meet Fayez Kazak, a famous Syrian actor and theatre director who played the role of the villain, Lieutenant Nimr/Ma'moun Beik, in *Bab al-Hara*. I start by describing the fictitious character Lieutenant Nimr, who is central to Season 5 and to the way *Bab al-Hara* constructs unity in the face of a traitor from within. Lieutenant Nimr is a Syrian local collaborator who served in the French army and was entrusted with becoming a field agent or a spy under the false identity of Ma'moun Beik, or Abu Kamel, to infiltrate the *Bab al-Hara* neighbourhood named Dabʿ.[134] Lieutenant Nimr's mission, as Ma'moun, was to implement the French plan to weaken the neighbourhood through urban planning and engineering. Ma'moun, on the official records, was born in Syria as the nephew of late Abu Saleh (the beloved leader of the neighbourhood), and emigrated as a child, with his family, to a non-specified location. Upon his "return," Nimr, as Ma'moun Beik, pretends to have enjoyed financial success as an expatriate, and uses money given to him by the French to ensure a major leadership role in the neighbourhood. Ma'moun is welcomed by the senior male members of the neighbourhood, treated as an insider, and allowed access to his uncle's house and to marrying his widowed cousin, Feryal (Wafaa Mousalli), thus gaining access to her family inheritance. Only one old resident of the neighbourhood

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[133] يا أهل المروه والعزه والكرامه والطيبه والنخوه والشرف والشهامه. ننسى الأيام الصعبه والمحبه تلم جراحنا والدنيا بتضحك لما منضحك بتزين أفراحنا. ورد وبحرى ولارنجي، أحلى الأسامي، زينة الحاره فرجه، الياسمين الشامي. النذل بيزرع فتنه يحصد شر النذاله والعز بيرجع للي عنده حكمه وأصاله. واللي بيحلف يمين كاذب يا ويله من الله واللي بيحلف يمين كاذب يا ويله من الله. الله الله الله .. الله الله الله. يا اللي بده يتحدى هي الحاره من قدها في مين بيحمي النار والحق يصون حدها عنا ناس زقرتيه بالصبر بيتحلوا بس العواينيه راح ينهانوا وينزلوا والخاين يا ويل ويله يا ويله من الله والخاين يا ويل ويله يا ويله من الله. الله الله الله .. الله الله الله

Oh, People of gallantry and pride and dignity and goodness and chivalry and honour and magnanimity, forget the difficult days and let love heal our wounds and life laugh with us and decorate our festivities. Roses, fountains and citrus orange trees: the most beautiful names. The neighbourhood's most beautiful decoration: Jasmine of Damascus. The rascal plants sedition and reaps evil and villainy and honour come back to those who hold wisdom and authenticity. Who swears a false oath is punished by God. Who swears a false oath is punished by God. God God God God God God. Who wants to challenge the neighbourhood with none other like it, with protected fire and safeguarded borders. Its people, courageous and patient, the collaborators, insulted and humiliated, and the traitor punished by God. The traitor punished by God. God God God God God God.

[134] Dabʿ is the fictitious name of the *Bab al-Hara* neighbourhood.

remembers that young Ma'moun died abroad, but he is not taken seriously by the community, who suspected that he had become senile. The character Ma'moun Beik is far removed from historical grounding. During the Mandate, a number of Syrians enrolled in the French army or collaborated with its forces as spies. However, it was not a common practice to entrust a local in espionage under a false guise; a practice that was usually entrusted to French nationals with proven loyalty. *Bab al-Hara*, through the character of Ma'moun Beik, gave the local collaborator the role and status of a foreign agent. [135] In Syrian popular history, one famous true story of espionage is that of the Mossad agent, Eli Cohen who infiltrated Syria in 1961, under the false identity of Kamel Amin Thabet, making it to the élite power circles, and sentenced to death in 1965. In the fiction, we learn that Lieutenant Nimr served with the French army as an interrogator at Arwad prison, where he participated in torturing his compatriots, including the two main characters of *Bab al-Hara*, Abu Issam and Abu Diab. Nimr's relationship with the French is portrayed as bing based on financial interest rather than on ideological alignment. In the last episode of *Bab al-Hara* Season 5, we hear the voice of the French colonel, in flashback, promising Nimr that those who are loyal to the French army are not left alone just before the neighbourhood men are about to capture him. At the end of Season 5, Ma'moun/Nimr is executed.[136] Lieutenant Nimr is not just a local collaborator with the enemy, but is the enemy from within.

> *Bab al-Hara* is not providing alternative values, neither *Bab al-Hara* nor any other drama series. The human is always looking for a hero. Searching for a hero does not happen through television. The real hero I mean. When we lack the hero in reality we start looking for him in a story or in history. That is why we have seen tens of historical video works hoping to support the collapsed citizen with a mythical hero.   (Fayez Kazak, 2010)[137]

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[135] Fayez Kazak, interview with the author, Damascus 3rd November, 2010.

Fayez Kazak, in an interview with the author, explained that he had been offered a role in *Bab al-Hara* in 2009, but he originally refused because: "Honestly, I don't like to wear the *shirwal* (Aladdin trousers). I am not against it as a traditional costume that used to be worn, but I do not like to wear it, and I thought that within the mayhem of *Bab al-Hara's* four seasons, maybe I would not have the chance to be distinguished", he thus negotiated the deal and made Ma'moun, pretending to be coming back from abroad, wear a three-piece suit. In Season 5, he had to convince the *Bab al-Hara* makers again when they wanted to show the viewers that Ma'moun had gone native and was closer to the community: "I totally refused, and my opinion was not based on my antagonism to the *shirwal*. I argued that in the previous 15 episodes (Season 4), a look had become consecrated and had become known to those following the genre, and if we threw it away we would lose a lot of the visual memory that had become a heritage that I needed to build on in the new season. They were convinced, and so the *shirwal* was dropped".

[136] For more details on the execution scene, please see Chapter 8.

[137] Fayez Kazak, interview with the author, Damascus 3rd November, 2010.

Fayez Kazak (born 1959), an "achieved" actor and theatre director, played the illusionary Ma'moun Beik during Seasons 4 and 5. He is a theatre trainer at the reputable Higher Institute of Theatrical Arts in Damascus. Kazak received his Bachelor's degree in 1981 from the Higher Institute, before travelling to the UK to enrol in an acting training programme at the Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance and completing a Masters in Theatre at the University of Leeds (MFA). In the interview, Kazak was a theatre advocate and a harsh critic of the television industry, which he resisted joining until 2002. He explained his two objectives in participating in the television drama: making money and fame. The fame of television stars, in his view, brought television audiences to the theatre. He compared the 100 million viewers of *Bab al-Hara* and the theatregoers, who in his thirty year long career may not have reached 2 million. He did not perceive *Bab al-Hara* as being a counter-flow or a culture resistant to the mainstream, but as being a space of patriotic cheerleading involving intense emotions and sensitivities that are similar to those experienced during football matches involving national teams.

Kazak did not expect the changes, and nor did I, that Syria underwent a few months after our interview. When I asked him his opinion on the discourses that analyse the "Damascene Milieu" genre as being an élite sectarian politics of Damasceness, he accused me of falling into the trap of treason through ignorance or cultural dependence, a slippery slope in postcolonial contexts (see Chapter 3). He claimed that Syrians were immune to sectarianism and to the sectarian discourse that is used to weaken local resistances to global hegemony:[138]

> In the Syrian context there is awareness of the danger of what might divide the national unity. Syrian citizens do not need anyone to tell them how to be in solidarity.... I am afraid that you are talking from the reality of the Lebanese society. The Lebanese climate is very dangerous and very important and, I say, very dangerous and important for many reasons. I am an observer of this atmosphere. … I am afraid that all the discussion you are engaging in is coming with its terminology from the social context of Lebanon, and this is your right, I am not condemning you. … Maybe some people have awakened questions you might have. But this is something personal to you, since you come from Lebanon

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[138] Fayez Kazak, interview with author, Damascus 3rd November, 2010.

and from a European logic that all the time, especially on the academic level, wants to dig in. I was there in Britain and the question was repeated: why do you have many sects, why Sunni, Shi'i, Druze, 'Alawite, Isma'ili? They dig into things we don't talk about. In our daily reality, we don't talk about sectarianism. My son has in him 2 religions and 3 sects, he is both Christian and Muslim. Is it possible that I still think this way? On the contrary [I identify with all sects]. … At the end, we have antagonism from the outside and from the inside. The Palestinian issue wouldn't have reached this stage if it were not for the treason of Arab leaders and the fragmentation of Arab power and wealth.

Unfortunately, Kazak's claims about Syria's immunity to sectarian politics were inaccurate. So was his assertion that in Syria they do not talk about sectarianism. He reverted to using sectarian terminology to explain political contestation after a friend of mine joined us at the Sham Palace Café. He asked me to stop recording and, off the record explained Damascene sectarian realities and identity politics. Kazak, similarly to many Syrians, considered sectarian frames to be problematic, especially when they are expressed in public. Sectarianism remains a private discourse and, in public, the discourse is that of unity. It is difficult to assess how I gained Kazak's trust, which allowed him to include me in his private discourse. It could have been the presence of my friend, who joined us, which allowed him to locate me outside the group of anti-Syrian Lebanese. Kazak's articulations on unity and sectarianism coexisted within an analysis of a collective and individual "state of collapse," at both the material and symbolic levels. Kazak believed that the Arab region is in a state of collapse where science, knowledge and reason are on the retreat. In this context, television commercializes mythical historical heroes and hollows out of them their heroic and mythical elements. Mediated history, for Kazak, provides the illusion of pride and glory.

When you are in complete collapse, you can't pressure or refuse the orders of the other, who is stronger, and who is enforcing his values through his material, cultural, agricultural and industrial tools and products... Television is the historical gift to Arab governments that wishes to keep the citizens at home. When each Arab government puts its people at home, you no longer need jails; the house is your prison. Cinema brings people together in places, whereas television fragments them and transforms houses into individual cells... Do you know that most Arab

homes breathe American cinema through MBC 1 and 2. Television is providing the American myth... Globalization is a system that wants to oppress any national belonging in the world. Television and cinema are its best tools. Do you think there is any television station that is not linked in one way or another to a government or a corporation? Do you think there is any government that is not linked to this American global system? We are all, in one way or the other, turning around in the orbit of this globalised media, culture, art and behaviour. This wave started in the late '50s. I remember the cowboy movies and the native Indian, who was regarded as evil and was killed. Now I am the Red Indian being killed.

Kazak provided a reading that drew links between the internal Arab predicament and the globalised system. His analysis paid special attention to "cultural imperialism" as a force manipulating local realities through media and other means. He associated cultural power with socio-economic power and questioned the power of the myth produced in an Arab context that is characterized by political subordination; a context of internal authoritarianism and external dependence. He scrutinized both western and local governments' use of television as a means of control, and he accused sectarian analysis of treacherous intensions. It was clear for Kazak that without a real project of unity, television drama on unity is a mere farce. The myth of unity that *Bab al-Hara* sold to most viewers was rejected by Kazak. He, however, adopted the myth of traditional religious tolerance and harmony as being a necessary public statement in the face of external attempts to "divide and rule." In this case, similarly to *Bab al-Hara*, he defined unity as patriotism. In private, he accepted a certain truth in the myth of communal homogeneity, thus suppressing sectarian discourse to going "off the record." The difference between Beirut and Damascus in 2010 was more at the level of what sectarian speech was publicly permissible. In both cities, viewers expressed Arab national sentiments in various degrees. In Syria, the nationalist discourse on unity forced sectarian politics into the private sphere, but similarly to Beirut, this idealization of unity did not allow for the historical deconstruction of the politics of sectarianism. With the civil upheaval in 2011, public expressions of sectarianism, common in Lebanon, gained grounds in Syria.

7.5. Conclusion

Before the social uprisings, individual informants in Beirut and Damascus negotiated sectarianism with the backdrop of the *Bab al-Hara* myth of patriotic unity. I argue that the hegemony of the Arab national discourse that defines unity as patriotism, and sectarianism as treason, is porous. It is prevalent among all informants, to reveal the presence of conflicting accounts of patriotism and sectarianism that struggle in a mediated sphere of multiple players. The power of *Bab al-Hara* to construct an idealization of unity does not succeed in eliminating the sectarian discourses I encountered in Beirut and Damascus. It, however, limits the discussion to the two myths: communal homogeneity and religious tolerance and harmony, discussed within a regional and global political context. Unity as patriotism portrayed in *Bab al-Hara*, continues to provide a political emotion to a wide range of viewers. This emotion of pride or trust in a past of unity, is short of contributing to the young generation an imagining of their future in Lebanon, for example. In Damascus, the "private" sectarian approaches to reading the reality emerged as "public" approaches after 2011, threatening the unity of Syria and challenging the chants shouting: "The Syrian people are One." In the next chapter, I move to Damascus during the first months of the upheaval, and build on this constructed polarity of unity as patriotism, and sectarianism as treason, to investigate how political dissent is controlled through a case study of an act of political protest by one of *Bab al-Hara*'s stars, Muna Wassef. I explore how an anti-colonial cultural imaginary and sustained imperial interference in Lebanon and Syria relate to the nationalist discourse of unity and harmony.

Chapter 8

CROSSING THE NEIGHBOURHOOD GATE:

Between al-*Khiyana* (Treason) and al-*Takhwin* (Accusation of Treason)

Visiting Damascus in June 2011, three months after the start of the domestic unrest, I was at a friend's place when I was asked whether I knew about an anti-government women-only protest that had taken place in the streets of al-Midan, a Damascene neighbourhood, where protestors chanted "Umm Joseph… Umm Joseph".[139] Umm Joseph is played by Muna Wassef (born 1942), one of the most famous contemporary Syrian actresses (of the senior generation) who played major roles in her career on stage, on television and in cinema. The Umm Joseph character is best revealed in a short description of the closing scene of *Bab al-Hara*, Season 5. The camera pans on all the neighbourhood men who are standing in a semi-circle addressing moral messages to the traitor, Ma'moun Beik, before his public execution. To the side of the majority male crowd, Umm Joseph, with her face visible and a cross on her chest, stands with a group of women with their faces covered. Before the men start shooting, Umm Joseph hands her gun to the spy's wife, Feryal, who publicly asks for a divorce and shoots the first bullet in revenge. The scene ends with Umm Joseph shouting, "Oh people, a country whose women's and men's hands are clutched together, will have its head held up high, with no one able to reach it".

In this chapter, I build on a case study of Muna Wassef, a famous Syrian star who played the role of the patriotic mother, Umm Joseph, in *Bab al-Hara*, to draw the boundaries of the discourse on patriotism/treason and to identify the power of an accusation of treason as a means to control dissent. I explore the nuanced position of one star in relation to the Syrian state, and I juxtapose her fictional role as Umm Joseph to her real life experience during the first months of the uprising. I investigate the power of fiction over the use of cultural symbols to express dissent. The significance of discussing the actress Muna Wassef and her character in *Bab al-Hara* stems from the fact that the dissident women who took to the streets of al-Midan neighbourhood in 2011 were specifically chanting the name Umm Joseph.[140]

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[139] Umm Joseph, Arabic for "mother of Joseph", is the name of the character played by Muna Wassef in *Bab al-Hara*.

[140] Umm Joseph, the symbol of the patriotic mother, is often portrayed in parallel to Abu Diab the symbol of the patriotic son. Abu Diab is a pro-independence young man who used to be held captive with Abu Issam in

8.1. Controlling Dissent: Muna Wassef, Collaborator or Heroine

Muna Wassef, is a self-made, professional actress who is recognized as having succeeded as a result of her talent and achievement. She might be the most acclaimed female star in Syria, with a fan base that extends across the Arab world. Her filmography includes Moustapha Akkad's classic *The Message*. She began her career as a model when she was seventeen years old, then joined the Military Institution Theatre when she was eighteen. She married the Syrian film director, Muhammad Shahin, who died in 2003, and gave birth to one child, Ammar, who is one of the dissident voices in exile. I have been fascinated with Wassef's characters on screen since I was a child. I still remember the excitement I felt going to meet her in one of the hotels in Damascus in June 2011. When I asked Muna Wassef about the anti-regime, women-only protest in al-Midan, who were chanting "Umm Joseph," she smiled and asked her sibling, who was sitting with us, whether she knew about it. She then asked me whether I had seen the *Al Jazeera* report that compare her life stances to those of her fictional role.[141] The audience "wanted to make me a heroine!" she added.

At the end of April, 2011 (more than one month into the protests), Muna Wassef signed a petition, dubbed the "Urgent Call to the Syrian Government for the Children of Dar'a" or the "Call for Milk," as it was named by the pro-regime loyalists, along with more than 100 artists, media personalities and writers. The petition asked the Syrian government to allow the passage of milk to children in the "besieged" southern city Daraa.[142] Regime loyalists

a French detention centre where they were both tortured by Lieutenant Nimr. Abu Diab escaped from detention and was visiting the neighbourhood to deliver a letter from Abu Issam to his son, Issam, when he spotted Lieutenant Nimr and uncovered his undercover work as Ma'moun Beik. He then took it upon himself to enter the neighbourhood disguised as a waste collector so as to be able to watch over Lieutenant Nimr. Although they never meet in fiction, each has a monologue directed to the absent son/mother, with the repeated alliteration specific to the mother-son thematic.

[141] Al Jazeera broadcast a five-minute report on the 15th May, 2011, that opened with images from the protests in Syria edited into images from *Bab al-Hara*. The journalist commented: "The inhabitants of the Dabʿ neighbourhood [the neighbourhood's fictitious name in the series] are no longer united, their renowned long drama series of five seasons has long ended and they have found themselves facing a real struggle in their country, one that requests that they take a clear position, independent of art. Is this the sixth season of *Bab al-Hara*, that the Arab audience is watching now, when the Syrian Drama stars, or most of them, have been forced to take off their acting clothes and disclose their principles, their fears, or maybe their interests and personal benefits? The answer reveals that the moment which divided the actors was when the Syrian Army tanks entered the city of Daraa." Translated from Arabic by the author. Abdelhadi, Majed (2011) Bashar al-Asad yaltaqi biʾadad min fanani al-drama al-souriyye [Bashar al-Asad Meets Syrian Drama Artists]. *Al Jazeera*. Television Report. [Online] Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vd3WPzvuEWA [Accessed 1st June, 2011].

[142] "We the undersigned demand that the Syrian Government stop its five-day-old blockade on Dar'a and its villages. The blockade has led to a shortage of food and other essential supplies necessary for subsistence, which has affected innocent children who could not be 'infiltrators' (*mundassin*) in any of the gangs, or the

regarded the Call to be "anti-regime" propaganda, as it wrongly accused the army of blockading the city, while "pro-demonstration" intellectuals were unhappy with its language evaluating it as being apolitical, not courageous enough, and of not calling the problem by its name.[143] Despite the "humane" language of the one-paragraph Call, regime loyalists accused it of crossing the line that safeguards the image of the national army as being the protector of the people. Rima Fleihan, the scriptwriter and the author of the Call, came under a great deal of pressure as a result of her initiative, and saw her reputation smeared, which led her to retract the Call, under the pretext that the signatories did not have enough information about the situation of the children in Dar'a.

The "Call" triggered a number of debates on various media outlets, including public and private television channels that hosted regime loyalist actors who publicly supported the government stance. The television shows invited artists to condemn their "disloyal" colleagues for taking the "anti-Syria" position. In Arabic, an accusation of treason has a specific word, *takhwin,* which is different from treason, which is *khiyana*. Takhwin is not a legal accusation *per se*, as much as a discursive tactic that aims to de-legitimize the political position of the accused. At the same time, takhwin is a pejorative word that is used against the process itself, making the accusation seem trivial. A number of intellectuals and journalists criticized the process of what they called a culture of takhwin (accusation of treason).

Early in May, 2011, one programme on Syrian public television hosted Muna Wassef, along with two female actresses Yara Sabri and Kinda Alloush, one male actor/director, Maher Slaibi and one female director, Rasha Sharbatji who had all signed the Call.[144] Wassef stated that she was not mistaken but misunderstood, and she apologized if she had been misunderstood. She specified that she came on television to defend her patriotism, and not herself as an individual or citizen. She was wearing the Syrian flag on the left lapel of her black jacket and talking with enthusiasm. Following her equivocal justification, the host asked accusingly whether signatories had intended to abuse their

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different sedition (*fitna*) projects. Based on the above, we demand that food and medicine supplies and children's food be permitted into Daraa under the supervision of the Syrian Ministry of Health and the Red Crescent. We do not want the children of our country to be hungry or hurt. We hope for immediate action". Translated from Arabic by the author.
[143] Anonymous, interviews with the author, Damascus 15th June 2010 and Beirut 20th May, 2012.
[144] Syrian Television (2011) Chat Show with Syrian Artists. [Online] Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jn3J6EJZ4TA&feature=related [Accessed 30th June, 2015].

position as stars, or the people's appreciation of their art, and continued: "the Call was translated into four languages, too bad it was translated into four languages, even the Israeli media have discussed this Call, and maybe other channels and human rights organizations took it as a document, how can we reply to this?"[145]

The anchor's use of the word 'Israel' was enough to put the artists on the defence. His role provides an example of what Wedeen regards as "disciplinary-symbolic power", where lines of demarcation between ruler and ruled are complex and shifting, for the anchor, once ruled, is, in the studio context, playing the ruler (1999: 150). His interrogating style led the stars participating in the programme to dissociate themselves from any misuse of the Call by foreign powers. The anchor was repeating similar accusations to those found in various articles online, or in posts and groups on Facebook accusing the artists of treason.

On the 14th May, approximately two weeks after the Call was published, President Bashar al-Asad met with a number of stars, artists and celebrities. According to Wassef, he rejected all accusations of treason and stressed that the artists' actions were rooted in their patriotic loyalty.[146] Wassef appreciated the president's show of consideration for the artists, but still thought that his intervention came after the harm had already been done. She was deeply hurt by the accusations that came after a fifty-year career filled with flattery, part of which was from the ruling regime and its institutions. For instance, in 2009 she received the Syrian Order of Merit-Excellent from President al-Asad, acclaiming her role in serving her country through Syrian and Arab Television and Cinema. The press also celebrated Wassef when she was honoured by the ruling party's youth association in March, 2010.[147]

Meeting with the president did not put an end to the takhwin practices. On the 22nd May, 2011, the private pro-regime channel Al-Dunia, hosted the actors Bassem Yakhuor, Abbas al-Nouri, Amal Arafa, Fahd al-Abed and the director Seif Eddine Sibai, who did not sign the Call and did not contradict the regime's discourse, but tried to avoid accusing their colleagues of treason. The anchor contacted Rima Fleihan by phone and accusingly asked her to explain why she had taken the decision to write the Call. She read a press release in

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[145] Ibid.
[146] Muna Wassef, interview with the author, Damascus 28th June, 2011.
[147] Abbas, Mazen (2010) Shabab Souriyya yahtafilun binijmat al-alam al-arabi Muna Wassef [The Youth of Syria Celebrate the Star of the Arab World Muna Wassef]. 16 February. [Online] Available from: http://www.discover-syria.com/news/5975 [Accessed 14th May, 2012].

which she confirmed that she was not ready to work with any "foreign entity." She apologized for what might have been misunderstood and emphasized that she had written the Call with, "the best of intentions in a moment of high emotion" driven by a "sense of motherhood, without expecting the Call to be abused, distorted and exaggerated".[148]

"Accusing the Artists of Treason: The Series is on and with Great Success", was the title of one article in the Lebanese press following the airing of the public television show.[149] The Syrian writer criticized the accusation process (takhwin) that had divided the artists into traitors and patriots. He scrutinized the new standards of patriotism and asked whether the famous television drama series director, Najdat Anzour, was setting these standards. Anzour had initiated a statement during early May, 2011, signed by Syrian production houses, to boycott the artists who had signed the Call. The campaign's statement was signed by twenty-two production houses, including 'Aaj Production, the producer of the first two seasons of *Bab al-Hara*. The declaration accused the Call of being based on the "fabricated claims of unknown witnesses and activists in suspicious foreign circles." It added that the signatories should have contacted the Ministries of Economy and Health to check on the food supplies that were available in Dar'a before signing a Call written in the "US Facebook circles, known for their blatant hostility to our country and all it represents." Israel was also mentioned in the statement, which "draws the attention" of the signatories to the fact that the bullets fired at the army are "Israeli bullets par excellence."[150]

The director and producer, Haitham Haqqi, one of the main founders of the Syrian television drama industry, was keen to be amongst those who took a strong stance against Anzour's statement. He denounced it in an article, which was published under the title "Those Alien Attitudes," where he refused all accusations or threats against artists' livelihood.[151] Haqqi's article was one among a number of other articles in the Syrian online

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[148] Translated from Arabic by the author. Addounia (2011) Chat Show with Syrian Artists. [Online] Available from: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GvaPPTe17oY&feature=related [Accessed 9th March, 2012].

[149] Suleiman, Hazem (2011) Accusing the Artists of Treason: The Series is on and with Great Success. *Al-Akhbar*. Issue 1406, Monday 9 May. [Online] Available from: http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11661 [Accessed 13th May, 2012].

[150] See article: Unknown (2011) Production Companies: We Refute the Latest Call by the Intellectuals and the Artists Regarding Daraa and We Declare our Boycott of those Who Signed it. *Syria News.* [Online] Available from: http://www.syria-news.com/var/articlem.php?id=14956 [Accessed 17th April 2012].

[151] See article: Haqqi, Haitham (2011) Those Alien Attitudes. *Syria News*. [Online] Available from: http://www.syria-news.com/readnews.php?sy_seq=132638 [Accessed 17th April, 2012].

press, which published the production houses' statement and reported the alleged demand that Muna Wassef be stripped of the Syrian Order of Merit that she had been awarded by President al-Asad in 2009. The sentence asking for Wassef to be stripped of the medal was, however, missing from the published text signed by the production houses. It is difficult to assess whether the sentence had originally been included in the written statement, or was simply rumoured to be so. It was most probably added to put more pressure on Wassef and other public figures, who might show public support for the opposition.

In an alleged interview, Anzour stated that the production houses had intended to teach the artists who signed the Call "a lesson."[152] He added that they would not boycott the artists after the latter apologized, "they are our friends and it is not personal." Anzour thus drew a line between the public and private, and by defining the issue as public, he requested the popular artists to take a clear position. Similarly to the anchor in the context of the studio, he was playing the role of the ruler trying to enforce compliance upon artists. The case of Muna Wassef provides an example of the ways in which the public expression of a star was believed to be politically significant, leading to its containment.

Syrian novelist and scriptwriter, Khaled Khalifa, divided the artists into those indebted to the regime for their fame and those that were self-made.[153] For the former, he used the term "consecrated," in Arabic, to explain how certain artists achieved success irrespective of their talents. The regime, he continued, expected loyalty from all artists. The links between the owners of the production houses and the political establishment are difficult to map, but not impossible to establish. Out of the eleven main businesspersons who the opposition accuses of benefitting from, and serving, the status quo, three are well known to have had a hand in the development of the drama industry. The son of Abdul Halim Khaddam, the ex-deputy president who defected from the regime in 2005, owned 'al-Cham International for Cinema and Television Production'. The company was one of the first private production houses of the nineties; it closed after the family escaped to Paris. Muhammad Hamsho, businessman and member of the People's Council of Syria (Syria's legislative authority), owns Syria International for Art Production, a major production

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[152] See article: Nweisati, Rola (2011) Najdat Anzour: Some Artists Signed the 'Call for Milk' as a result of Stupidity or Ignorance. *Syria Days*. [Online] Available from: http://www.syriadays.com/index.php?mode=article&id=5903 [Accessed 17th April 2012].
[153] Khaled Khalifa, interview with the author, Damascus 29th June, 2011.

house in the country, and Majd Suleiman, the son of a former high- ranking army commander, owns the United Group that organizes a yearly Oscar-like prize: "Adonia," which holds tributes to Syrian Drama and the efforts of its creative personnel (2004-2010).

Rojek differentiates between three forms of celebrity status; the "ascribed" (lineage-dependent), the "achieved" (accomplishment-dependent), and the "attributed" (media representation dependent), which he calls "celetoids" (2001: 18-19).[154] In his analysis he does not give special attention to the role of the state in creating media hype. In contrast, Khalifa does not highlight the role of the media, but that of the state, in attributing the consecrated celebrity.[155] In the context of Syria, it is important to mention that the status achieved/attributed is not only dependent on the perceived accomplishments or media exposure of the star, but on his/her relationship with the security apparatus and the rewards gained because of this relation. "Muna Wassef comes from another time," Khalifa insisted. Her fame, he explained, has been achieved "before the rise of the Gulf funded Syrian drama" during the last two decades, which allowed for the development of the "attributed" celebrity status. Khalifa mentioned Wassef's "memorable roles," her dedication to acting and her knowledge of the craft before it became a good business. All of these can explain why she was able to refrain from offering her "full loyalty" to the regime, according to Khalifa.[156]

When talking about her attitude towards the ongoing events, Wassef did not clearly mention whether she was anti or pro-regime, but specified that she was pro-reform:[157]

> Irrespective of the problem I faced, the country remains the most important thing.
> When I played the part of Umm Joseph, I believed in something; not only in Umm
> Joseph, but also in all my roles during the last fifty years, that for me, Syria is a red

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[154] Looking into research on stardom, celebrity, and fame, I have come across little research that drifts away from representational text-based or discursive individual-based studies. Turner (2010) identifies four angles from which to approach the study of celebrities; 1) as a genre of representation, 2) as a discursive effect on those 'celebritised', 3) as an industry, and 4) as a cultural formation that has a social function. Turner criticizes the second trend for framing the "representational regime," or the "process of celebritisation," in terms of an "individual seeking validation of … their intrinsic 'star' quality," and he argues that the production/mediating process is of greater influence than "the recognition of the particular qualities of each individual self" (p. 14). He highlights that most of the literature on stars falls within the first two trends and calls for research to adopt a social or political economy approach that situates the celebrity within the socio-economic issues and dilemmas in which she/he engages.

[155] Khaled Khalifa, interview with the author, Damascus 29th June, 2011.

[156] Khaled Khalifa, interview with the author, Damascus 29th June, 2011.

[157] Muna Wassef, interview with the author, Damascus 28th June, 2011.

line. This is my country and whatever happens, I am not ready to leave, you know, God forbid if anything happens, I won't leave, this is my conviction, exactly like that of Umm Joseph, she has something that resembles me. If other people leave, I stay with insistence. I mean I cannot love the country when it is strong and leave it when it is wounded. … During the last few years, when I played the character of a strong woman, it was because I wanted to feel stronger internally, because they used to challenge me: 'what would the beautiful coquette achieve'! Then I proved to be successful. I chose roles that made me stronger. My general knowledge, and my theatre experience all helped make me who I am.... I am with reform and with what has happened [meaning the protests], but without reaching the stage of wounding the country. That no human is killed, that I don't witness blood, either from the protesters or from the army or police, that we do not reach the phase we are in. I mean I am falling in love with Syria, more and more. I have seen a lot, I am not young, I have seen those who have been displaced when they left their countries, I have seen when the Americans entered Iraq. Where is Iraq now? In the end, this is not the way problems are solved, this is what I believe in. In a way, it resembles my roles, but when they ask where Umm Joseph is, they are asking me to be more, they are asking me to be Umm Joseph, the one on the screen, but it is too much, and I am not, not, not, Umm Joseph.

During the whole interview, Wassef celebrated an idealized representation of homeland and disregarded the view of Syria as being equivalent to the person of the president. She considered Syria itself to be a "red line" - its problems being more important than her own. She stressed that, whatever happens, she would not leave and compared herself to Umm Joseph, who had something that resembled her: "the attachment to the house that harbours the photos of members of the family who are gone." Yet she was not able to fulfil the heroic position of Umm Joseph and retreated away from the lights of interviews and public debates.

Wedeen mentioned an incident when Wassef, or "Syria's most famous actress, declared to her television audience that it was raining – a welcome occurrence in desert regions – because Syrians were holding a referendum reaffirming their loyalty and allegiance to Hafiz al-Asad." (1999: 39). Capitalising on her past declared loyalty to the regime, Wassef mentioned, during the only television interview she gave after signing the Call, her

146

volunteer role during the 1973 war and how artists were invited by the late president, Hafiz al-Asad and were thanked for being "soldiers inside the country and not on the border."[158] Although Wassef surely fulfilled the criteria for being an "achieved" celebrity, in the sense she could not escape being part of what Khalifa criticized; the regime's role in "consecrating" television stars into "national symbols."[159] Her past expressions of loyalty to the regime, even if, or when, this was different from privately held belief, and makes the use of these set statuses complex. The blurring of these forms of celebrity status and their inability to provide a meaningful explanation of Wassef's political position requires a different type of investigation that examines how the meanings of state, regime and country interfere in how Wassef and other stars situate themselves or are situated as being "patriots" or "traitors" within the public sphere.

What it is interesting to juxtapose is the relationship between these two dichotomies: treason/patriotism and sectarianism/unity, and how they constitute a dominant frame that is recurring in both fiction and political dissent. In describing Umm Joseph, Wassef, who was born to a Syrian Christian mother and a Syrian Kurdish Muslim father, explains:

> The designer and I were able to develop her distinct looks. She shouldn't resemble any of the neighbourhood women … She should look Christian, and I added the human touch based on the modes of speech used by Christian women, like referring to Jesus and the Virgin Mary that they use, and I use since my mother's upbringing has affected me … Umm Joseph resembles the woman I want [to be] in life, I mean, I am not the subservient type to start with, and neither was my mother … I loved [Umm Joseph] because she was courageous and because she was noble. I loved her because the reality of the situation in Syria is that all of the sects are together. I have not seen, in my long life, conflict between Christians and Muslims. I witness this coexistence and believe in the message that this character wants to deliver.

Umm Joseph is not an ordinary character, but is a strong, independent woman, who participates together with men in the armed struggle against the French army. Informants

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[158] Syrian Television (2011) Chat Show with Syrian Artists. [Online] Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jn3J6EJZ4TA&feature=related [Accessed 30th June, 2015].
[159] Khaled Khalifa, interview with the author, Damascus 29th June, 2011.

in Damascus explained to me that her Christian name (Umm Joseph) was raised in a predominantly Muslim neighbourhood (al-Midan) as a means for calling Syrian Christians to join the protests, or to highlight the unity of Syrians across the sectarian divides. There are other possible explanations. I argue, however, that by chanting "Umm Joseph," it is as if the protestors had liberated a fragment from the dominant discourse and infused it into everyday life; as if the protestors used "Umm Joseph" as a borrowed element from one story that is used to tell another story; as if they used the words of television to express their voice. In other words, they released the patriotic fictional character from its discursive ensemble, thus confronting the power of the screen and reclaiming the power to recount the narrative and to define patriotism. Umm Joseph, and not Muna Wassef, was called for in the protest. The women chanting were celebrating the role as though they were aiming to repossess lifeworld stories that are packaged as discourse (De Certeau, 1984). To call out to Umm Joseph at that moment in time was to tactically displace the meaning of the "patriotic," even if only for a brief moment in time.

The weaving of the personal, as political with the fictitious, is also evident in the way the director of *Bab al-Hara's* Season 5, Mo'men al-Malla, worked with Wassef. He allowed her to improvise lines into the dialogue, for example, in one scene, Umm Joseph, her eyes swollen with tears, whispered: "the strange land [*ghurba*] has eaten my children." In the interview with me, Wassef added, "my son is also living in exile [*ghurba*]." The interpolation of Wassef's lived emotions and experience into her fictional character, and the affective meaning attached to the Arabic word ghurba (English for strange land or expatriation), may help to explain the power of her utterance in the fictional role, but, what if this son is accused of treason? Muna Wassef is not the mother of Joseph in the fiction, but the mother of Ammar, whose loyalty is suspect.

8.2. Mother and Son: "Public" or "Private"

Wassef is a special case among the Syrian actresses and actors who are not fully supportive of the regime, for her son is living in, and is accused of being funded by, the United States of America. The son, Ammar Abdulhamid (born 1966), introduces himself on his blog entitled "Syrian Revolution Digest" as a "liberal democracy activist whose anti-regime activities led to his exile from Syria on September 7, 2005." He is the founder

and director of the Tharwa Foundation, "a non-profit dedicated to democracy promotion."[160] Abdulhamid is an ex-fellow at the Saban Center, and a current fellow at the 'Foundation for Defense of Democracies' (FDD), both regarded as being pro-Israeli. When asked why he was allowed to leave the country and was not jailed like other dissidents, he suspected that it was because of his mother, Muna Wassef.[161]

A published New York Times interview with Abdulhamid confirms the three main accusations pro-regime activists use to attack Muna Wassef on various online forums. Wassef's son is firstly, open to working with Israelis. Secondly, he has relations with the US government and has met "leading figures in the Bush administration," and thirdly, he admires the US position and was "hoping to spend the next year explaining the American viewpoint to anyone in Damascus who would listen." (Smith, 2005).[162] Tharwa's two pages on Facebook have a total of 122 members or people who "like" it, while his personal public figure page on Facebook has 215 people who like it. [163] In the same magazine article, Jon Alterman, from the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington considers that liberals like Abdulhamid are "too westernised to make an impact on the Arab masses" (Smith, 2005). [164] With the changes in the region, the impact of Abdulhamid's role is difficult to assess. Joshua Landis, author of the "Syria Comment" newsletter and Head of the Centre for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma, wrote on 29th March, 2011, that Abdulhamid has "emerged as the 'unofficial spokesman' and the most visible face of the Syrian Revolutionary movement" in the US. [165] In 2011, he gave testimony to the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee. [166] Irrespective of Abdulhamid's actual influence on the dissident street, or of his impact on US foreign

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[160] Ammar Abdulhamid (2012) About the Author. *Syrian Revolution Digest*. [Online] Available from: http://www.syrianrevolutiondigest.com/ [Accessed 9th April, 2012].

[161] Smith, Lee (2005) A Liberal in Damascus. *The New York Times Magazine*. February 13. [Online] Available from: http://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/13/magazine/13ENCOUNTER.html [Accessed 10th August, 2011].

[162] Ibid.

[163] Accessed during August, 2011. Accessing the pages during February, 2012, Tharwa's two Facebook pages had a total of 136 likes, while Abdulhamid's public figure page reached 416 likes, and his personal Facebook profile had a 1018 subscribers.

[164] Smith, Lee (2005) A Liberal in Damascus. *The New York Times Magazine*. 13 February.

[165] Landis, Joshua (2011) Ammar Abdulhamid Emerges as Face of the Syrian Revolution, According to Washington Times. *Syria Comment*. [Online] Available from: http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=8864&cp=all#comments [Accessed 10th August, 2011].

[166] The submission took place on the 9th November, 2011, to the Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South Central Asian Affairs, and the written report was entitled: 'Towards a Post-Assad Syria: Options for the United States and Like-Minded Nations to Further Assist the Anti-Regime Syrian Opposition.' 9 November. [Online] Available from: http://www.defenddemocracy.org/testimony/us-policy-in-syria [accessed 20th February, 2012].

policy concerning the Syrian government, his political activity puts him in a questionable position and makes his mother vulnerable to charges of incitement.

The Syrian regime's rhetoric positions the Syrian state in confrontation with the United States and Israel, a political line dubbed *mumanaʿa* in Arabic, which translates as "rejectionism," "anti-conspiracy" or "anti-imperialism," in contrast to the other camp of pro-Western "moderates," such as Mubarak's Egypt or Abdullah's Jordan. This rhetoric emphasizes the neo-imperial US policies and the disrespect of international law, for example, concerning the occupation of Iraq, supporting Israel and interfering in Syria's internal affairs. This same rhetoric potentially puts the state's subjects in a polarized position of "patriots" versus "traitors." It is beyond the scope of this chapter to further analyse how the US "War on Terror," Manichean policies and attitudes compare to the black and white representations that the Syrian government uses vis-à-vis the US. However, emphasizing the dominance of such a discourse, which is interrelated with US foreign policies, might explain how allies or defenders of the US, like Abdulhamid, are made suspect. Wassef stressed that her son is against external military intervention in Syria.[167] In this case, she was speaking from within the discourse that renders those supportive of military intervention to be "servants of the imperial hegemony." Her son's position during June 2011 allowed her to open a window within the local dominant rhetoric to argue that: "Abdulhamid is patriotic in his own way." Her attempt to defend her son's patriotism became more problematic after he called for military intervention in an interview with the Israeli newspaper Yedioth Ahronoth in December, 2011, entitled: "World should Bomb Syria," thus rendering him her weak spot.[168]

The treason accusation campaign targeted the personal link, portraying Wassef as being responsible for her son's politics, as if disowning him would prove her loyalty to the country or regime. Wassef refused to choose between her son and her country. She stressed that she was an independent entity, with personal opinions and stances that she could make and defend without the influence of patriarchy, a son or a husband. Secondly, she refused to either defend or attack her son's politics and put her relation with him outside her public

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[167] Muna Wassef, interview with the author, Damascus 28th June, 2011.

[168] Azoulay, Orly (2011) World Should Bomb Syria. *Yedioth Internet*. 28 December. [Online] Available from: http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4168102,00.html. [Accessed 20th February, 2012]. The sub heading of the article reads "Special: In first interview with Israeli media, two Syrian exiles urge world to wake up". This interview was not the first Abdulhamid had given to the Israeli press. For more information see Benhorin, Yitzhak (2007) Towards a Democratic Syria. *Yedioth Internet*. 24 February. [Online] Available from: http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3369003,00.html [Accessed 20th February, 2012].

life, back into the private. "He has his way of loving the country, and I have my reasons to be annoyed about why they spoke".[169] While she did not specify who "they" were, she made it clear that the de-legitimizing discourse targeted her public persona through her private kinship ties to a dissident expatriate. Wassef, the star, expressed clear ideas about her career, roles and aspirations. She did not perceive herself as being merely a wife or a mother. However, the view of women as being wives or mothers persists, and the accusations that targeted Wassef cast her as a mother, either as being responsible for her son's deeds, or as being under the authority of his political position. Wassef became the victim of a triple-edged struggle for power: an internal one with a dominant national discourse that defines patriotism as being antagonistic to empire, the U.S. and its interests in the region, and gender politics that are reflected in her position as a woman and a mother.

The refusal to be described as an annexe to the man, the emphasis on independence and on defining motherhood as a private business, was Wassef's tactic in order to attempt to deal with the accusation campaign. Fleihan (the scriptwriter, and the author of the Call), on the other hand, used motherhood as an excuse to de-emphasise an "irrational" act that stemmed from an emotional drive towards the children of Dar'a. Fleihan was presumably forced to depoliticize her position, while, on the other hand, Wassef politicized her silence by choosing to stay away from the media after her television appearance. Wassef and Fleihan's presence in the public domain forced them to tactically use notions of the "private' and "public" to negotiate accusations of treason. While Wassef's interest was to draw a strict border between the "private" and the "public", Fleihan saw value in extending the "private" to the "public." In the slightly different context of reality television shows viewed in Kuwait and Lebanon, Kraidy asks the relevant question: "why did women emerge as powerful and contested symbols?" (2010: 196). He concludes that, in times of war, women stars are vulnerable to "symbolic appropriation," especially when the nation is fragile and "feelings of belonging to imagined national communities" are heightened (2010: 196). Times of conflict allow for "instances of women's victimization as symbolic pawns of nations or as repositories of traditions;" meanwhile, women are politically engaged, participating in demonstrations and, in some cases, confronting "self-appointed custodians of tradition" (2010: 197). This case study provides additional evidence of the centrality of gender to the study of power. The accusation of treason is not

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[169] Muna Wassef, interview with the author, Damascus 28th June, 2011.

only a means with which to discipline dissent, but it is also an expression of the crisis of the postcolonial state at the level of non-achievable sovereignty. In this context, discourses of national unity and loyalty are thought to defend the local from the exogenous factors governing less powerful states in the global order (Giddens, 1990).

8.3. Patriotism in Question

The case of Muna Wassef is not unique to the Syrian crisis that was developing from 2011 until today. Other accusation of treason campaigns were used by loyalists (TV presenters, television drama directors, cyber-activists, etc.) as a way to manage the position of stars who were attempting to employ their charismata to question or deconstruct the regime's label of who was a patriot and who a traitor. The regime's grip over the definition of patriotism allowed loyalists to mobilize and keep an upper hand to control the discourse. It is nevertheless difficult to fully explain the various factors that have influenced the positions of stars, including Wassef, who have accepted that their public role is constrained. It is not possible to determine, without further research, whether loyalty or compliance with the regime remains a result of its power or of other factors, including ideology and a fear of insecurity resulting from the threat of "Lebanonization" in Syria. In addition, the division between loyalists and opposition in the country has not polarized the whole population, and a large section of society remains silent, i.e., not publicly aligned with any side. Dissidents, on the other hand, tried to redefine treason by raising the slogan, "a traitor is one who kills his people," something Hajj Saleh (2012) regards as a revolutionary definition that constitutes the basis for a new patriotism.[170] Among the silent majority are the cultural critics who expressed anxiety about dissidents who were accusing stars who were still residing in Syria of being regime loyalists.[171] Amidst this instability that not only challenges the power of the regime's power but that threatens the unity of the Syrian state as well, and that compromises the lives of millions of Syrians, the symbolic power of stars to offer a voice to contest the regime and to gain political power by redefining the patriotic, or contributing to political consensus, was controlled through the accusations of treason campaigns that either contained their efforts, or led them to exile.

[170] Hajj Saleh, Yassine (2012) al-Hizb al-ladhi lam yaʾud qa'idan li-aldawla wa al-mujtamaʾ [The Party that is no Longer the Leader of the State and the Society]. *Al Hayat*. 26 February. [Online] Available from: http://daharchives.alhayat.com/issue_archive/Hayat%20INT/2012/2/26/الحزب-الذي-لم-يعد-قائدا-للدولة-والمجتمع.html [Accessed 30th June, 2015].
[171] Anonymous, interview with the author, Beirut 15th May, 2012.

To go back to the women's protest, chanting the name of a television character, one reading gives the protestors in Damascus the agency to claim patriotism by using Umm Joseph's symbolic value as a freedom fighter in *Bab al-Hara*, while hinting at Muna Wassef's act of protest in the first months of the upheaval. The use of this symbol by the protestors was a creative use of the institutional narrative against itself. Umm Joseph, the patriot according to the regime's nationalist narrative, was also Wassef, the patriot, according to protestors. Umm Joseph, at that moment in time, became the complex representation that allowed for the contestation of the official patriotism, with the aim to appropriate it. Umm Joseph was able to bring together the discourse on defying the Mandate, the historical counterpart of today's neo-imperialism, and to express loyalty to Syria, in shapes of the land, the imagined community, not the president. The strength of the use of the fictitious character in the protest resided specifically in allowing the choice of a patriotic discourse that claims to stand firm against foreign neo-imperial forces, without advocating al-Asad's personalization of power.

Bab al-Hara's demarcation of clear boundaries between patriotism and treason, allows for another reading of the meaning of the symbol of Umm Joseph in the protest. Although the women chanting 'Umm Joseph' were raising a dissident voice, they contributed to reproducing the binary that characterises *Bab al-Hara*. In this context, the *Bab al-Hara* analogy is useful in deconstructing the polarisations that are in control of the unfolding Syrian crisis. It is as if the anti-colonial dynamics had symbolically taken the reigns over internal political dynamics. In other words, the line of the border between who is within and who is without kept shifting, until it cut into the private sphere. This constant presence of the colonial other in the public sphere, as well as in everyday politics, leads to a form of double speak: a discourse on unity in public, and a certain permissible expression of sectarian loyalties, in private. What Makdisi (2000) theorises, based on the historical development of the sectarian regime in Lebanon, can be used as a lens through which to review the rise in sectarian discourse in Syria. What Hassane and Adam were comfortable in discussing in Beirut in 2010, and Kazak regarded as shifting the context of Lebanon to Syria in 2010, became the Syrian context from 2011 onwards. In certain contexts in Lebanon and Syria, the public expression of sectarian loyalties is considered a kind of treason that undermines patriotic unity. The mass representation of unity, with the myth of communal homogeneity as its undertone, in a context of reproduced colonial encounter

153

and continuous imperial penetration, seems to enforce the dichotomy of a local 'us' and a foreign 'them.' This dichotomy, instead of contributing to a symbolic social unity, is used to feed similar dichotomies of communal patriotisms/unities versus treason/sectarianisms. The internal polarization of a multiple 'us' and 'them,' all accusing each other of collaborating with an external enemy, allows for the legitimation of sectarian divisions and the failure to deconstruct sectarianism through its contextual historicity.

8.4. Conclusion

In this chapter I have looked through the lens of treason, the theme of *Bab al-Hara* Season 5, at the elements of inter-societal political conflicts that were expressed or denied in Damascus 2011. I have juxtaposed treason, as it is constructed in *Bab al-Hara*, with the realities during the first few months of the Syrian upheaval. The beginning of the Syrian protests in March, 2011 led to a division between regime and opposition loyalists. This division was also reflected in the position of popular television stars, producers, famous directors, scriptwriters, journalists, actors and actresses from Lebanon and Syria, whose public image became vulnerable to smearing and to campaign of accusations of treason. Both the regime loyalists and the pro-demonstration activists created black and honour listings of stars that were based on their political positions. In this chapter, I focused on the case study of Muna Wassef, who plays the role of Umm Joseph in *Bab al-Hara*. I juxtaposed Wassef's fictional role, which is embedded in a discourse of unity, with her real life experience of being accused of treason. The differences and similarities between treason as constructed in *Bab al-Hara*, and accusation of treason, as lived by Muna Wassef, reveal the limitations of the frame of patriots and collaborators as a presumed tool of anti-colonial struggle. I showed that accusation of treason being used as a discourse with which to discipline dissent, had led to heightened internal divisions instead of the unity it declares. I also explained how protesting women in Damascus used the symbol of Umm Joseph to possess the definition of the patriotic. However, this discursive dichotomy of 'patriots versus traitors' is locked within the same structure of "either us or them," and it cannot provide the liberating ends it promises. In the case of Muna Wassef, accusation of treason did not work as a tool with which to enforce unity, but as a mechanism with which to legitimate sectarian loyalties and to blur a contextual understanding of sectarianism. Accusation of treason thus has the potential to weaken resistance by disciplining dissent, reinforcing the myth, and   suspending critical engagement with questions of sectarianism

and patriotism in the postcolonial global structure of power. *Bab al-Hara*'s utopic imagination of the moral home and of the binary insider/outsider does not provide a future imagination outside the complex everyday politics of Lebanon and Syria.

Chapter 9

CONCLUSION: ON MORALISING AND ITS INCONSISTENCIES

Ode to Damascus

Damascus, it is six thirty p.m.

Different shades of blue decorate windows, pottery, and in-between clouds.

The smell, a bitter orange tree surrounded by a courtyard house.

The eyes, open wide without kohl.

The couple, walking slowly under flocks of swallows drawing to infinity.

The street, empty except for a lone statue of a hero called Joseph.

Sciatica pain cuts till the knee while, on the checkpoint, stands a soldier wearing sports clothes, a Kalashnikov, and performing rituals she knows well: open the car trunk, show me the I.D.

She tries to stay steadfast by connecting her heart beat to the continuous rhythm of shelling.

Launching sound

Explosion

Where did it fall?

Launching sound

Explosion

As if the launcher were externally glued to the room wall

As if she lives in memories of packed bags of valuables ready for displacement

Of her mother making the bag a pillow during long nights underground

Launching sound

Explosion

There are no underground shelters in Damascus or its rural surrounding

You just need to leave the house in time

Launching sound

Explosion

She sleeps in a home filled with displaced souls

Saturated with sounds of machine guns

Her friend calls it the curse of Sisyphus

No revolutionary romance

No speeches

No verbosity

Details within details that no scholarly volumes can capture

and a clarity that hides in the cul-de-sacs of the will for life with dignity.

(Author 2012/2013)

We must try to be historicists, or in other words, try to analyse this perpetual and unavoidable relationship between the war that is recounted by history and the history that is traversed by the war it is recounting.

(Foucault, 2003: 173-174)

More than two years have passed since I last visited Damascus. I left the field in July, 2011, and went back for short stays during January and October, 2012, then during April, 2013. My encounters with a Damascus entering deeper into a state of war brought strong emotions of a destabilizing quality. I experienced the crippling of my academic writing, and for two years I only wrote Arabic prose. I am no poet, except that poetry was the only medium I could use to describe the feelings of entrapment between the life and death drive.[172] I reflected on the meanings and representations of Damascus. My voice and positionality were simultaneously grounded and uprooted. I was a thinking refugee between disciplines, cities and traumas, living in/with the absence of peace. Writing poetry led me to establish connections between my pains, growing up in the Lebanese wars, the collective insecurities attached to the continuous wars in the Middle East, the potentiality

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 In his essay 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', Freud introduces the death drive, or death instincts, as Thanatos, "the goal of all life is death," the opposite of Eros, or life instincts (2010: 106).

lying in the Arab-wide revolutions, and of the symbolic/material Damascus under the threat of violence. I was overwhelmed by the weight of destruction engulfing the region, and I was caught in an existential crisis that pushed back all questions on culture and television. Questions of knowledge as perspectival (Foucault, 1976), the connectedness between reasoned action (praxis), creative production (poeisis) and moral practice (phronesis) (Lambek, 2000), and the revolutionary "moment" (Lefebvre, 2005) became essential to my investigation. In other words, living with the social upheavals and subsequent wars in Syria, and throughout the Arab region, translated into a set of epistemological, ontological and existential questions on meaning, and positionality. War and precariousness have been a constant, both in my life and the life of those people around me. It is while writing this conclusion that war forces itself back on this work.[173] Maybe it is not possible to engage with the concepts of ontological security, moral domesticity and the binaries private/public, unity/sectarianism and patriotism/treason, which are investigated in this research, independently of the frame of war. It is thus necessary, before engaging in a discussion of the research findings, to delineate the contours of the discourse on war in which *Bab al-Hara* is situated.

In this concluding chapter, I firstly establish that the study of *Bab al-Hara*, as a phenomenon that gives us access to an idealized society, which is constructed through mass media and implicated in everyday life, is inseparable from the material and symbolic context of internal and external wars that are taking place, both in and over the Levant. Secondly, I answer the research question by synthesising the research results into three axes of *Bab al-Hara*'s implicatedness in everyday life Beirut and Damascus: constructing the space of ontological security, inhabiting it with domestic morality, and drawing its boundaries. In the first axis, I identify the Damascene house of the past as the space of ontological security. Then, I establish how the idealization of domestic morality is contradicted or supported through "*Bab al-Hara* talk". Lastly, I argue, that the *Bab al-Hara* strategy to build symbolic internal unity in the face of external invasions, is in short, not successful in leading its viewers or makers to sustain a non-conflictual identity.

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[173] I chose my PhD topic with a clear aim of detaching it and myself from the theme of war, but then, again, there are limits to one's agency.

9.1. Present Continuous Coloniality

In Chapter 2 of this doctoral dissertation, I posed Said's question: "How does a culture seeking to become independent of imperialism imagine its own past?" (1993: 258). This question establishes the connection between the writing of history, representations of the past, and the politics of decolonisation. In the case of the Arab region, where the research problem identified the role of media in exploiting the past in support of a cultural *salafist* trend which demystifies the past into one that is a glorious of honourable confrontations and high moral grounding, these processes mask a sense of "defeatism" and a "wounded and damaged" self (Kassab, 2010: 361). To contextualise this defeat, it is important to summarise shortly the dominant historical narrative that tells the story of the last hundred years. The end of the French Mandate over Syria and Lebanon in 1943 and the withdrawal of French troops in 1946 did not mean an end to colonial and imperial influences and intervention in the Levant. The area of the eastern Mediterranean was part of the Ottoman Empire until 1918, when it was on the losing side at the end of World War I, notwithstanding that its political forces fought with the invading French and British armies, which led to a sense of mistrust and deception with the invaders, under the guise of "liberators". The borderless land of ancient civilizations, under the imperial system, was partitioned into "nation states" or "postcolonial states" with fixed borders and competing "national" projects. The "trauma" of that phase, which saw the making of the Sykes-Picot agreement and the establishment of the state of Israel, still lingers today. The narration and re-narration of that phase, from different perspectives, is a feature of everyday life and cultural production in Syria and Lebanon. A narration that is regarded as necessary in order to make sense of the self in place, and to participate in and contest the existing nation building projects and the new processes of state reformation. Processes of state formation and fragmentation that include the redrawing of the borders, old and new, are associated with military invasions, resistance to external powers, the loss of land, a settler colonial project, and conspiratorial politics. Everyday life in the Levant is not a practice of everyday normality in a state of peace, but is a negotiation of a precarious existence within contested statehoods under the constant influence of geopolitical competition and the threats of modern warfare, what Al-Mohammad and Peluso (2012) borrow from Wittgenstein (1953) to call the "rough ground" of the everyday, while talking about post-invasion Iraq. The invasion of Iraq in 2003, superseded by the 1990/91 Gulf war and thirteen years of imposed sanctions and embargo, is another factor that drastically

influences the region. The so-called Arab revolutions have not succeeded in breaking the structures, but they have challenged the power claims and questioned existing national, ethnic, sectarian and political framings. That is, the social upheavals are not strictly ruptures, but they are critical moments that allow for a radical revisiting of all of the generalizations on history, space and religion in the Arab region. These moments, which started in 2011 across the region, challenged all established knowledge, including the duality, imperialism/resistance, and once again raised questions on the crisis, or, as in his interview with Habash in 1999, Munif analysed the crisis is: a trilogy of oil, political Islam and dictatorship (Habash, 2003).[174]

In this research on cultural production in contemporary Syria and Lebanon, I have contextualised the region within the extremely aggressive neocolonial politics of war, and have challenged a narrow state-centric framing of cultural production as a product of authoritarian or sectarian regimes, or as an act of resistance to them. The contested rule of the élites, important as it is, is one feature of everyday life in which sovereignty claims are challenged by postcolonial relations of dependence, internal struggles over resources and power, and the mobilization of discourses of freedom, liberation, and independence in favour of, and in opposition to, global power structures. The "in-dissociable circularity" between recounting the war that positions the "us" at war and the war itself, which is waged through narrated history, as Foucault suggests in the excerpt above, is essential for an understanding of *Bab al-Hara*, not solely as a weapon of war but also as a description of this war, in which it functions as a weapon (Foucault, 2003: 173). In order to understand the phenomenon of *Bab al-Hara*, however, it is not enough to go beyond a state-centric, culture-focused or religion-limited perspective, but it is also necessary to engage in a dual critique: firstly, of the global order that impacts "Arab" realities, aspirations, identity claims and scholarship from and on the region, and, secondly, in a critique of the local dominant views that represent and control these realities. That is, it is to commit to a double-critique (Khatibi, 1980; in Sabry, 2010) from the multiple perspectives of the various imagined communities. It is to epistemologically practice being

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[174] In the same interview Abdul Rahman Munif was asked whether Beirut is a special case among Arab cities, and his opinion was that, similarly to all other Arab cities, Beirut has fallen under the force of oil, which defines the politics, culture and ways of life across the region. For the whole interview please check Habash, Iskandar (2003) Unpublished Munif Interview: 'Crisis in the Arab World – Oil, Political Islam, and Dictatorship.' *Al Jadid*, 9(45). [Online] Available from: http://www.aljadid.com/content/unpublished-munif-interview-crisis-arab-world-–-oil-political-Islam-and-dictatorship [Accessed 28 April 2015].

critical, or being the other of the other, while also being conscious of the specificity of one's intellectual voice and positionality.

In this work, I build on the presumption that the discourse on cultural authenticity is rooted in modernity (Al-Azmeh, 1993; Salamandra, 2004) similarly to that of sectarianism (Makdisi, 2000; Beydoun, 2012) and thus free the analysis from the binaries: authentic/modern and sectarian/modern. I approach the processes of the production and consumption of *Bab al-Hara* as being opposed to a number of the circulating discourses on "Arab wretchedness" or "malaise".[175] I draw on the association between safeguarding capitalist structures, maintaining authoritarian rule and promoting a conservative moral discourse (Mitchell, 2011), to identify television as one of the oil funded avenues that are used to strengthen and protect this status quo. I contextualise *Bab al-Hara* within an analysis on moral discourses that is grounded in the global political economic order. That is, I approach *Bab al-Hara* as a pan-Arab cultural production that stands at the intersection of MBC group funding, private television production in the Syrian Arab Republic, and consumption practices that are taking place globally, with a focus on the month of Ramadan. This placement brings to light the crucial influence of the political economy of oil and its role in the growth of political Islam and the sustainability of authoritarianism, where moral discourses act as ideological legitimators of undemocratic rule in both oil rich and oil poor Arab countries (Mitchell, 2011). In both cases, where Islam is mobilized as the ideology of rule, or where it works as a moral legitimator, and where political Islam still functions as a mobiliser of oppositional politics. Anti-imperial rhetoric often happens when it is shared by the ruling elites and dissident powers. As a result, I understand the production and consumption of Old Damascus to be taking place in the context of undemocratic global, regional and local structures, where real estate is a durable structure for capitalization linked to the oil economy.

In this politically charged context of neocoloniality and Arab wide social and political crises, that are structurally linked to the economy, I approach the problem of the construction of an ideal society which is set in the past, by focusing on the production of moralities (symbolic/spatial) firstly as cultural telos, and, secondly, as it is being negotiated through the everyday understanding and rationalisation of the moral. I

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[175] Samir Kassir uses these terms to describe being Arab in the 21st century. For more on this notion, please see Kassir, Samir (2006) *Being Arab*. London: Verso.

investigate the narratives of resistance to imperialism that are embedded in the glorification of the past that is adopted by *Bab al-Hara*, by studying two imaginings of the past: a mass mediated one that reconstructs Old Damascus of the early 19th century (*Bab al-Hara* 2010- Season 5), and an articulated one from informants, who are followers of *Bab al-Hara*, at Beirut's Rawda Café during Ramadan, 2010. I conceptualize the phenomenon of *Bab al-Hara* through an analysis formed from conjunctions by looking at the complex structures of mass cultural production and socio-cultural meaning making. In-depth analysis of structures of pan-Arab satellite television production (with a focus on MBC) as it is linked to advertising agencies, the marketing strategies of multinational companies, and Syrian drama production, important as it is, falls within the conceptual frame (discussed in the thesis's introduction), but outside the scope of this research. I focus, in this work, on the televisual text, as it implicates the everyday life of its viewers. This approach to studying media in context, allows for the complex multi-layered dynamics of everyday life to complicate easy generalizations.

Bab al-Hara's success before the uprisings, during its first five seasons, between 2006-2010, and its continued pertinence during 2014-2015, after three years of suspension, proves it to be an ideal phenomenon through which to study these complexities. Its fictional story, set in Damascus under the French Mandate during the '30s, speaks not only to a Syria-specific reality, but benefits from the glory of Damascus in holding a place in "Arab cultural history" (al-Jabri, 2011) in order to address Arab-speaking audiences who relate to the "Arab wretchedness". In the sections below I discuss the results of my empirical study and make nuanced logical generalizations that are based on the theoretical understandings of the context. My contribution identifies three angles of focus. In the first, I argue that *Bab al-Hara* is based on the value of, and gives value to, the courtyard houses of Old Damascus, with the promise of ontological security that they offer. In the second, I propose the normative meanings of the historicised domesticity that is imagined by *Bab al-Hara*, and which is challenged by its viewers in Beirut and Damascus. In my third focus, I contend that the promise of *Bab al-Hara* fails to constitute an alternative imaginary to modernity and its discontents.

9.2. Arab Cultural History under Siege: Houses of Ontological Security

> Oh ye standing on the thresholds, enter
>
> to drink Arabic coffee with us,
>
> you might feel human like us.
>
> Oh ye standing on the doorsills of houses,
>
> get out of our mornings
>
> so we rest assured we are
>
> human beings like you!   (Mahmoud Darwish, 2002)[176]

> The problem that faces us does not lie in choosing which civilisational
> model to opt for: modernity, or *asala* [authenticity], or the reconciliation of
> the two, but the problem, in truth, lies in the duality of our position towards
> this duality. We accept this duality at the level of modernisation and the need
> to modernise the economy, and other contemporary sectors, political, social
> and educational … However, at the same time, we refuse this *duality* on
> other levels: spiritual and intellectual life.
>
>   (al-Jabri, 1989: 13)[177]

In this section, I read the significations of the *Bab al-Hara* courtyard house in the context of the general "Arab wretchedness". I argue that the power of the introverted house to grant a sense of ontological security (Giddens, 1990), is located in a set of converging intrinsic and extrinsic factors that all lead the "Arab" individual back into the family sphere. The Palestinian poet, Mahmoud Darwish and the Moroccan thinker, al-Jabri, speak using a first-person plural to describe a crisis or impasse: the first relates to occupation, and the second to thought. This crisis is better described through the image of an "Arab" interior that is in a struggle to define itself vis-ä-vis an exterior, an Other that is hindering

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[176] Translated by the author. Darwish, Mahmoud (2002). *Halit Hisar* [State of Siege]. Beirut: Dar Riyad al-Rayyis. Original in Arabic:

أيُّها الواقفون علي العَتَبات ادخُلوا، واشربوا معنا القهوةَ العربيَّة قد تشعرون بأنكُم بَشَرٌ مثلنا أيها الواقفون

علي عتبات البيوت أخرجوا من صباحاتنا،نطمئنَّ إلي أننا بَشَرٌ مثلكُمْ!

     For another translation, please see the one by by Amina Elbendary, Darwish, Mahmoud (2002) 'Stage of Siege'. *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*. 11-17 April. Available from: http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2002/581/bo7.htm [Accessed 5 May 2015].

[177] Translated by Tarik Sabry in Sabry, T. (2010) *Cultural Encounters in the Arab World: On Media, the Modern and the Everyday*. London: I.B.Tauris.

its freedom. The sense of a break in trust, of feeling threatened and of being on the defensive is what characterizes the general mood.

My contribution is based on the analysis of the courtyard house as a visual sign that promotes the iconisation of Old Damascus as a non-corrupt, timeless, urban idyll. Here, it is important to differentiate between the meanings of real houses in Damascus, the hyperreal houses on the screen, and the interplay between the two. It is, of course, not possible to fully encompass the production of Damascus as both a place and a symbol. I first built on the work of Salamandra (2004) to identify the phase of the 1990s and 2000s as the time when cultural production (literature, television serials, etc.) by cultural élites contributed to the commodifying of the old city and the courtyard house. This phase benefitted from the process in which the courtyard houses of Old Damascus became "sites of memory" for a generation of Damascenes who moved away from the old city into modern apartment buildings, a process which started in the '40s and '50s. The second phase, observed between 2000 and 2010 under the rule of Bashar al-Asad, is characterized by foreign investments that facilitated the transformation of Old Damascus into a "heterotopia" of time (Chapter 4). The courtyard house is central to this process, for the houses of élite Damascenes that were expropriated to become museums during the 20th century became the reference to a trend to the 'museumification' of more and more houses, not only into cafés and restaurants, but also into boutique hotels reproducing an image of the real Old Damascus as a perfect, static place that compensates for the lack in everyday spaces. These two phases are taken to a third level by *Bab al-Hara* which, by using the museum houses as shooting locations, transformed the introverted courtyard house into a public monument that was visible to millions across the world. A visual monument of cultural heritage that embeds the characteristics of "sites of memory" and "heterotopias" retrospectively, crystallizing memory and accumulating time, standing for a utopic domestic lore that functions as a depository of identity.

By choosing the museum-like courtyard houses of Old Damascus as shooting locations, *Bab al-Hara* has succeeded in capitalizing on and reproducing the aesthetic value of the courtyard house, as well as in producing its meanings of sakina (peace), haram (sanctuary) and dar (circularity) in an imagistic form. Here, I was not only interested in the domestic as home, family and household (Silverstone, 1994), but also in the dialectical relationship between the house and time, in the case of Old Damascus. In other words, my emphasis

was on understanding the multiple meanings of this materialization of history in a house to tell an ahistorical story.

The importance of the Damascene courtyard house in *Bab al-Hara* is manifold. It first constitutes a "site of memory" that inspires images of Arab cultural history. The preserved museum houses of Old Damascus, although built during the Ottoman era, insinuate the heritage of Damascus as being the capital of the Ummayad dynasty, which connotes Arab or Muslim power and pride. Secondly, the aesthetics of the house that belonged to Damascus' élites, inhabited in the fiction by small business owners, connotes wealth and plenitude. Thirdly, the house structure, open from the inside and protected from the outside, resembling a fortress of collective dwelling, connotes security, protection and solidarity. Fourthly, the cultural meanings embedded in the house during the 19th century signify strong kinship relations, extended family households, and segregation between the sexes.

The cultural identity significations of the old Damascene courtyard house re-established the identity value of the domestic. This leads us back to the duality that is raised by al-Jabri (1989) in the opening quote above. A duality that is best interpreted by Chatterjee (1993), in terms of the material or "outside" domain of the economy, state craft, science and technology, in contrast with the spiritual or "inner" domain of cultural identity.[178] I build on the concepts of "outer" and "inner" domains to explain the power of the courtyard house and the neighbourhood (as courtyard house), which, in *Bab al-Hara*, is confronting the French Mandate and contributing to the imagining of domesticity as a sovereign space. Chatterjee bases his analysis on anti-colonial nationalisms in India, where he argues that the spiritual domain was declared to be the "sovereign territory" of nationalism, in response to the material domain, which was believed to be the sphere where "the West had proven its superiority" (1993: 6). Language, literature, art, schooling, and the family are defined as the main spheres where the nationalist project in India aimed to constitute an independent "inner" culture that is concurrently both "modern" and "non Western" (1993: 7-9). In the Arab region, the history of national liberation shows the interplay between

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[178] By using this duality to analyse the logic of the construction of the domestic sphere, I do not subscribe to this duality, but highlight its uses. Kassab (2010), based on Wannous, introduces the position of the Tunisian reformer of the 1860s, Kheireddine al-Tunisi, who warned against this duality and, in the footnotes, she compares his position to that of Chatterjee and establishes the interesting similarity in the use of the inner/outer domains across postcolonial settings.

nationalism and religion. The 1967 Naksa and the 1979 Iranian revolution, as historical events, have strengthened religious discourse and precipitated a moralising type of nationalism, where the family "inner" domain became central.[179] In the section below, I describe how, in the case of *Bab al-Hara*, religious and nationalist worldviews fuse to create a conservative, patriotic, family life that gains its legitimacy from the symbols that are embedded in the old courtyard house, answering to desires for sovereignty that is free from foreign dominance, and allowing for feelings of ontological security.

Ontological security refers "to the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action" (Giddens, 1990: 92). The Arab citizen, in doubt about his feelings of inner trustworthiness, struggling with an actively hostile world system (see Darwish above), and with no strong state to secure her/his rights, looks back for the localized contexts of trust in kinship systems, local communities, religion, and tradition. The image of the house evokes the emotion of ontological security, for it generates a sense of the continuity of things, characters, roles and places. Here, I aim to raise a few thoughts on re-theorizing ontological security in the context of the Levant. I dialogue with Giddens through inserting the experience of colonialism (lived in the Levant and represented by *Bab al-Hara*) to his conceptualization of ontological security that is associated with the notion of basic trust and is linked to habit. I engage with basic trust by highlighting the recurrent suspension of trust in modernity, its institutions, the human cost of globalization, and the failures of the postcolonial state project of modernity, as expressed in *Bab al-Hara* and by its viewers. This suspension of trust allows for the recreation of what Giddens (1990) defines as the pre-modern ontological security paradigm anchored in place. Here, I understand his explanatory binary of pre-modern and modern not as being phases of development, but as being concurrent states of representation, terminological frameworks and schemas for reproducing realities. That is, given the presumption that the Middle East lives in modernity (Al-Azmeh, 1993; Joseph, 2011; Sabry, 2010), I trace the uses and

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[179] Suad Joseph identifies the role of religious institutions in reinforcing what she calls "political familism" in Lebanon. She argues that "families are considered 'natural,' God-given in most religions in Lebanon. Religious leaders use the idioms of kinship for their own relationships—terminologies of 'father' and 'son' are woven through the discourse of most religions, especially Christianity, further sanctioning the idioms of kinship. The authority of the patriarch is considered morally grounded." (2011: 158). Although, in this PhD research, I do focus on the role of Islamic religious discourse, this does not mean that the Christian faith is not implicated in the discourse on family, as Joseph has made clear.

functions of the *local* as a premodern experience (before the time-space distanciation of globalization) in the modern present.

The "inner" domain gains precedence as a result of mistrust in the "enlightenment" project and its agents (both Arab and Western) in establishing a democratised, modernised, world that guarantees ontological security, and a coherent social existence. *Bab al-Hara*'s representation of an "inner" domain of kinship, its spatialisation and traditionalisation of everyday life, are a discursive response to the "Arab wretchedness". *Bab al-Hara* answers to an existential angst; a feature of modernity and its consequences (including colonialism and imperialism). In the face of the modern risks, ontological insecurities and modern warfare, *Bab al-Hara* digresses to a pre-modern temporality in order to provide security, certainty and coherence for its audiences. This is played out most clearly through its articulation of the domestic, the familiar and the sacred. The image of the house as a materialization of history constitutes a strong internal context for building ontological security, and so does the local community viewed through the idioms of kinship.

One remark should be added here regarding the specificities of Beirut and Damascus. While Joseph's (2011) work from Lebanon supports the analysis that family and kin are sought due to distrust in the state as a provider of necessary services and as a protector of citizens' rights, in Syria, the reasons that lie behind reversion to the inside of the home and to the family domain are explained, not in terms of what is lacking in state services, or of protection, but through the encroachment of state security into the domestic sphere, thus creating a general mood of suspicion and a dread of civic engagement in political opposition (Geros, 2008). My observations from Damascus, 2010, do not agree fully with Geros' empirical research during 1999-2001. However, the memory of reverting to the familial, which was a feature of the '80s and '90s in Syria, remained part of the narratives that were shared by the informants that I met a few months before the upheaval. The courtyard house constitutes a sign of a reliable and continuous past, present and future, irrespective of whether it is lived as a place of ontological security in the present. The nostalgic promise of the house gives legitimacy to a kin-based patriarchy that recreates a moral discourse, which ties segregation between the sexes to patriotism and to piety. In the section below, I explain the notion of domestic morality and problematize the possible generalizations that are based on meanings that are embedded in the text. I build on

167

interviews in Beirut and Damascus so as to critique *Bab al-Hara*'s ahistorical historicization of Damascus.

9.3. Domestic Morality

In this study of imagined and practised morality within the limits of *Bab al-Hara*, and its implicatedness in Café Rawda (Beirut), I do not configure the "moral" merely through the religious. I approach Ramadan as a social ritual, without disregarding its religious meanings. Ramadan, as a religious month of tradition, provides a temporal rhythm and a spatial meeting point, which allows for the establishing of a sense of ontological security, which helps to counter everyday life anxieties During Ramadan, Café Rawda attracts (as it does throughout the year) clients from all religious and sectarian identifications. Rawda remains a space of non-exclusivity and a meeting point continuously being reproduced (Massey, 1994), despite becoming a "moral space" of leisure, part of the "Islamic milieu" (Deeb and Harb, 2013).[180] In fact, I am more interested in the contestation over the Islamisation of spaces and morality within a context of multiple Islams that exist within a more complex socio-politics. I argue that the main values of manhood and chastity which are advocated by *Bab al-Hara*'s domestic morality, are pre-Islamic values that were embraced by Islam (al-Jabri, 2001). In the context of the Levant, these values are social values that are idealised and practiced by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. It is important to mention here that, similarly to Rawda, *Bab al-Hara* is a non-exclusive moral text. It includes Christian characters who play heroic roles as part of the struggle against colonialism. It is this presence of a multi-religious sociality that complicates an approach to Islam as an explanatory or causal concept (Al-Azmeh, 2013).

My contribution to the research on morality in the Levant lies in the following three dimensions. The first grounds *Bab al-Hara*'s morality in the symbolic landscape of the

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[180] While studies in the context of Egypt use the concept of Islamic revival to identify the general context of pious Muslims who follow the Sunni denomination of Islam, Deeb and Harb (2013) use the concept of the Islamic milieu in the context of Lebanon among Muslims following the Shi'i denomination. It is interesting that the concept of Islamic revival connotes both Shi'i and Sunni revivalist trends from al-Afghani to al-Khoumeini. Saba Mahmoud defines 'Islamic Revival' as a term "that refers not only to the activities of state-oriented political groups but more broadly to a religious ethos or sensibility that has developed within contemporary Muslim societies". (2005: 3). While 'Islamic milieu' connotes the "physical and symbolic spaces within which pious Shi'a Muslims live out a particular 'state of being,' the public sphere where its norms and values are debated as well as shaped, and the 'state of being' itself with its continually shifting moral norms." (Deeb and Harb, 2013: 37). In this research, I use Islamic milieu with the same three dimensional meanings as those that were developed by Deeb and Harb, however, I generalize its use to both Shi'i and Sunni pious Muslims.

courtyard house, with the neighbourhood as its extension. I use the term 'domestic morality' to denote a spatially placed normativity, protected within the house and centred on motherhood, marriage, and pedigree. I focus on manhood and chastity as two authoritative imaginings within the normative lifeworld of the family, and of the neighbourhood as a family. I juxtapose these idealised representations to the everyday life moral practices of followers of *Bab al-Hara*, residents of Beirut and Damascus, in 2010. I argue that it is the spatial anchoring of morality in a historicised moral domesticity, rather than religion, that grants *Bab al-Hara*'s moralising its disciplinary power. In other words, what is more interesting is this fusion between the sacred and profane in how *Bab al-Hara*'s imagining of the strongmen and protected houses contributes to empowering the religious discourse. The power of *Bab al-Hara* lies in its almost sacred idealization of the profane lifeworld of the gated home-like community that is resisting the foreign invaders. This domestic worldview is anchored in the courtyard house, which gives it historic legitimacy and, similarly, domestic morality gains its power from its residence in ontological security, thus inscribing the moral discourse in space. In *Bab al-Hara*, manhood and chastity are mobilized in the protection of a morality and a nation that is perceived to be "weakened" in confrontation with the "West". By implicating the imagined manhood and chastity in the everyday life of *Bab al-Hara* followers, I am careful not to participate in producing the religious and the secular as a binary. Here, morality is not limited to moral practices, but also to the interplay between discourses on moral decline, coupled with institutional mass media efforts to restore normative values, and it is then confronted at the level of everyday contradictions. This leads me to the second dimension: the non-Islamic roots of what is often branded as "Islamic" morality.

In his archaeology of Arab ethics, al-Jabri (2001) examines the pre-Islamic and Islamic influences/encounters that now define Arab morality. He identifies *muru'a,* which is the concept that defines manhood as chivalry and courage, to be Arab (both pre-Islamic and Islamic), while chastity is traced to an essential value carried through by Muslim scholars from Greek normative ethics. al-Jabri argues that, in Islam, the mind and not religion is the foundation of morality (2001: 103). He thus associates the Islamic with the contextual cognitive evaluation of the good and the right, and not with a sacred dogma. Here, I do not intend to engage in a discussion of morality from within Islamic thought and jurisprudence. What I care to highlight, however, is two-fold: firstly, that using the general singular notion of Islam, or Muslim, instead of Islams and Muslims, contributes to fixing

what is not fixed. Secondly, that in certain contexts in the Arab region, it is important not to conflate what is Muslim with what is Arab, and vice versa. Research on Islam and morality that is restricted to Islamic pious movements (Mahmoud, 2005; Hirschkind, 2006) escapes this intellectual blind spot, but tends to substitute Islam with Islamism (Schiekle, 2009). In the context of the Levant, manhood and chastity carry no specific identity and can be used within an Arab, Muslim, Christian, nationalist, or Islamist moral discourse, among others.

This leads to the third dimension, where the implication of an idealised domestic morality in everyday life allows for a study of the "moral" as an abstract system of ideas and values, as it is articulated, negotiated, and rationalised by individual linguistic and non-linguistic practices. In fact, while most studies on morality in the region are anthropologically informed by the practice approach, the value added by this study lies in juxtaposing mass mediated moralizing to everyday articulations that are in place, thus highlighting the extrinsic factors that are contributing to the teleology of the subject. I present the results under three categorizations: the spatial, the generational, and gender.

Superimposing the two sites of my research, Rawda Café and *Bab al-Hara*, I borrow from Lefebvre (1991) his conceptualisation of the three dimensions of space as the perceived, the lived and the conceived. I understand *Bab al-Hara* as a representation of space, or a conceived space that exists in a triad relationship with the perceived spatial practices of Rawda clients, and the lived representational spaces of visions of artists. Although representational spaces of Rawda do exist (see Figure 5), I care to focus on how *Bab al-Hara*, as a representation of space, presents a model of life, that exists in interaction with the spatial practices taking shape in Rawda. This duality, which is not oppositional since it exists within a triad relationship, allows for the augmentation of what is recurrent. In other words, the presence of the image of the courtyard house on the screen intensifies the vision of Rawda as a place of the past, and it thus influences the café as a space of daily practices. When the way of life in an idealized non-historical '30s Damascus is conceived in space, it interacts with the perceived spatial practices, thus the domestic morality of manhood and chastity is inscribed in space. This inscription, however, is influenced by social relations.

The generational analysis is important in order to explore the multiple meanings of the text and to identify the factors that influence its reception. My examination allows me to

deduce that situated experience, and not age *per se,* is a main influence on the viewing experience. Age, in this case, is a precondition of experiential knowledge, since the drama series claims to represent the '30s. Comparing the older generation with the younger generation, the observable difference in relation to viewing *Bab al-Hara* was not at the level of all of the interlocutors born in the '30s and '40s (in Beirut or Damascus), but at the level of those who have a situated experience of life in an old courtyard house, and/or social relations during that epoch. Two observations mark the difference between the younger and older generations: the desire of the younger generation to own a house, and their use of *Bab al-Hara* to idealize the past. To put it differently, the *Bab al-Hara* viewers of the younger generation tended to describe the past by referring to *Bab al-Hara* as a "true" representation. They articulated images from *Bab al-Hara* as being a mediated experience that explains how things were in the past. The older generation, who have a situated experience of the times of *Bab al-Hara*, contested its spatial and symbolic restorative attempts at producing the past. I infer that *Bab al-Hara*'s idealization of a morally superior past, free of class considerations, and of materialistic values, has a resonating powerful imagination among the young generation, however, it is challenged mainly by the older generation, who hold the knowledge to demystify the *Bab al-Hara* past.

From *Bab al-Hara*'s idealization of the past, I move to the moral domesticity that is symbolised by the two constructs: manhood and chastity, both idealized. I choose these two, because from the multiple values that are advanced by *Bab al-Hara*, these were the two recurrent themes among the discussions, while, for example, polygamy and the segregation of men and women were not brought up. The generational perspective is key to an analysis of the manhood construct. It, however, does not explain the complexity of negotiating the gender moralisation. For example, none of the interlocutors in any of the generations, underestimated the value of chastity. The non-anonymity of the interviews might explain why, in the case of chastity, this might be considered a sensitive or taboo subject, and most research participants took a reserved position. Although it is difficult to generalise, it is nevertheless observable that most of the interlocutors denounced women's sexual liberty, or identified its practice as high-priced. This did not apply to the idealized manhood, in fiction, or in "reality." It is interesting that the dwindling of the social order represented in *Bab al-Hara* is recognized at the level of its outcomes for men, but not for women. Women interlocutors, from both generations, declared the absence of the

patriarchal man that *Bab al-Hara* idealizes. Younger women deplored this absence, while older women dealt with it in a reflective nostalgic way, from which it was obvious that they remembered and missed their fathers, but did not wish men to get back the authority that they enjoyed in that vanished system. Rationalising manhood and chastity through the spoken text of *Bab al-Hara* meant a complex reading of the text, its symbols and morality, across generations and gender.

My multi-sited approach, which looks at the implicatedness of one text in the everyday life of two cities, allows for a number of demystifications: the private/public binary, culture that is segregated from the socioeconomic and the political, televisual teleologies that are solely explained through the lens of religion. The media ethnographic description or multiple localities, allow for an evaluation of the "Damascene Milieu" genre, not as a Syria-specific cultural product, but as a product that represents Damascus to the Arab region. Juxtaposing the idealized domesticity to realities outside Damascus itself, reveals the publicness of the domestic space that is open to the outside gaze as a representation of the nation. The result is the schism between the desired past as becoming, and the completely different present, insecure expected future of emigration, displacement or war. This incoherence, which was clear at the level of the image of manhood, continues at the level of defining the patriotic.

9.4. Fissures of the Self

What happens to the image of the house when its sovereignty is threatened by the native who collaborates with the foreign occupier, or, when the inside is divided into two halves that each claims its sovereignty? I build on Hage's (2006) critical deconstruction and the differentiation between the binaries inside/outside and insider/outsider to dissect the problematic of sectarianism as treason, and of unity as patriotism. I then deduce the workings of the accusation of treason in postcolonial contexts. I argue that the promise of ontological security that is attached to the imagining of the sovereign family-like community in *Bab al-Hara*, fails to counter the feelings of existential anxiety and suspicion that accompany the suspension of trust in the Other. The traitor, Ma'moun Beik, i n *Bab al-Hara* (Seasons 4 and 5, Chapter 7), is on the inside, and an insider who "belongs" to the socio-cultural space of the fictitious Damascene neighbourhood, but an

172

outsider at the level of political belonging. He works for the French colonisers, who are outsiders but are standing inside on Syrian territory. They are, however, being prevented from accessing the utopic, fictitious neighbourhood and in succeeding to secretly buy the houses through their local agent. The complexity of the spatial positioning, socio-cultural and political belonging and power relations complicate the analysis which in the case of immigration takes a clearer trajectory. In the fiction, the representation of the native collaborator assumes a collective identity that is based on a patriotic multi-sectarian unity. The internal forces of inclusion and exclusion strengthen a clear inside, vis-à-vis a clear outside. The traitor, in this context, is evident to the viewer and only creates problems for the community if he is covert, but when the men capture him they unite with the women to execute him at the neighbourhood gate in the last scene (Chapter 8). The *Bab al-Hara* ideal of unity, implicated in everyday internal power, struggles of sectarian loyalties and infra-state ʿ*asabiyya* (social solidarity) in Syria and Lebanon, fails to constitute a meaningful call for social cohesion. Instead, it strengthens the presence of multiple insides/outsides within a territorial inside. The insider, in this case, is always suspect. The insider is never inside or outside but is in the liminal state of suspicion. The power of the "West" to recruit native collaborators, the fragility of the Arab regimes to resist intervention, the weakness of dictatorships in building political immunity, and the challenges that are inbuilt into espionage and security apparatuses, exacerbates the risk of treason becoming a continuous discourse of the accusation of treason that leads to crippling divisions, civil wars and ontological insecurity.

The *Bab al-Hara* utopic view of a conservative "inner" protected Damascus might have succeeded in advancing a dominant reading of domestic morality, however, it failed to achieve a dominant reading of unity, which compensates for what the interlocutors regarded as a hollow Arab nationalist project. Traces of Arab nationalism, observed during the conversations, were debated within sectarian analysis. Both of which, conform to the binary of unity/sectarianism and do not provide a political and historic evaluation of sectarianism, and the role of internal and external powers in enriching and abusing sectarian discourses and institutions (Weiss, 2009). The travelling of the possibility of street violence, from Beirut to Damascus, that were implemented by state and non-state actors, and the actual meaning of Syria's transformation from an independent country to a battleground for multiple foreign and local struggles for power within and over Syria, raises questions on *Bab al-Hara* Season 7's ability to provide a utopic view of Syria and

Damascus. In 2015, the traitor has become the other "half of the population", so, according to regime and opposition loyalists, where does ontological security reside?

ANNEXE 1: The *Bab al-Hara* Story Line

General Introduction:

Bab al-Hara tells the lifeworld stories of a fictitious neighbourhood, set in Old Damascus under the French Mandate during the early 20th century. The neighbourhood, which is called Dabʿ, is portrayed as an example of social solidarity and the cohesion of its inhabitants. The general recurrent themes revolve around marriage, procreation and divorce, motherhood, death, resistance against colonialism, and collaboration with the external forces.

The central family of the drama series is headed by Abu Issam (Abbas al-Nouri) and Umm Issam (Sabah el Jaza'iri). Abu Issam (meaning the father of Issam) or Shawkat is a respectable member of the neighbourhood's seniors. He works as a barber and Arabic doctor (medicinal herbs expert). His wife, Suad or Umm Issam (the mother of Issam), belongs to a family of pedigree ('usul), with her two brothers as main figures in the fictional neighbourhood. The first brother, Abu Chehab (Samer al-Masri), is the neighbourhood's chief of strongmen (ʿaqid) and the main legume trader, and the second brother, Abu Jassem (Ayman Bahnasi), who is the owner of the neighbourhood's Hammam. (See Annexe 2).

Season 1 (2006)

Bab al-Hara Season 1 tells the story of al-Idaʿshari, a poor man in the neighbourhood who steals gold coins from the fabric trader and kills the neighbourhood's guard who catches him jumping out of the trader's courtyard. He makes a false oath in front of the seniors and leaves the Dabʿ neighbourhood to go to the rival neighbourhood of Abu al-Nar, then he tries to come back and is assisted by the community to start a decent life. At the end of the season, he falls sick, and on his death bed he admits the robbery and murder. In the meantime, we learn about the competitive relationship between Umm Issam and Feryal, which has led to a divorce between Umm Issam and Abu Issam. The neighbourhood's men were assisting in the transport of weapons to the rebels in Palestine, but their efforts were hampered by the presence of an undercover spy working with the British forces, who kills

one of the men. The spy is Steif, pretending to be a poor, blind man, who was taken into the care of the community. The season ends with the neighbourhood's zaʿim Abu Saleh promising the seniors that he will capture the killer.

Season 2 (2007)

Season 2 starts with Steif killing the zaʿim Abu Saleh, and the leadership of the neighbourhood passing to Umm Issam's brother, Abu Chehab. Abu Chehab defends the community against the attacks of the rival neighbourhood and assists in the mission to transport weapons. In his absence, Abu Issam takes on the leadership role until his second divorce with Umm Issam, which leads to a lot of conflict in the community. Abu Issam's move to sleep at his shop leads to Steif's exposure as an undercover spy and his eventual execution. By the end of the season, the couple remarry and Abu Issam succeeds in building a truce between the two rival neighbourhoods.

Season 3 (2008)

In Season 3, the neighbourhood receives the news of Abu Issam's death while participating in resistance activities. However, his body was never found and so was not buried. Abu Chehab is married to Abu Hatem's daughter and Issam marries for the second time. A new informant, Hamdi, infiltrates the neighbourhood, and the French Mandate forces start to have a physical presence in the neighbourhoods, causing the death of a child in the al-Mawy neighbourhood, which causes some of its inhabitants to start helping the Dabʿ men in resistance activities.

Season 4 (2009)

Abu Chehab mysteriously disappears, which leads his nephew, Muʿtaz to take on some of his roles. The Dabʿ neighbourhood falls under complete siege by the French troops after the men take French soldiers as hostages. The neighbourhood's men use Umm Zaki's house to dig a tunnel out, so as to be able to smuggle food and weapons. Some of the men join the rebels in the Ghuta area. The women also support the neighbourhood in collective cooking and the distribution of rations. An agreement is finally reached with the French

and the blockade is removed and the men given amnesty. Ma'moun Beik, the late Abu Saleh's nephew, returns to the neighbourhood from a life abroad.

Season 5 (2010)

Abu Chehab's body is found and the neighbourhood have a suspect. Issam and Muʿtaz, receive a letter written by Abu Issam indicating that he is still alive and is imprisoned by the French. The neighbourhood becomes involved in plans to locate the prison in order to free Abu Issam. Muʿtaz, is appointed ʿaqid following his murdered uncle, when he succeeds in leading an operation to rescue Umm Joseph from imprisonment at the military hospital. The French soldiers remove the neighbourhood gate and, in the process, Muʿtaz kills a French soldier and escapes to the Ghuta. The French informant, Ma'moun Beik, succeeds in buying houses, leading to the municipality's decision to destroy old houses so as to widen the streets. The season ends with Ma'moun Beik being exposed as Lieutenant Nimr and being executed at the neighbourhood gate, which they have succeeded in bringing back.

Season 6 (2014)

Abu Issam returns to the neighbourhood after years of detention in a French prison and a military hospital where he meets Nadia (Maisun Abu-As'ad), the French nurse in charge of his case. Abu Issam falls in love with Nadia and they are married. Nadia is recruited as a French agent, responsible for gathering intelligence on Abu Issam and Muʿtaz, who is given amnesty and returns to the neighbourhood. Nadia falls in love with Abu Issam, becomes pregnant, moves to live in his house with Umm Issam (which creates a buzz in the neighbourhood), starts to feel she belongs, quits her espionage job and confesses to Abu Issam, who keeps her secret after eventually forgiving her. Another local French informant, Wawy, infiltrates the neighbourhood as a construction worker, thus creating a lot of problems. Abu Zafer, originally from the Dabʿ neighbourhood, moves back from Aleppo, after having succeeded in making a fortune. He aims to take the leadership from Abu Issam.

Season 7 (2015)

This season is still showing (episode 20). It starts with Nadia, Abu Issam's French second wife, sick with tuberculosis, and the French Commandant, who wanted to settle the score with Nadia and Abu Issam, visiting their house in order to pressure Abu Issam to let Nadia travel to France. Nadia dies and is buried in the neighbourhood's cemetery, defying the Commandant, who wanted to retrieve her body. After her death, the Commandment accuses Abu Issam of having falsified the official papers of another detainee in order to escape from detention, creating many problems for Abu Issam in the community, who eventually learn that Nadia used to work as a French intelligence officer. We also meet Abu Issam's friend, Doctor Moussa, who medicates Nadia. The Doctor's daughter, Sarah, falls in love with Muʿtaz through the window. She later escapes to Abu Issam's house, causing mounting tension between the Dabʿ and the Jewish neighbourhood. In one incident, Nasim, the Doctor's son, and Maurice, his friend, burn Abu Issam's shop in retaliation for Muʿtaz's actions. The seniors from both neighbourhoods are meeting to prevent the Fitna.

ANNEXE 2: *Bab al-Hara* (Season 5) Cast and Characters[181]

Character	Actor/ Actress	Short Description
Abu Saleh	Abdul Rahman al-Rashi[182]	Neighbourhood's zaʿim or leader. Dies in Season 2.
Feryal	Wafaa Mousalli	Abu Saleh's nephew. Widow with one daughter, Latifa. In Season 5, she is married to Ma'moun Beik who was believed to be her cousin returning from a life abroad. She shoots the first bullet from Umm Joseph's pistol during his execution scene.
Latifa	Lilia al-Atrash	Feryal's daughter, Issam's first wife.
Lieutenant Nimr/ Abu Kamel (Ma'moun Beik)	Fayez Kazak	A Syrian enrolled with the French army, who enters the neighbourhood in the guise of Abu Kamel or Ma'moun Beik.
Abu Issam (Shawkat)	Abbas al-Nouri	Well respected neighbourhood barber and druggist. Dies in Season 3. Is back in Season 6. Takes on the role of the zaʿim (leader).
Umm Issam (Suad)	Sabah al-Jazairi	Married to Abu Issam. The sister of the neighbourhood's chief, Abu Chehab.
Issam	Milad Youssef	Abu and Umm Issam's eldest. The neighbourhood's barber after his father. In Season 5, he is married to his third wife.
Muʿtaz	Wael Sharaf	Abu and Umm Issam's son. The neighbourhood's chief of strongmen (ʿaqid), following his uncle Abu Chehab.
Jamila	Dana Jabr	Abu and Umm Issam's daughter. Married to Bachir.

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[181] These are only the characters and cast mentioned in the text.

[182] In the closing credits of Season 7, *Bab al-Hara*'s makers dedicate "a salute to the souls of the artists," who died between 2011 and 2015, two of whom died of heart attacks, three were sick, and the youngest, Rafeʿ, was kidnapped and killed by rebel opposition militia, after being accused of support for the regime. The six *Bab al-Hara* actors who have died since Season 5, Hassan Dakkak (1956-2011), played Abu Bachir. Adham al-Malla (1932-2014) played Abu Mahmoud, Abdel Rahman al-Rashi (1934-2014) played zaʿim Abu Saleh, Wafiq al-Zaʿim (1960-2014) played Abu Hatem, Salim Kalas (1936-2013) played Abu Khater, and Mohammad Rafeʿ (1982-2012) played Ibrahim.

Dalal	Anahid Fayad	Abu and Umm Issam's daughter. Married to Ibrahim, who is killed by the French in Season 4.
Abu Chehab	Samer el-Masri	The neighbourhood's chief of strongmen. Dies in Season 3.
Abu Hatem	Wafiq el-Zaʿim	Owner of the neighbourhood's café. Takes leadership roles in Season 5.
Abu Bachir	Hassan Dakak	The neighbourhood's baker.
Bachir	Oussama Halal	Abu Bachir's son. Good friends with Issam and Muʿtaz, married to their sister Jamila. Works with father in the bakery.
Hoda	Najlaa al-Khamri	Abu Bachir's daughter. Married to Issam.
Abu Khater	Salim Kallas	Craftsman, owner of the shop that manufactures Damascene metal (silver, copper and brass) inlay Arabesque wear.
Khater	Alaa Zuʿbi	Abu Khater's son. Works with his father. Muʿtaz's closest friend.
Abu Badr	Mohammad Kheir al-Jarrah	Abu Issam's neighbour. He does not have a job and is dependent on his strong wife.
Umm Joseph	Muna Wassef	Midwife. Friends with *Bab al-Hara's* midwife, Umm Zaki. Was assisting the neighbourhood in fighting the French (Season 4). In Season 5 Muʿtaz leads an infiltration into the military hospital in order to free her and she is moved into hiding in the neighbourhood at Abu Bachir's house.
Abu Youssef (Elias)	Nawar Bulbul	Umm Joseph's nephew from Palestine. Travels to Damascus during Season 4 to transport arms to the rebels in Palestine. He is shot by the French. He introduces Umm Joseph to the *Bab al-Hara* neighbourhood.
Abu Diab/ Abu Qaʿud	Qusai Khauli	Syrian who was in French detention with Abu Issam where he was tortured by Lieutenant Nimr. He infiltrates the neighbourhood as the garbage collector (Abu Qaʿud) in order to help the neighbourhood uncover Ma'moun Beik.

Abu al-Nar	Ali Karim	ʿaqid or the chief of strong men of the rival neighbourhood. In Season 5, Issam marries his daughter as his third wife.

GLOSSARY

'iftar:	breaking the fast in Ramadan
'iskan:	dwelling
'iwan:	three walled room within the courtyard
'usul:	pedigree
agha (pl. aghawat):	chief or master in Ottoman, a title used during the Ottoman Empire
al-bi'a al-Shamiyya:	Damascene Milieu
al-mustaqbal la ilak:	the future is yours
ard al-diyar:	courtyard (literally, land of the homeland)
argileh:	hookah or hubble-bubble (argileh is Lebanese dialect)
asala:	authenticity
Bab al-hara:	neighbourhood gate – name of a television drama series
bab:	door or gate
Barak:	Blessings
bawja'a:	popular damascene accent
Bayt:	ʿarabi: courtyard house
bayt:	House
Beiruti	from Beirut
Bilad al-Sham:	Levant
bitmun:	you are in a position to demand
dabʿ:	hayena – name of *Bab al-Hara's* fictitious neighbourhood
dar (noun):	house
dar (verb):	to circle, to spin
dar al-baqa':	The Hereafter (lit. the eternal house)
dar al-fana':	The Here and Now (lit. the ephemeral house)
dar al-qarar:	the Hereafter (lit. judgment day)
dar al-salam:	heaven (lit. house of peace)
darmeseq:	watered land in Syriac

diyar:	homeland
fanus/fawanis:	Ramadan lamps
fitna:	sedition
ghurba:	exile or strange land
ghuta:	lowland – region around Damascus (*Barada* riverside grove)
habib:	beloved
habibi:	my beloved
hamimiyya:	intimacy
hammam:	Roman or Turkish bath
hanan:	tenderness
hanin:	nostalgia
hara:	neighbourhood
haram:	sanctuary
hatta:	scarf
hizbullah:	party of God
hob:	love
hurriyya:	freedom
hwaynto:	what a loss
kamil mukammal:	financially at ease, (lit. perfect or perfected)
katb kitab:	signing the marriage contract
Kaʿba:	sacred cube shaped structure in the centre of al-Haram Mosque in Mecca
khiyana:	Treason
la ʿyunak:	for your eyes
madafa:	hosting saloon
madʿukin:	life-tested
maqha shaʿbi:	popular café
masturin:	Sheltered
milaya:	full-body garment, black cloth that is wrapped around the body

mukhabarat:	secret intelligence
mumanaʿa:	rejectionism, anti-conspiracy or anti-imperialism
mundassin:	Infiltrators
murabaʿ:	square
muru'a:	virility based virtues
musalsalat:	drama series
mushriqa:	Bright
muʿassal:	Honeyed
nakhwa:	Gallantry
naranj:	bitter orange – citrus aurantium
q/abaday (pl. q/abadayat):	strongman (strongmen)
qahwa:	coffeehouse or café
rakʿat:	one unit of Islamic prayer
Ramadan:	holy month of fasting in the Muslim calendar
rawda:	garden – name of café on the sea-side in Beirut
sahn:	centre, courtyard
sakan (verb):	to dwell
sakina:	tranquillity and peace
sala:	prayers or ritualistic prayer
salat al-tarawih:	non-compulsory extra prayers performed solely during Ramadan based on sets of 4 rakʿat followed by rest
Sham:	Damascus or Syria
Shami:	from Damascus or Syria
sharaf:	honour
shirwal:	Aladdin trousers
suhur:	predawn Ramadan meal
sukn:	tranquillity and peace
sur:	Wall
sutr:	protection
sutra:	veil or shelter

takhwin:	accusation of treason
tarbush:	head cover, fez
turath:	Heritage
wajh:	face
zuʿran:	thugs
ʿabaya:	cloak, loose over-garment
ʿajami:	non-Arab or Persian (Lebanese dialect)
ʿaqid:	chief of strongmen
ʿarus al-bahr:	mermaid – the name of a sea-café adjacent to Rawda café
ʿasabiyya:	social solidarity

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