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Nefissa Naguib, *Nurturing Masculinities: Men, Food, and Family in Contemporary Egypt*, University of Texas Press, 2015, 144 pp., \$21.95 US (pbk), ISBN 9781477307106.

The cloth had been spread on the low table and the cushions arranged around it. The head of the household came and sat down cross-legged in the principal place. The three brothers filed in... The brothers took their places politely and deferentially, with their heads bowed as though at Friday prayers... No one dared look directly at their father's face. When they were in his presence they would not even look at each other, for fear of being overcome by a smile... Sitting with him, even for such a short period, was extremely taxing for them. They were forced to observe military discipline all the time. Their fear itself made them nervous and prone to the very errors they were trying so hard to avoid... The mother carried in the large tray of food and placed it on the cloth. She withdrew to the side of the room near a table on which stood a water jug. She waited there, ready to obey any command.¹

—Naguib Mahfouz, *Palace Walk*

This excerpt from the classic Egyptian novel seems to confirm everything that there is to know about Egyptian/Arab men and food. The meal, like everything else in Arab culture, supposedly, is framed by a powerful patriarchy that places men on top and women cordoned off in the shadows. Nefissa Naguib in *Nurturing Masculinities: Men, Food, and Family in Contemporary Egypt* aims to disrupt the academic and popular notions of masculinity in Egypt, and the broader Arab world, by examining men's relationship with food. The heart of her book is the "simple yet complex idea that food is a powerful marker of manhood, fatherhood, and family structure in contemporary Egypt" (123).

Naguib sets out to support this idea by presenting an anthropologic study of her conversations with "Muslim middle-class and lower-middle-class men with ties to popular inner-city quarters on either side of Tahrir Square..." (9). The words of her interlocutors ground a four-part analysis of food and masculinity in post-2011 Egypt. After a well-cited introduction, which lays out the theoretical justifications for focusing on men, their identities, and their narratives of food, her first chapter introduces and interrogates the concept of "nurturing masculinities." This neologism tries to capture the idea that an

¹ Naguib Mahfouz, *The Cairo Trilogy*, trans. William Maynard Hutchins, et al. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), 23-24.

Egyptian man's masculinity is, as Marcia Inhorn notes on the back cover, "measured by the care, nurturance, love, and daily bread" that he brings to domestic life. Naguib sees her work as an expansion of Inhorn's own work in *The New Arab Man: Emergent Masculinities, Technologies, and Islam in the Middle East*.² Naguib and Inhorn both try to dislocate Arab masculinity from the unquestioned association with patriarchy. This action is absolutely necessary to understand gender in the Middle East and free us from the image of the tyrannical *paterfamilias* and cowed (and hidden) women that shapes the popular perception of the region.³ Naguib shows the power of this new thinking when she recounts words of her interlocutors like this: "It is shameful for a man not to give his wife enough money for the food, and not to come home at least once a week with seasonal fruits for the children. You know, I turn the key to my home and I hear my daughter ask, 'What did you get me today, *ya baba?*'" (39).

She follows this chapter with a stark shift away from men's role in the Egyptian home towards an analysis of the "food activism" of young male members of the Muslim Brotherhood. This food activism entails activities like distributing food, keeping peace in government bread lines, and monitoring government bakeries to make sure that their work is above board. For its practitioners, this is a faith-driven way to battle the inequities of an Egyptian society that leaves roughly ninety percent of the population subsisting on less than fifty-thousand pounds a year.⁴ Naguib points to this food activism as evidence that faith-based action, especially when it concerns Islam, defies easy characterization. She sees this activism as "straddling the boundaries between orthodoxy and nonconformity, the traditional and the modern, the old and the young, and the local and the global" (61). Although this chapter makes an interesting contribution to our understanding of the Muslim Brotherhood, it is an odd fit with the rest of the book. I see the connection Naguib is trying to draw, the ways these members of the Muslim Brotherhood deal with food can tell us something about their masculinities. However, there is not a one-to-one comparison with the rest of the subjects in the book. These young men are talking about how food fits with their political identity, while we get very little about how it shapes their domestic identity. For all the other men in the book it is the reverse, we hear about their thoughts on food and their domestic role and little on food and the political. These comparisons thus serve only to highlight the deficiencies of each analysis.

Naguib then returns to the intersection of masculinity, food, and the domestic in Chapter 3, which also happens to be her best. At its center are her interactions with Mustafa Hashim, a taxi driver who insists that the best rice is made with *samna baladi* (clarified butter). As Naguib unpeels Hashim's preference in rice, even visiting his old family home and making rice, we discover his preference is based on the way his mother prepared rice. Hashim's poignant recollections, and his refusal to believe rice made with olive oil could compare to that made with clarified butter, call the reader to their own strongly held beliefs on food. Naguib mines this powerful connection to food to argue that when Egyptian men, and people in general, talk about food they are retelling their own personal histories. The

² Marcia Inhorn, *The New Arab Man: Emergent Masculinities, Technologies, and Islam in the Middle East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

³ See Mona Eltahawy, "Why Do They Hate Us: The Real War on Women is in the Middle East," *Foreign Policy* April 23, 2012. Although Eltahawy brings up some very salient points, much of her argument plays into this stereotype.

⁴ Economic Research Forum & Central Agency for Public Mobilization & Statistics (CAMPAS), *Income, Expenditure & Consumption Survey 2012/2013, Vol.5, Average of Household Income & Percentage Distribution of Incomes According to Socioeconomic Characteristics of Household* (Cairo: Arab Republic of Egypt, January 2014), 14.

tastes and smells of food “offer daily confirmation of what people carry with them and to what they keep returning (80).”

In the last chapter, Naguib focuses on how the masculinity of her interlocutors is tied heavily to their self-identification as *ibn al-balad*. Literally translated as “son of the country,” it is a term that encompasses all that her interlocutors, and those of their social grouping, deem authentically Egyptian. The *ibn al-balad* is also defined by what he is not, *ibn al-nas*, “son of the people” and one with no roots in the country, and *afrangi*, “foreign.” For Naguib, the genuine *ibn al-balad* is “chivalrous, generous, smart, and ‘light-blooded’ (quick witted)” (45). He can perform each of these characteristics through food. He is chivalrous when he brings meat home for his wife and daughter. He is generous when he provides cookies or tea to visitors or neighbors. He is smart when he goes to the market and picks out the best quality foodstuffs. And he is light-blooded, when he sits with his friends or guests over a meal and laughs and jokes. Naguib is particularly focused on this last aspect, being light-blooded (Ar. *Dammu kbafif*), because it so clearly counters the stereotype of the stern and patriarchal Arab man. In fact, humor is often the last recourse for men who live in a society that leaves them impoverished and disenchanting. As one interlocutor noted, joking was, under the circumstances, “instead of committing suicide” (120).

Naguib has touched on something understudied, yet powerful. It is not coincidental that one of the major slogans of the 2011 Tahrir movement was “bread, freedom, and social justice.” Food is incredibly important in Egyptian society. What you eat, where you eat it, who you eat it with, and how much you pay for it, animate the conversations of Egyptians. And anyone who has spent time in Egypt has the story(ies) of hospitality and offered food (sometimes unwanted). Tying this to men and masculinity is also quite significant. The image of the severe, dour, and religiously conservative Arab man, the perfect complement to the cowed, weak, and hidden Arab woman, has become a powerful stereotype in popular culture.

While this trope is thankfully no longer present in the academic world, it suffers from its own issues for which this book is a tonic. The study of the Middle East has only really begun to escape its marginalized position as an exercise in finding the exotic and curious. The fact that its geopolitical “importance” underpins this rise to relevance means that most of the interest of non-specialists relates to this “importance,” read terrorism, Islamism, conflict, etc. This is what those who take the courses, read the books, and decide course offerings want. Scholars themselves, recognizing the dispiriting conditions in many of the countries they study, want to use the limited attention that non-specialists pay to the region to shine light on the issues that have ravaged it. The sum of these two effects is that the study of the Middle East is often drained of the vibrancy, humor, and humanity that characterize this and all regions of the world.

Naguib’s study of food, and to a lesser extent humor, is a welcome addition to the growing literature that eschews “serious” issues to focus on the lived experience of those in the Middle East. Naguib’s study shows the power of this approach. Her focus on food, which made her interlocutors more forthcoming, gives readers a more honest and meaningful depiction of masculinity in Egypt. We see that with this passage: “Now it is my turn to tell you about my favorite dish. It is the one I love the most. But I did not want to tell you in front of all the people. It is personal... My favorite dish is the first meal *el madam* [his wife] made for me: meat with okra. Here, I will phone her so she can give you the recipe” (110). This focus also brings the reader closer to the day-to-day reality of the country’s residents. Elections, riots, or wars have tremendous impact, but they are short

staccatos in the song of someone's life. It is the smell of bread wafting from the ovens that comprise the rhythm of that song.

Despite the fact that Naguib discusses something real and powerful, her execution prevents this book from reaching its full potential. The smell of freshly baked bread and the sound of meat sizzling in *samma baladi* are stifled by Naguib's over-citation. Her book is never able to develop a strong narrative flow because as soon as it starts, she breaks it up with excurses on anthropological debates. The recognition of the state of the field has its place, in the introductory phases of the book. It unfortunately appears throughout the body of *Nurturing Masculinities* and does not let her analysis breathe. This tic is not the result of a lack of substance, but lack of belief in the power of the material.

She is cognizant of the fact that some scholars characterize food studies as "scholarshiplite" (39) and seems to be constantly trying to convince the reader her work is important and vital by citing other scholars. It of course has the opposite effect. Not only does the too-frequent calling back of other scholars undermine her authority, it crowds out important voices. For example, the thoughts of those who were accepting bread and help from the Muslim Brotherhood would have made her chapter on food activism stronger. Do they accept the message of the Muslim Brotherhood with the food or do they take the food in spite of the message? It would also have been enlightening to hear from the older members of the Muslim Brotherhood, who the younger members were reacting against. What did they really think of this food activism? With more space, she may have also been able to analyze the dichotomy of "foreign" and "native" that she readily accepts. She hints at the complexity of it, the traditional butcher with the "*afrangi* (foreign)" methods (106) and the prepackaged rice on the shelf of Um Mustafa, who is the embodiment of her son's obsession with traditional Egyptian cuisine (79).

There are several other instances where the reader wants more from the author and her interlocutors because what she provides is so excellent. This book makes meaningful contributions to our understanding of Egypt, the anthropology of food, and Arab masculinity. It is thus a useful book for scholars of any of these specialties. However, because of its extensive reliance on other scholarship and lack of narrative flow, it would be a challenging read for the non-specialist. This is an unfortunate reality as it is exactly the non-specialist who would benefit from seeing Egyptian men as funny, caring, and nurturing individuals who are more likely to offer you something cold to drink than a lecture on the corruptness of Western living.

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