

Empires and Emporia: Fictions of the Department Store in the Modern Mediterranean

by

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## ABSTRACT

*Empires and Emporia: Fictions of the Department Store in the Modern Mediterranean* examines the function of nineteenth-century Egyptian and French department stores as urban spaces and literary symbols which shaped and contested the concept of citizenship in both nations. I offer a new reading of these spaces by contextualizing narratives about them within the modern history of the Mediterranean, divided as it was among the British, French and Ottoman empires. I trace the historiography of the modern Mediterranean to the vision developed by the French utopianist Saint-Simon (1760-1825). Saint-Simon imagined the modern Mediterranean as a “mother sea” bringing together Orient and Occident, connected by networks of trade and transport. Such a vision would later be realized through projects promoted by his disciples, such as the Suez Canal and the urban planning of Cairo.

French and Egyptian department stores, inspired by the Saint-Simonian project, assumed a key role in the creation of a modern Mediterranean culture, as they formed commercial and cultural networks in a transnational, colonial, and postcolonial context. Drawing on archival documentation as well as literary works, and invoking theories of human geography and cultural memory, I reconstruct the urban and cultural history of the Parisian and Cairene department stores to examine their role as urban and cultural landmarks, which influenced the city dwellers’ notions of gender, class and race. Through a study of Emile Zola’s *Au bonheur des dames*, Huda Shaarawi’s Arabic memoirs and her newspaper *L’Egyptienne*, Jacqueline Kahanoff’s *Jacob’s Ladder*, and a selection of contemporary works — Latifa el Zayat’s *Al-Bab Maftuh* (*The Open Door*), Paula Jacques’s *Lumière de l’oeil* and Gilda Stambouli *souffre et se*

*plaint*, Robert Solé's *Le tarbouche*, Waguih Ghali's *Beer in the Snooker Club*, Victor Teboul's *La Longue découverte de l'étrangeté*, Samir Raafat's *Cairo, the early years*, and Ilios Yannakakis's *Alexandria 1860-1960* —, I reveal how the Francophilia, Egyptomania and Orientalism sustained by department stores led Egyptian and French writers to use the stores as a strategic literary symbol in rewriting a critical moment of their nation's history, to reinvent their national identity, and to interrogate issues of modernity, cosmopolitanism, Levantinism, and social equality.

## Chapter 1

### Undoing the Utopian Gesture: Revisiting Mediterranean Geography

La Méditerranée...son personnage est complexe, encombrant, hors série. Il échappe à nos mesures et à nos catégories. De lui inutile de vouloir écrire l’histoire simple.

[The Mediterranean...its character is complex, cumbersome, atypical. It escapes our calculations and categories. It is useless to try to write a simple history of it.]

—Fernand Braudel<sup>1</sup>

La place Muhammad-Ali étoile d’autres itinéraires de ma mémoire. Je me souviens des grands magasins, du côté de la place Sainte-Catherine: Hannaux, Chalon, Sédnaoui...Les vendeuses: Juives, Italiennes, Arméniennes, Grecques, Maltaises, veilles filles à maigre dot ou jeunes filles espérant le mariage promis et toujours repoussé, parlaient toutes le français, socles de leur polyglottisme. Elles étaient à l’image de leurs cadettes, ces écolières des écoles chrétiennes dont la scolarité atteignaient péniblement le niveau du certificat d’études...Elles faisaient partie de ce petit peuple “européen” d’Alexandrie, d’origines ethniques et religieuses si diverses, à qui revenait le mérite d’avoir perpétué la *lingua franca* –le français- durant des générations. (Yannakakis 1992, 129)

Mohammed Ali Square lights up other avenues in my memory.<sup>2</sup> I remember the department stores over towards St. Catherine’s Square: Hannaux, Chalon, Sednaoui. The salesgirls were Jewish, Italian Armenian, Greek, Maltese; some consigned to spinsterhood by meager dowries, others young and hopeful of the promised but ever postponed marriage. They all spoke French, the foundation of their polyglot world. They were the very image of their juniors, those pupils of the Christian schools whose studies scarcely reached the level of *certificat d’études*. .... They were part of Alexandria’s European proletariat of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, who could take credit for having perpetuated the *lingua franca*—French—over generations. (Yannakakis 1997, 110)

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<sup>1</sup> My translation; Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II*, 1999, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Yannakakis uses the Arabized name for the Ottoman ruler of Egypt (1805-1848). Throughout the dissertation, however, I will use the Ottoman equivalent, Mehmet Ali.

For Ilios Yannakakis, the department stores' signs and counters provide the lens for projecting the image of Alexandria's Mediterranean communities. Mohammed Ali Square comes into being when he utters the various names of department stores in his native city. As the neon signs douse the city in light, they draw a contour of the main streets, and by allowing the readers a glimpse inside the *grand magasin*, Yannakakis presents the city's cultural landscape cemented together by Francophone culture. In this context, the department store turns into a microcosm of the larger society seen in retrospect and a miniature map of the city to document the "brief history of Alexandria's cosmopolitan life between 1860-1960."<sup>3</sup>

As Robert Ilbert indicates in the introduction to the book which includes Yannakakis's article: "Alexandria stood as the symbol of an open Mediterranean unlike the sea of today, sealed along all its coasts by petty nationalism"(Ilbert 1997, 15). The very fact of Yannakakis being a Francophone Alexandrian historian of Greek origins who lived in Czechoslovakia and ended up in France attests to that unique experience that he seeks to describe. Despite the utopian aspect of the department store depicted by Yannakakis, his description is still fraught with nationalist tension. Soon enough, as the readers proceed through the paragraph, the homogenizing French aspect that gives shape to Yannakakis's department store reveals many distinct subgroups and cultures: Greek, Italian, Maltese and other nationalities who communicate via French, a foreign language that relates neither to their national backgrounds, nor to the colonizer, English, nor to the locale where they live, Alexandria.

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<sup>3</sup> The title of the edited volume which includes Yannakakis's work

On the other side of the sea, almost a century earlier, Emile Zola invokes a similar geo-historical project. Writing during the early phase of the Third Republic (1870-1940), he takes the department stores as one of the focal sites to document the rise and fall of the Second Empire (1852-1870). In contrast to Yannakakis's account, Zola's novel *Au Bonheur des dames* (1883), presents the opposite image by highlighting the close-knit relationship between Orientalism and French commercial culture, manifest in the department store's architectural design, its sales exhibitions, and its advertisements. Zola dubs the newly established Parisian *grand magasin* an "Oriental bazaar" and a "harem," and such a discourse looms large in the novel. For the author, the ever-expanding department store heralds the demise of traditional boutiques. It represents the epitome of consumerist decadence, a social crisis in which the East is recreated within the heart of the imperial metropolis, leading to an indelible change in the social and cultural map of France (see Chapter 3).

Despite these seemingly disparate images and discourses associated with the French and Egyptian department stores, both sites share a common historical background. They emerged within the context of a modern Mediterranean project envisioned by the French philosopher and utopian Claude Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825), who sought to unite the entire sea via a network of trade and transport. While it started as a utopian ideology, especially during the initial phase of Franco-Egyptian cooperation, Saint-Simonianism would eventually propel sweeping changes in France and Egypt. As Saint-Simon's followers rose to rank in the French government during the Second Empire (1852-1870), Saint-Simonian ideals became part and parcel of French imperialism and gave further shape to French colonialism

and the entire region (see Chapter 2). The Suez Canal in particular served as a joint project around which both France and Egypt consolidated their images as leading modern powers in their respective regions.

Yannakakis's and Zola's accounts and the reception of them draw attention to two competing currents that still dominate the representation of the Mediterranean veering between a totalizing image and a fragmented nationalist one. Whereas Yannakakis's text is framed as a historical account of Egypt's Mediterranean society, Zola's work is usually divorced it from its larger regional Mediterranean context and treated strictly within the framework of French nationalism or European relations.<sup>4</sup> One of the major challenges of Mediterranean Studies consists in being caught between two "utopian gestures."<sup>5</sup> Any attempt to reconstruct a totalizing image of the sea leads to a reductive perspective that effaces local specificity. Similarly, the desire to focus entirely on specific areas or nation-states around the Mediterranean basin overlooks the impact of the larger Mediterranean both as a milieu and as a myth in shaping this space.

While each text separately sheds light on the national and social context of their respective authors, read together both stories offer a macroscopic view on the transformations that took place within the larger Mediterranean which give further insight into these particular accounts described by the two authors. Read together, both works—that of Yannakakis and Zola—suggest a cyclical history of commercial spaces

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<sup>4</sup> For a brief survey on the literary criticism of Zola's work, see Brian Nelson's *Émile Zola: a Selective Analytical Bibliography*, 1982.

<sup>5</sup> By this term I am referring to a concept addressed by Derek Gregory in *Geographical Imaginations*, on which I will elaborate later.

and material culture within the Mediterranean: the Oriental bazaar becomes the inspiration for the Parisian *grand magasin* and finally returns to the East as a quintessentially European invention. If anything, this meshing of origins and imaginaries reveals the obsolescence of many cultural and geographical categories, such as Orient-Occident, modern-pre-modern, East-West. As Bruno Latour affirms, the myth of modernity relies on a double gesture, a simultaneous process of “conjoined” birth and dissimulation of ambiguous origins (Latour 13). In other words, the representation of modernity hinges on an artificial caesura that frames the modern moment as unique and pure, distinct from a hybrid complex past. But such is the story of the modern Mediterranean itself in which the *grands magasins* emerged. The distinction between the *grand magasin* and the bazaar breaks the continuum within the history of the material culture and that of the Mediterranean to highlight each space as categorically different from the other, one representing European modernity and the other a clichéd backward Orient located on the other side the sea. In this context, the overlapping histories of the Mediterranean constantly challenge its artificially clear topography. The promising image of an enclosed basin, easily traceable, even appropriable, as suggested by the Latin expression for the Mediterranean “*mare nostrum*,” our sea, stands in contrast to a wealth of histories and mythologies that resist any attempts of closure or control.

Both texts raise many questions: what was the function of a “Franco-Egyptian” department store in the middle of an Arab-Ottoman country occupied by the British? To what extent did the “Egyptian” department store operate as a French space in contrast to the actual Parisian ones on which it was modeled? Similarly, to what extent



did the Parisian *grand magasin* function as an “Oriental” bazaar? What is the purpose of writing through the lens of the department store, or sometimes from within the space of the department store? How might we interpret these connections within the broader Mediterranean context? These are some of the questions which I will examine in the chapters that follow.

This dissertation explores the significance and function of department stores in the history, and the imaginary, of France and Egypt within the context of a modern Mediterranean connected by the networks of trade and culture envisioned by Saint-Simon. By situating this study at the intersection of human geography and comparative literature, I seek to create a dialogue between narratives written about department stores in France and Egypt and the historiography of the Mediterranean in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I present these narratives as part of a project of history and memory accomplished by writers for whom the department store was not simply the image of a fantasized or romanticized past, but rather a vehicle for making sense of, and negotiating with, their milieu. This milieu, I argue, is irreducible to the history of nationalism and empire, or empires — a Mediterranean divided among the British, the French, and the Ottomans. Rather, it involves a complex series of relations, exchanges, power structures, and mutual transformations which change over time.

I argue that empire and emporia are two sides of the same coin. Born simultaneously, equally shaped by Saint-Simonian Mediterranean utopianism, each articulates the ambition of expansion and appropriation, of rearranging the world order into new hierarchies of races, classes and objects. By emporia, I refer to the network of

department stores, which emerged during the height of imperialism and have spread across the Mediterranean region or within the different provinces of the same nation-state. Empires and emporia are mutually dependent in shaping each other. Yet, they are also competing images, reflecting and denouncing each other. In emulating the *utopian* illusion of empire, emporia create an unsettling image that reveals the gap between the fantasy of imperialism and the reality of its operation. In addition, in these texts the department store represents a space in which subjectivities are apprehended, questioned, reconsidered, and reconfigured, a space in which the writer confronts his/her subject position in relation to society and place, both inhabited and imagined.

In the context of the rapid urban metamorphosis within the Mediterranean propelled by the Saint-Simonian project, the department store became a literary symbol highlighting the dissonance between the society and the writer's community. Among the many rich aspects of the image of department stores is their power to evoke the relation between the social and economic structure of the store and the outside world: the store serves as a utopic, or sometimes dystopic, metaphor for the city, and for the nation in general. The literary texts which I study — Emile Zola's *Au Bonheur des dames*, Huda Shaarawi's *Memoirs*, Jacqueline Shohet-Kahanoff's *Jacob's Ladder*, and works by other recent or contemporary writers such as Latifa el Zayat, Paula Jacques, Robert Solé, Waguih Ghali, Victor Téboul, Samir Raafat and Ilios Yannakakis — use department stores as a literary motif to find a new subject position in the context of the historical changes and geographical reconfigurations in France and Egypt during this period.

All these narratives center on the transcription of an urban map, on the decoding of its iconographic elements in a literary text that reconstructs the map's points of references and scale within another medium and genre. They take the department store as a focal point to rewrite the history of a bygone epoch, evoking a cityscape that has fallen into ruin, and whose memories are being erased. Just as old Paris with its narrow streets and traditional boutiques disappears under Haussmann's urban plan, multicultural Cairo and Alexandria cede to a homogenous nationalist one. All these authors write from the vantage point of a changing society or of one that has undergone irrevocable transformations. They share an interest in documenting the memory of the city, its monuments and what remains of it. They take space, or the rewriting of space, as a central aspect of their narrative while documenting the memory of department stores, and accordingly that of Paris, Alexandria, Cairo, and the larger Mediterranean.

My definition of human geography is mainly derived from Derek Gregory's work *Geographical Imaginations*. Gregory presents a framework of human geography that takes its initial theoretical model from poststructuralist theory in order to look at geographical space not as a two-dimensional tableau but as "a deep space" inseparable from its social context, both influencing and influenced by those who live inside it (Gregory 1994, 4). The work of Henri Lefèbvre, David Harvey and Frederic Jameson on modern and postmodern urban spaces plays a central role in the field since they tie spatial organization to that of the circulation of capital. The recent trend in human geography aims to emphasize the significant difference between the two categories of "space" and "place," as defined by Lefebvre. If place is the abstract geometric

concept, space takes into account the social and cultural context in which this place is embedded. This relationship is central to my research, since department stores are nodes of economic and cultural capital and loci for social interaction. The department store's location, design and advertising inform the visitors', and readers', perceptions and promote the ideologies and social codes of the dominant class; the use of French as a language of communication is one example. Accordingly, the codes promoted by the department stores' setting, sales activities and advertising create privileged social networks and, by means of inclusion or exclusion, act as markers of race and class. Most importantly, through their advertising strategies, products, and setting, nineteenth and early twentieth-century department stores actively participated in shaping the urban dwellers' worldview.

### **Retracing Mediterranean Geography**

A brief survey of Mediterranean Studies gives insight into the double “utopian gesture”—the continuous tension between the materiality and symbolic significance of its topoi—implicit in the representations of and debates on “the Mediterranean,” reflected in the above texts. Fernand Braudel's *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (1949) remains the tidal rock that rhythms the push and pull of Mediterranean studies. Most scholarly works are still haunted by Braudel's description of the sea and start by referencing him, to the extent that one could say that in the beginning, before the “Mediterranean,” there was Braudel. He drew its contour into one unfragmented unit, anthropomorphized it, and endowed it with a historical persona modeled after the image of France sketched by his

predecessor Vidal de la Blache. Braudel's romanticized imagery of a paradoxically elusive and complex sea with a predictable scenery has produced two opposite reactions that currently constitute the Scylla and Charybdis of the field, a constant debate that wavers between unity and division; the ideal of a unified Mediterranean versus its segmentation among nation-states, languages, cultures, urban and rural landscapes. The list of categories that emphasize the differences is extensive: Europe versus Africa, the First World versus the Third World, wealth versus poverty, north versus south, and not to mention the classic Orient versus Occident and Islam versus Christianity.

In contrasting the unified geographical aspect of the Mediterranean with its human diversity, Braudel claimed:

La Méditerranée n'a d'unité que par le mouvement des hommes, les liaisons qu'il implique, les routes qui le conduisent. Lucien Febvre écrivait: « La Méditerranée, ce sont des routes », routes de terre et de mer, routes de fleuves et de rivières, immense réseau de liaisons régulières et fortuites. (Braudel 1999, 338)

The Mediterranean only exists in so far as human ingenuity, work, and effort continually re-create it... The Mediterranean has no unity but that created by the movements of men, the relationships they imply, and the routes they follow. Lucien Febvre wrote 'The Mediterranean is the sum of its routes,' land routes and sea routes, routes along the rivers and routes along the coasts, an immense network of regular and casual connections. (Braudel 2005, 276)

This statement brings out the tension in Braudel's work between the actual topology of the Mediterranean and its human diversity. His concept, however, still operates within a Saint-Simonian paradigm in the sense that it stresses the centrality of human agency and the networks that connect the Mediterranean basin. By engaging narratives and fictions on the Mediterranean, I would like to emphasize that the Mediterranean

amounts to more than the sum of its routes and is irreducible to them. These routes and networks are themselves the subject of numerous imaginaries and spatial practices that exceed the charted ones. The example of department stores, the product of a trade network across the modern Mediterranean is a case in point. Born at the height of imperialism, and emulating the ambitious dream of Saint-Simon, the nineteenth-century emporia were each subject to different local practices and imaginaries. They shaped, and were shaped by, people who reconciled social and cultural belonging and the tightening grip of imperialisms and nationalisms.

In his essay “Practical Mediterraneanism: Excuses for Everything from Epistemology to Eating,” Michael Herzfeld, one of the major scholars in contemporary debates about Mediterranean studies, explains at length the irrelevance of the Mediterranean as a cultural category as he reveals the colonial gesture implicit in it. He argues that, by using an undifferentiating lens that has not critically distanced itself from an imperialist ethnographic tradition, academic scholarship becomes complicit in disseminating “Mediterraneanisms,” a reminder of Said’s Orientalism, namely a series of reified images that violently erase any cultural and historical specificity in favor of a totalizing representation of the Mediterranean (48). Some examples of Mediterraneanism are the frequently evoked ethnographic model of “an open city space” besieged by “moral degeneracy,” instigated by a “corrupting sea,”<sup>6</sup> or the study of “honor and shame” as a unique feature of a Mediterranean culture. Anthropology paired with a Eurocentric perspective reduces the region to a sexualized portrait not

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<sup>6</sup> Herzfeld alludes here to the title of Peregrine Horden’s and Nicholas Purcell’s *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History*. See also his articles “Honour and Shame: Problems in the Analysis of Moral Systems” and “The Horns of the Mediterraneanist Dilemma.”

very different from any Orientalist picture (53). Such a legacy comes from the romantic tradition adopted in the eighteenth century, the characteristic era in which travelers, writers and artists made the “Grand Tour” of the sea, crafting it into an archeological object, a cultural artifact, or a series of colorful vistas against which “the Mediterranean type,” happy, unchanging, effusive, leads a peaceful and monotonous life (Herzfeld 57) (Brummett 10). This folkloric imagery becomes canonized in the nineteenth century when combined with an imperialist apparatus aiming to regulate and possess the Other. This form of “Mediterraneanism” fits into an ethnological model of evolutionism, which stages the Mediterranean as an anterior phase to modernization, an era preceding the consolidation of the nation-state (Herzfeld 61).

A Mediterranean that bears these clichéd geographical and cultural characteristics serves to define the contour of a modern, technologically advanced “Europe,” another geographical category that bears the stamp of Western European conflicts and political competition. This legacy goes back to Saint-Simon whose vision of a modern Mediterranean stemmed from his desire to shift the balance of power in Europe, a situation where France and England would assume leadership of the Western continent. Such a train of thought persists to the present day, as we have seen in Nicolas Sarkozy’s presidential campaign in 2007 which promoted the establishment of a Union for the Mediterranean modeled on the European Union (Balfour 99). The strategic position of the Mediterranean in contemporary French and European politics emerges clearly in Jacques Derrida’s *L’autre cap*, addressing the question of Europe and its future. Derrida starts his book by emphasizing the fact of being an outsider, from the other side of the Mediterranean (13). His text succinctly alludes to the key

role of the Mediterranean in securing France's position in Europe. Not only does he evoke the history of French colonization but he also highlights how the Mediterranean was always enmeshed in shaping a European identity "always in the making," an identity that depends on the gaze from the other side of the sea to transform it into a single, conflict-free, continent (Derrida 1991, 12-15).

Similarly, the history of French scholarship on the Mediterranean was constantly informed by a nationalist project in which what is now called human geography was instrumental for defining a modern French identity. The works of Saint-Simon, Vidal de la Blache and Fernand Braudel attest to this fact. Vidal de La Blache, the father of modern French geography, and Jules Michelet, the renowned French historian, were among the pioneers in addressing the critical question of the relation between nation and geography. Michelet published his *History of France* in 1869, just a year before the fall of the Second Empire. La Blache, on the other hand, published his *Tableau de la géographie de la France* in 1903, the first volume in a series on the history of France. Most of the French nationalist discourse and goals featured in Michelet's and La Blache's works resurface implicitly in the framework and methodology of Fernand Braudel's canonical work on the Mediterranean. For La Blache, national identity is not based on race or territory, but on culture. The problem had arisen especially clearly over the question of Alsace-Lorraine, annexed by Germany in 1870, since national claims to that region could not be made on the basis of race or ethnicity. In his book, La Blache does not discount heredity completely, but he subordinates it to culture. This shift created a new perspective of the French nation, one that did not undermine Western Europe's racial distinction, a category that was



necessary to justify French imperialism and colonial expansion, but still accommodated the variations within the cultures of the French nation.

Vidal de la Blache, then, shifts attention toward the field of human geography in order to find a new interpretation to the wide linguistic and cultural variations that existed within France, without jeopardizing its unity. In contrast to earlier traditions, human geography focuses on the interaction between individuals and their immediate milieu. For France to be considered a homogenous nation, distinct from other European countries, a clear separation between “race” and “people” had to be developed, where the word “people” comes to embody a sense of unity based on the collaboration between different inhabitants of the same nation. In another book,

*Principles of Human Geography* (1956), La Blache highlights this dilemma:

En quel sens la France est un être géographique ? Il me semble presque paradoxal de poser même la question suivante: la France est-elle un être géographique? Ce nom a pris à nos yeux une forme concrète; il s’incarne dans une figure à laquelle les cartes nous ont tellement habitué... Volontiers nous serions portés à la considérer comme une unité... La réponse n’est pas aussi simple qu’on le croirait tout d’abord. Ce n’est pas au point de vue géologique que la France possède ce qu’on peut appeler une individualité... Cependant nous répétons volontiers ce mot de Michelet: “la France est une personne.” (25:26)

In what sense France is a geographical entity? It seems paradoxical to me even to ask this next question: is France a geographical entity at all? This name, which has taken a concrete shape in our eyes, is embodied in a figure to which maps have accustomed us... We gladly incline to consider it as one unit... the answer is not as simple as we would at first think. It is not from a geological perspective that France acquires its individuality. Nonetheless, we repeat happily Michelet’s statement: ‘France is a person’... How has a fragment of the earth surface, that is neither island nor peninsula, been elevated to the status of political region and finally become a nation? This is the question that is being posed at the threshold of this work. [my translation]

La Blache here seeks to follow in the footsteps of Michelet, who depicted France as a distinct individual with a unique historical narrative that ties its people to the history of the land. France, through the historical narrative, itself becomes an abstract, normalized subject, which all French citizens, regardless of their backgrounds, are expected to embody. By figuring France as a person, Michelet does not simply address the question of its relation to the rest of Europe and the world, but develops a history which should be interchangeable with that of every person in France.

In *Principles of Human Geography*, Lablache adopts a similar strategy. The writer clearly marks the distinction between race and people. “People” in contrast to “race” evokes a specific history, experience, and social organization, as opposed to a deeper, one might say buried, concept of “ancient descent”. Because Lablache cannot elide the nineteenth-century concept of race, grafted as it was onto Darwin’s theory of evolution, he posits:

On peut dès à présent considérer comme acquise, contrairement aux habitudes du langage courant qui les confond sans cesse, la distinction fondamentale du peuplement et de la race. Sous les conformités de langue, de religion et de nationalité, persistent et ne laissent pas de travailler les différences spécifiques implantées en nous par un long atavisme. Cependant ces groupes hétérogènes se combinent dans une organisation sociale qui fait de la population d’une contrée, envisagée dans son ensemble, un corps. (11)

In spite of current usage, which confuses the terms “people” and “race,” the fundamental distinction between them can henceforth be considered established. Beneath similarities of language, religion and nationality, the specific differences implanted in us by an ancient descent never cease to be operative. Nevertheless, all such heterogeneous groups blend in a social organization which makes of the population of a country a unit when looked at its entirety. (La Blache 1956, 17)

Through this definition, Lablache subordinates the concept of race to that of national identity, creating as such new criteria for national belonging and citizenship. For Lablache, what constitutes the “people” of a specific nation is their interaction with their geographic milieu, and the creation of a cohesive system which subjects nature to their forces and gives a unique character to their milieu.

Une individualité géographique ne résulte pas de simples considérations de géologie et de climat. Ce n'est pas une chose donnée d'avance par la nature. Il faut partir de cette idée qu'une contrée est un réservoir où dorment des énergies dont la nature a posé le germe, mais dont l'emploi dépend de l'homme. C'est lui qui, en la pliant à son usage, met en lumière son individualité. Il établit une connexion entre des traits épars; aux effets incohérents de circonstances locales, il substitue un concours systématique de forces. C'est alors qu'une contrée se précise et se différencie, et qu'elle dévient à la longue comme une médaille frappée à l'effigie d'un peuple. Ce mot de personnalité appartient au domaine et au vocabulaire de la géographie humaine. Il correspond à un degré de développement déjà avancé de rapports généraux. Ce degré a été atteint de bonne heure par la France. (La Blache 1956, 26)

A geographic individuality does not result from simple considerations of geology or climate. It is not something given in advance by nature. We should start from the idea that a country is a reservoir where energies lie dormant. These energies, of which nature planted the seed, depend for their use on Man. It is Man who, by bending nature to his use, sheds light on his individuality. He establishes a connection between disparate traits; he replaces the incoherent effects of local circumstances by a systematic design of forces. It is then that a country takes shape and differentiates itself, becoming in the long run like a medal coined with the image of a people. This word personality belongs to the field of human geography. It corresponds to an advanced level of development of general relations. France reached this stage early on. [My translation]

Inherent in La Blache's concept of human geography is a capitalist view of nature, as an inert force contained within space, only to be liberated by human labor. Such labor manipulates that force to create a system, or structure, which elides the difference between the diverse national regions, but still keeps it uniqueness in relation to the rest of the world. Here, not only does France become a subject or a person, but it also

becomes a brand, created by the different workers of a factory, whereby each province, by means of the traditional capitalist concept of the division of labor, contributes to the assembly of that product. This idea comes directly from the work of Saint-Simon, who identifies industry as the main value that shapes and defines the French nation: “La France est devenue une grande manufacture, et la Nation un grand atelier. Cette manufacture générale doit être dirigée de la même manière que les fabriques particulières” [France has become a large industry and the nation a big workshop. This general industry should be managed in the same manner as the private factories<sup>7</sup>](La Blache 1994, 91).” Saint-Simon’s definition and by extension that of Vidal de La Blache emphasize the predominance of human labor over nature in creating a unique character for both the space and the individual. In doing so, La Blache modifies the relationship between the French citizen and the nation by pushing milieu into the background. A person from Alsace would still be considered French, even though the geography of the area resembles that of Germany, primarily because he participates in a larger industrialized system, or general project, that gives France its particular identity. The French hexagon becomes “a coined medal,” a brand produced between the interaction of individuals and their regions, whose work is coordinated, and has to be approved by, a central manager, that is, Paris. In other words, representing France as an individual, or a product (the two are interrelated, since every commercial product is given a commercial persona by the producer) abstracts the concept of the French citizen, but also elides the provinces in favor of the metropolis.

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<sup>7</sup> My translation

In his study of the Mediterranean, Fernand Braudel uses a framework that emulates La Blache's geographical study of France, itself highly informed by Saint-Simonian ideology. Braudel begins his study of the sea by imagining a persona for the Mediterranean, as the quotation at the start of this chapter indicates. Just like La Blache's France, Braudel's Mediterranean is made up of mosaic-like fragments that compose a single picture. In both cases, France and the Mediterranean become transcendent, atemporal categories. Braudel transposes the modern framework of French nationalism onto the Mediterranean, with one slight modification. For La Blache, the provinces, with their unique cultures, make up the different pieces of a puzzle. Each province adds a missing aspect and complements the larger picture of the nation. It is the interdependence of the provinces that justifies French sovereignty over this diverse territory. If the different parts of the Mediterranean were also complementary, it would imply that the Mediterranean basin could be an independent, self-sufficient, unit. Ironically, this would undermine France's sovereignty over its Mediterranean littoral. Braudel's model solves this problem by describing the different pieces of the Mediterranean mosaic as interchangeable, rather than complementary. The Mediterranean is a unit made of interchangeable, but not self-sufficient, tableaux.

Later in his writings on the identity of France, Braudel highlights this difference between the geography of the Mediterranean and that of France. He uses the same model that he created for the Mediterranean: La France "est une mosaïque de paysages dont la variété...ne se rencontre pas ailleurs. [...] même pour le randonneur à pied...le paysage change sans cesse. ... "Cependant, ces carreaux sont joints par des

ciments solides, par des contraintes, des différences complémentaires, par des échanges et des routes obstinés à coudre ensemble pays et régions” (Braudel 1986, 28) [France is a mosaic of landscapes whose diversity ...cannot be found elsewhere. ...even for the backpacker...the landscape keeps changing ...Nevertheless these tiles are joined by a strong cement, by constraints, by complementary differences, by exchanges and routes determined to stitch together the country and its regions<sup>8</sup>]. Braudel’s description of France is highly informed by his earlier study of the Mediterranean with its differences and networks of connection. However, unlike the sea basin, the French provinces are complementary rather than interchangeable, leading to the strong unity and uniqueness of the French nation.

Other scholars who attempted to overcome the clichéd and colonial aspect of *Mediterraneanism* have selected an interactionist model, where the sea represents a traversable interconnected space, with overlapping histories and cartographies irreducible to one another. This model does not necessarily consider the sea as a unified space, but focuses on the dynamics of communication around the basin, looking at the Mediterranean as a space of connection despite differences and fragmentation. For instance, Jocelyn Dakhlia identifies a language of the sea, a *lingua franca*, a language that is other, nationless, classless, belonging to no one, a “consensual space” like the sea itself, but which enables the communication among multiple groups. Dakhlia does not negate the diversity of the sea but rather seeks to highlight another unifying aspect beyond its fragmented image (29). In turn, the

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<sup>8</sup> My translation

interactionist model has had its own share of critiques. Ian Morris interprets interactionism as another attempt to create a totalized image of the sea through a process that he calls “Mediterranization.” This new pattern, he argues, results from the impact of globalization in shaping academic scholarship, which looks at the image of a fluid Mediterranean to deflect a central debate related to globalization. In Morris’s words, the question we are constantly evading is: “is Interconnectedness a Good or Bad Thing?” (Morris 33). In contrast to “Mediterraneanism” with its geographic tableaux, “Mediterranization” shifts the attention toward temporality, which sheds light on the process of change that develops over time, eclipsing as such the many conflicts that arise with the effects of globalization or interconnectedness.

Rejecting the marginalization of the human factor in determining the historiography of the sea, David Abulafia foregrounds the actual political and social events that shaped the history of the area (Abulafia xxvi). He divides the sea into five histories marked by major economic, political and social characteristics at each era. In each of these five Mediterraneans, the sea becomes a self- enclosed image distinct from the other. This raises the question of whether a continuum is impossible, or whether these histories are overlapping and interconnected, thus endowing the sea with a significance that mobilizes the different political attempts to control it. This broad historical overview overlooks another side of human agency in relation to the quotidian. The history of the sea is also that of workers, sailors, farmers, immigrants, and travelers, who may not have a direct influence on its major events but have their own relation to, and role in, its histories and cultures.

The historians Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell attempt to bridge the two positions by making the distinction between the history “of” the Mediterranean and history “in” the Mediterranean, that is the historiography of the sea and the actual development that takes place around it. Horden’s and Purcell’s model acknowledges the effect of a common geographical background on shaping life around the Mediterranean, while at the same time it highlights the importance of the immediate contexts of each milieu which allows each zone to develop differently. They divide their study into “historiography” and “microecologies” (2-4). In this manner, they give an overview of the development of the ideological framework that created Mediterranean studies while at the same time examining the specific aspects of different areas across the sea existing beyond the urban centers. This model, as Morris indicated, marginalizes the impact of globalization (Morris 33). At the same time, as Michael Herzfeld elaborates, Horden’s and Purcell’s argument merges with a discourse on a common Mediterranean identity “transcendent” but “infinitely variable” (Herzfeld 2006, 57). Such an idea, as I argued is also implicit in the original work of Braudel and La Blache in relation to French geographic and national representation.

The question, then, is how to undo this persistent utopian gesture while attempting to document the history of the Mediterranean. In the *Geographical Imagination*, Derek Gregory proposes an answer:

The task of a critical human geography—of a geographical imagination—is [...] to unfold that utopian gesture and replace it with another: one that recognizes *the corporeality of vision* and reaches out, *from one body to another*, not in a mood of arrogance, aggression, and conquest but in a spirit of humility, understanding, and care. This is not an individualism; neither is it a



corporatism. If it dispenses with the privileges traditionally accorded to “History,” it nonetheless requires a scrupulous attention to the junctures and fissures between many different histories: a multileveled dialogue between past and present conducted as a history (or an historical geography) of the present. (Gregory 1994, 416)

Inherent in Gregory’s argument is what he calls “the decorporealization” of space, which obscures the materiality of the body and its central role as both subject and object of space, a critical notion that Henri Lefebvre also highlights in his seminal work *The Production of Space*, which Gregory seeks to address. As Simonsen puts it, “the living body is both space and has its space at the same time it produces that space” (Simonsen 4). Not only does the body perceive the surrounding space, but it also creates, develops, and enforces its function and its symbolic and social codes; in addition, it becomes the means of subverting this.

Gregory suggests that this tension calls for the need to relocate the human body at the center of these narratives, in order to re-inscribe within these maps the complexity of human experience. By creating a dialogue between human geography and literature, I seek to provide a framework in which to consider concrete spaces with their specific practices, functions, and imaginary while at the same time shedding light on the human experience involved in shaping, imagining, and remembering those spaces. This framework coincides with the methodology of Horden and Purcell which looks at the historiography “of” the Mediterranean and the history “in” the Mediterranean: I examine the department stores as “microecologies” and also the broader history of the basin. The project also addresses David Abulafia’s concern to foreground human agency as central to the history of the sea, but with one difference. Instead of looking solely at the larger political movements, I shed light on the

quotidian experience of the individuals who found their lives entangled in this new Mediterranean divided among three competing empires, and in some cases witnessing the sweeping changes of postcolonialism. In doing so, I follow in the footsteps of Michel De Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, which problematizes the relation between "the concept of the city" and its "practices," between the panoramic, "god-like" view of the utopian who dictates a certain cartography, in this case Saint-Simon's Mediterranean, and the individual interpretation and use of such space (De Certeau 1984, 93).

Looking at Mediterranean culture through the lens of narratives about department stores provides a special perspective from which to see how different individuals and authors reacted to the urban changes in France and Egypt following the Saint-Simonian project for the Mediterranean initiated by the Suez Canal. The authors presented in this thesis attempt to locate themselves within their larger society, or the emerging nation-state. The experience of the owner of department stores is especially revealing: mostly Jews from Egypt and Syrians, their adoption of Francophone culture and establishment of a commercial chain of *grands magasins* became an act of negotiating a position that was neither British nor native, and sometimes a matter of mere survival (see chapter 2).

My approach is to examine not only the circulation of goods and people in the Mediterranean, that is the trade network itself, but also the *Mediterranean* in circulation, as myth and imaginary used by various people for their own social and political reasons. In doing so, I recall Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*,

which deconstructs the process of nation-building and defines it as the work of many trends and currents that shape a nation's self-image and its citizens' behavior.

Anderson argues that, "communities are to be distinguished not by their falsity but by the style in which they are imagined" (Anderson 6). Where the Mediterranean is considered, I would like to emphasize the multiplicity of these imaginations and the numerous communities engaged in such a process, whose lives are shaped by the dynamics of imperialism and nationalism, as well as their immediate societies and their personal interests. I would like to trace the evolution of these "imagined" Mediterranean "communities," the purposes they serve and how different individuals use them for different ends.

A Mediterranean imaginary, despite its utopian aspect, played a key role in the region and affected the life of many communities and peoples. The writers I address did not necessarily see the Mediterranean the way the Saint-Simonians or Braudel did. Nevertheless, their lives were shaped by the Saint-Simonian vision of the Mediterranean and the material consequences of Franco-Egyptian relations. While taking account of Herzfeld's critique of "Mediterraneanism," the French nationalist ideology and the colonial gesture implicit in it, I seek to investigate how the different authors and individuals lived and negotiated with these constructed views of the region which unavoidably shaped their worldview and their everyday life. My approach stems from Michael Herzfeld's suggestion that, "a critical study of Mediterranean identities is not necessarily and should not be an act of Mediterraneanism. It can instead be a critical response to such essentializing discourses" (63). He adds:

Local people invoke the idea of a shared Mediterranean identity for a variety of reasons. One such reason may simply be the desire to represent themselves as exercising cultural choice in parallel with other, neighbouring populations doing exactly the same thing. Another may be a genuinely expanded access to resources of knowledge about local and regional culture that were simply not available under the more repressive regimes of the past. (Herzfeld 2006, 57)

For some, the Mediterranean is a flexible space which does not exhibit the clear contemporary barriers and distinctions that define it for us today. At the height of Saint-Simonianism, Emile Zola perceived his world as a struggle between an “Orient” and an “Occident,” with modernization depending on a merger of the two. Hoda Shaarawi saw the Orient as extending from the Levant to Marseilles. For her, the gates of Europe started at Lyon (see chapter 4). For other writers, like Jacqueline Kahanoff, the modern Levant was a product of a Judeo-Greek culture, which blossomed in a different city every few hundred years. In the recent past this city was Alexandria (Chapter 5). Others, like Ilios Yannakakis and Robert Ilbert, historians specializing in the Mediterranean, interpret the history of colonial Egypt and their memories of Alexandria using a clear reference to the Mediterranean informed by Braudel’s paradigm (Chapter 6).

My project, then, shows how Mediterranean cultures negotiate between different imaginaries and everyday life. There is no single imaginary of Mediterranean identities, but rather multiple ones. Each is in circulation in contrast with other geographical categories such as that of North Africa, Europe, Occident, Orient, Mashrek, Maghreb and Levant. The manipulation of all these categories serves in one way or another to consolidate or question the national and social identity of the individual and the nation-state.

While analyzing the different texts in relation to the Mediterranean and to modern urban life in Paris, Cairo and Alexandria, I have attempted to avoid the word *cosmopolitanism* as a guiding concept. In doing so, I hope to avoid a romanticized view of cosmopolitanism where tensions among races, cultures and classes do not exist. I have nevertheless let the authors use their own terms and describe the world according to their own perception. In the few instances where I do use *cosmopolitanism*, I mean the term in Gerard Delanty's definition: "cosmopolitanism is about the extension of the moral and political horizons of people, societies and institutions. It implies an attitude of openness as opposed to closure" (Delanty 2). Yet while using this definition, I do not seek to deny the gap between the concept of cosmopolitanism and its practice, or the history of tension and "disdain" between the local, or native, and the global, especially in the colonial and postcolonial context where such distinction acquires importance (Delanty 2). Some of the authors studied here did not call what they experienced cosmopolitanism but still attempted to navigate between different cultures and master different languages because their contexts required it. However, I contend that these instances embodied a similar encounter, one that challenged the authors' worldview. In some cases, there were different moments and versions of cosmopolitanism that were not necessarily the focal point of the stories: scenes involving workers in the department store or servants in the kitchen, who would create their own cultures and negotiate their own terms of encounter outside the framework of a romanticized idea of cosmopolitanism. I have tried to bring these out as elements of the experiences that the authors identify as "Mediterranean".

Each of these writers attempts to fathom his/her world using different terms and relating a specific social and political context. A key aspect of understanding the significance of the negotiation between the writers of these narratives and the larger Mediterranean project is the nineteenth-century turn to space and geography which was central to the modern image of both France and Egypt. In *Geographical imaginations*, Derek Gregory interprets the drive behind the nineteenth century's obsession with spatial organization manifest in Haussmann's project, the Universal Exhibitions, and, I would add, the Suez Canal project, as "cartographic anxiety." He posits that "cartographic anxiety" is another aspect of foundationalism, or the Cartesian paradigm, which veers between the desire to create a solid rational image of the world and the fear of losing one's power, or agency, over it. Yet "cartographic anxiety," or the fear of losing control over one's milieu, does not fit solely within a nationalist project, but also concerns the individuals who lived these spatial transformations. Whereas Gregory refers to "cartographic anxiety" as a philosophical question that influenced the fields of History and Geography, I borrow the term to highlight the dissonance caused by the urban transformation and the new geographical representations, and the reconsideration of subjectivity and identity associated with them.

Documenting the memory of the city has become a common trope especially when writing about Alexandria and Paris<sup>9</sup>. The writings on Alexandria of Robert Ilbert

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<sup>9</sup> For more information about the historiography of colonial Alexandria, see Khaled Fahmy's "For Cavafy with Love and Squalor: Some Critical Notes on the History" in *Alexandria Real and Imagined*.

and Ilios Yannakakis attest to the image of a city always in decay whose dwellers and visitors attempt to salvage their memories from what Pierre Nora calls “the acceleration of history” (Nora 7). A similar phenomenon begins with the Haussmanization project in Paris, as memorialized in the works of Baudelaire, Zola, Proust and Walter Benjamin. The obsession with traces and sites, as Pierre Nora explains, intensified after the Franco-Prussian war and the Third Republic, leading to an explosion of museums and archives. That is the epoch when Zola, Proust, and Benjamin were creating their encyclopedic narratives about Parisian life.

Perhaps one of the iconic figures who embody this aspect of cartographic anxiety would be Charles Baudelaire, the French poet-flâneur whose collection of writings from the same era, *Les fleurs du mal* and *tableaux parisiens*, lament the disappearance of old Paris changed forever after Haussmann and mark the anxiety of a Parisian who seeks through his writing to resituate himself as both a city dweller and a poet. Celebrating *flânerie* and taking the city as a central subject of his writing, Baudelaire documents the ephemeral beauty of the cityscape and its human geography. Such a desire to record the fleeting aspect of the city marks what I mean by “cartographic anxiety,” which reveals the urban dweller’s sense of loss and a (futile) aspiration to gain control of the urbanspace. Cartographic anxiety here becomes a pivotal driving force in the construction of subjectivity, since it forces the individual to rethink and redefine his/her subject position in the light of the new urban changes.

In most of the writings I address, the department store features as a mediator between space and time, history and memory. The different authors use the department store to mobilize the different experiences related to that space, and in so doing they

resituate themselves, both as writers and individuals, within their changing societies. Pierre Nora's concept of "lieux de mémoire," or sites of memory, is particularly useful in this context, marking the tension between individual and collective memory and canonical historiography. For Nora, history represents an institutionalized process of erasure, a homogenous or reified "representation of the past" that seeks to "annihilate what in reality has taken place." Memory, on the other hand is "subjective" in constant evolution seeking to connect past to present. The gap between history and memory, between the individual and the nation leads to the disappearance of "milieux de mémoires," spaces where memory is lived and reinforced daily through rituals and customs, only to give way to *lieux de mémoire* which are "material" "symbolic" and "functional," sites that contain traces of the past. For Nora, lieux de mémoire are "the ultimate embodiments of a memorial consciousness that has barely survived in a historical age" in which "spontaneous memory" has disappeared. *Lieux de memoires* are multivalent sights whose significance is hijacked by a historical narrative that emphasizes temporal caesura rather than continuity.

Yet, what characterizes a *lieu de memoire* is its ambiguous significance, being "a site of excess" which resists erasure, enabling their continuous appropriation and re-appropriation by different communities who attempt to reconnect to their society by mobilizing the different meanings and histories related to these sites. The significance and the memory of the department store presented by these writers do not necessarily conform to the official historical or nationalist narrative in which these spaces are situated. Instead they bring to the surface another memory of the department store, turning it into a *lieu de mémoire*, to become, as Nora puts it, "a bastion" "upon which



[they] buttress their identities” (Nora 12). Reconstructing memory by means of writing about a *lieu de mémoire* such as the department store expresses Gregory’s concept of cartographic anxiety, in which the individual fears the loss of the familiar places and signs which shaped his early vision of himself and his society, the anxiety of being disconnected from one’s past and milieu, of suffering a double effacement both from history and geography.

When the department store turns into a *lieu de mémoire*, it provides a special place from which to rewrite history, to negotiate between past and present, history and memory, between a space that was conceived as an embodiment of a modern urban and national culture and the individuals who shaped, have been shaped by, or subverted the function and symbolic significance of these spaces. I would like to argue that writing about space as *lieu de mémoire* is not simply a Janus-faced process that looks at the past and present simultaneously, hoping to bridge a historical rupture. It is rather a multifaceted project that involves a diachronic and synchronic intervention. By writing retrospectively about space, authors attempt not only to come to terms with a bygone past but also to deal with an immediate present. Writing about space becomes a dialogical approach in the Bakhtinian sense, which seeks to communicate with other texts, memories, histories, both in the past and the present (Bakhtin 279).

Derek Gregory writes: “The first job of geography is to make people lost, in a way, to disconcert them, to make them realize that they don’t know the world they live in, they really don’t, and that it’s incredibly difficult to know: and then we can talk” (Gregory 1998, 75). Gregory suggests that writing about space should go against the authoritative indication of the compass, to destabilize the map, to toss roads and

avenues into a labyrinthine web, forcing others to rethink what they previously considered terra firma. In this case, one of the central effects of geographers, and I would add writers, is to shift the readers' perception by rendering the map *unheimlich*, that is an uncanny space that obstructs complete control over its interpretation, precluding its reification into a single meaning, or a flat image. From this competition over the map between readers and writers, between geography, history and storytelling, several vantage points emerge; new pathways open up to disrupt our routines and presuppositions.

Perhaps most of us recall a moment when we lost our way inside a department store, finding ourselves among endless aisles, waking up from its comfortable setting as a living room to find ourselves unable to reach the exit. A key passage in Zola's *Au Bonheur des dames* stages this very experience. Or we may have had the other experience where we asked for directions in a city and were given the name of a department store as a point of reference, a landmark to look for. Once again, the texts before us figure this experience. With an interior set like a maze and a monumental exterior designed to stand out with a cupola and oversized statues, like a public building, the department store occupies the ambiguous position of the Minotaur and Ariadne's thread at once, an engulfing maze and navigation guide.

Despite the unique vantage point offered by the department store, it is still a privileged space that can mask the many racial, class and gender tensions on which it relies. Writing about the department store involves the risk of throwing a romanticized mantle over its connection to imperialism: for the department store had a double civilizing mission, targeting the colonial subjects from whom the merchandise came,

as well as its own citizens who would be molded into the image of the middle class. Writing about department stores, then, involves the risk of repeating “the utopian gesture” related to the theatrical nature of these spaces.

I would like to argue, however, that it is specifically the utopian aspect of the department store that makes it a complex *lieu de mémoire*, a space of excessive meanings, histories and maps that disturbs our vision of history, space, and the quotidian. The department store becomes an unsettling vantage point, and as a rich literary motif it enables the different writers to deconstruct the historical and social relations which it embodies. In describing nineteenth-century century *grands magasins*, Baudelaire writes:

Il y a dans un grand magasin [de joujoux] une extraordinaire gaieté qui le rend préférable à un bel appartement bourgeois. Toute la vie en miniature ne s’y trouve t-elle pas, et beaucoup plus colorée, nettoyée et luisante que la vie réelle? On y voit des jardins, des théâtres, de belles toilettes, des yeux comme le diamant, des joues allumés par le fard, des dentelles charmantes, des voitures, des écuries, des étables, des ivrognes, des charlatans, des banquiers, des comédiens, des polichinelles...des cuisines et des armées entières bien disciplinées... (« Morale du joujou, » 1853, qtd. in Jarry 29)

There is in a department store an extraordinary gaiety that makes it preferable to any beautiful bourgeois apartment. Doesn’t one find in it an entire life made in miniature, even more colorful, cleaned and polished? One can see gardens, theatres, beautiful outfits, eyes like diamond, cheeks ignited by makeup, charming lace, cars, stables, drunkards, charlatans, bankers, comedians, clowns...kitchens and entire well-disciplined armies.<sup>10</sup> (qtd. in Jarry 29)

For Baudelaire, the store is a whole world in miniature, and specifically a space of excess — more colored and brilliant than real life. Like a work of art, the illusion permits us the better to see things as they truly are. Set to emulate a bourgeois

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<sup>10</sup> My translation

household and a miniature world , the department store is an uncanny space, a ghostly site both familiar and unfamiliar. Well-known points of reference become obsolete, and symbolic significance crosses over many domains at once: the modern urban city, the household, the theatre, the museum and the marketplace. The department store setting simultaneously exhibits and shapes the different institutions and social relations which constitute it. Stopping by the large windowpanes of the department store, strollers could catch a glimpse not only of their own reflection but also that of an entire society in display: workers, clients and even mannequins. Writing about department stores as a *lieu de mémoire* gives the writer the potential of turning that space into a sort of mirror that allows one to recognize, and accordingly rewrite, oneself as an individual, within the image of the larger society that this mirror also projects.

In reading these various authors, I have sought to emphasize the intertextuality of their work. I aimed specifically in comparing and contrasting the maps of department stores, cities and other spaces which they reconstruct in their writing with the actual maps, stores advertisements, images, architectures and catalogues of their era. My goal is not to focus exclusively on the department store but to move between the stores and other urban spaces which the authors describe, in order to gain a better insight into the significance of the store as a central space that shapes and mirrors their lives. In some cases, the description of the stores is brief, but crystallizes in a very few lines the author's worldview.

The role of the department store in mapping the city and representing the nation extends beyond its internal setting. The connections between actual cartography and department stores date back to the nineteenth century. In 1865, the *Bon Marché* offered visitors to the Universal Exposition a map of the city and the different pavilions (Miller 175). This advertising strategy is still practiced today; visitors to Paris are offered a map of the city sponsored by *Galeries Lafayette*. The store thus positions itself as an urban landmark and a city guide for visitors and Parisians alike.

A close look at the cultural and literary history of department stores reveals the centrality of these spaces as arenas of social praxis. Under the guise of mundane consumer interaction, they mapped the everyday onto the larger colonial and capitalistic ideological framework, allowing, as such, for colonial and state ideologies to trickle down from the bourgeoisie to the masses. The narratives which I will present later reveal how the department stores documented and participated in a moment of violence in the creation of national, social, cultural and gender identity. Department stores put into practice some of the seminal ideas of postcolonial theory. For example, both the literature about these sites and the stores' promotional strategies duplicate the colonial construction of Orientalism as well as Fanon's distinction between colonizers and colonized elaborated in *Black Skin, White Masks*, a divide that shatters the colonial subject's self-perception and reconstructs it according to a European concept and hierarchy of race. Department stores turn into institutions that uphold the values of an imperialist civilizing mission and translate them into a consumerist plan of action that could be followed by the different groups.

Just as, in Foucault's demonstration, armies, schools and prisons are mechanisms of discipline and power for controlling modern behavior, department stores participate in the creation of a normative concept of citizenship, especially in relation to gender roles and national duty (see Chapter 4). It is through the reiterative, seemingly pleasant and joyful practice of everyday urban space and consumerism that the "phantasmic" national, social and marginal bodies emerge, and accordingly the "phantasmic" quality of the city. This in turn becomes the basis for normative ideals (Butler 90). Yet as the texts I discuss also show, despite the seemingly rigid barriers and rules developed by department stores in imitation of imperialism, they also provided the possibility for the blurring of those distinctions and the breaking of those rules.

In some cases, the newly promoted consumerist patterns suggest what Mona Domosh defines as "flexible racism," an ideal that supported "the fluidity of foreign cultures as they moved toward modernity yet [through consumerism], on the other hand, reasserted the importance of geographical boundaries to keep people in their proper place" (10-11). In addition, my dissertation reveals another dimension to the department store in relation to the impact of the Saint-Simonian Mediterranean project and the changes in commercial culture in reconfiguring class relations through consumerist and spatial practice. In this new context, the rigid distinction between the working class and the bourgeoisie is redefined and questioned, leading to new roles for the two groups, especially women from the middle class. As some of these texts also reveal, the concept of a "Mediterranean" culture is often one of direct concern for an

elite who could move between cultures and languages, and who recreate the distinction between East and West, colonizer and colonized.

In Chapter 2, “Saint-Simon Reconfiguring the Mediterranean: a Double Display of Egypt at the Universal Exhibition,” I supply the geographical and historical context of these narratives by tracing the history of the modern Mediterranean before Braudel, to Saint-Simon in order to examine the French-Egyptian economic and cultural exchange that took place before, during, and after the Suez Canal project. I discuss the central position of Egypt in French national propaganda on the Suez Canal to shed light on the French ideology which crafted a new image of the Mediterranean basin and guided modern Egyptian and French urban development simultaneously. In this context, Francophilia and Egyptomania became the two sides of the same coin as they served to consolidate the image of the two countries.

In Chapter 3, “Zola’s *Au Bonheur des dames*: Shopping at the Harem,” I argue that Zola’s iconic novel of 1883 expresses the anxiety about the dissolution of traditional social structures by recreating a colonial map inside the boundaries of the metropolis; a map which defies the desire to impose reason and order during the unprecedented expansion of capitalist enterprises in Paris. The Orient also reflects the unstable conditions of France after its defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. I shed light on Zola’s use of Orientalist material culture to represent and critique French social and political relations. Zola’s description of the department store is largely influenced by his field research before he began drafting the novel. Despite the author’s announcement that his work seeks to document the history of the Second Empire through the story of a family, the Rougon-Macquart, his description is marked

by the political and social context of the Third Republic. In addition, not only does Zola's orientalized department store embody the concepts of a Saint-Simonian Mediterranean vision, but it resembles the urban geography of Paris.

In Chapter 4, "Huda Shaarawi: Rewriting "the Ideological Work of Gender," I place Shaarawi's Arabic memoirs and the Francophone newspaper *L'Egyptienne*, which she founded in 1925, in dialogue with Zola's novel. Shaarawi, a pioneer Egyptian feminist, considers Parisian and Cairene department stores as the spirit of the age and as emblems of European progress. For her the stores stand for a public space in which Egyptian women could gain practical experience necessary for playing a new role in their society. I argue that Shaarawi's first visit to the stores served as an act of transgressive negotiation with the Ottoman, French and British patriarchy, to abolish the tradition of the harem. This negotiation comes within a larger struggle with a body of laws that restrict women's movements and rights to education. Shaarawi's travels and shopping experience demonstrate new agency for middle- and upper-class Egyptian women both inside the household and in public. As someone who wants to recreate a new practice of space, she competes with three major figures: the prostitute, who at the time occupies the imaginary as the main female present in the public spaces; the eunuch who controls the upper-class women's movements and the household's finances; and ambulant sellers through whom bourgeois Muslim women did their shopping and who had control over their purchases and choices. By stepping into the department store and leading a national and international campaign against prostitution, Shaarawi manages to marginalize these figures and create a new taxonomy of both public and private spaces on a European bourgeois model.



In Chapter 5, “Jacqueline Kahanoff’s *Jacob’s Ladder*: Becoming Levantine or ‘Kol-Bo’ Cosmopolitan,” I argue that, for Kahanoff, Cairene Francophone department stores embody a model of cosmopolitanism that challenges at once British colonial culture and Egyptian nationalism. Taking the stores as a model for citizenship, she suggests an alternative notion of Mediterranean culture and Egyptian identity, which decentralizes European hegemony, a notion which she later dubs “Levantinism.” I analyze her novel of 1951, *Jacob’s Ladder*, to examine the different types of Egyptian cosmopolitanisms that encompass different classes and communities. *Jacob’s Ladder* could be considered a pioneer work in the formulation of the concept of Levantinism, which later gains currency, after decades of dismissal, in Israeli literature and culture.

Chapter 6, “Postmodern-Postcolonial Crossing: Egyptian Department Stores as Lieux de Mémoire,” explores the references to Egyptian department stores in contemporary writings of the Jewish Egyptian Diaspora, the Coptic, Greek and Syrian communities and the postcolonial Egyptian bourgeoisie: Latifa el Zayat, Paula Jacques, Robert Solé, Waguih Ghali, Victor Téboul, Samir Raafat and Ilios Yannakakis. All these authors write in retrospect after Egyptian independence, as Egyptian nationalism becomes the shaper of cultural identity. Except for Raafat who writes from Egypt, Téboul from Québec and Waguih Ghali from West Germany, the others write from France from a vantage point of displacement after their migration or exodus from Egypt. For Ilios Yannakakis, the memory of the Egyptian *grand magasin* stood for a complex culture beyond the monolithic restraints of nationalism. In Robert Solé’s novel, *Le Tarbouche*, Cairene department stores memorialize the competition between the writer’s community — Syrian-Egyptians — and Egyptian Jews over the

representation of French culture in Egypt. I analyze the conflicting ethnic classifications created by the three empires to show how Francophone culture occupied a paradoxical position that enforced and challenged these categories. For Paula Jacques, the Egyptian department store marks the displacement of Egyptian Jews who find themselves trapped between two equally disappointing promised lands: France and Israel. Finally for Téboul, the department stores mark a caesura in the culture of the Jewish community, a disconnection from its Near Eastern past.

While setting the context of the Saint-Simonian Mediterranean project as the background for the major urban, political and economical changes in the region, my dissertation explores the story of the sea and the different connections that were created around the building of the Suez Canal. The different narratives which I examine reveal a new perspective both on the national and regional levels. The story of the modern sea and of the people around it is told in many ways, once through the ambitious Saint-Simonian utopian dream, and then by the many individuals whose world was shaped by such a vision sustained by both empires and emporia.

## Chapter 2

### **Rearranging the World Order: France, Egypt and the Saint-Simonian Mediterranean Dream**

If the philosophy of the past century was revolutionary, that of the nineteenth century should be organizational.

—Claude Henri de Saint-Simon<sup>11</sup>

The following chapter explores the history and context of the modern Mediterranean envisioned by Claude Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825). I examine the effect of Saint-Simon's ideology in modifying the urban plans of Paris and Cairo to embody his dream of a world interconnected by networks of trade, people and information, which preceded the emergence of department stores on both sides of the Mediterranean. The Saint-Simonian geographical adventure, I argue, was for both Egypt and France a moment of mutual nation-building and recognition, which centered on the reordering and re-signification of spaces. In this cooperation, Francophilia and Egyptomania constituted the alphabet of an imaginary that expressed a new national discourse in both countries. By Egyptomania, I refer to the body of knowledge on Egypt developed by French scholars, artists, Egyptologists, geographers, and members of the military, which became the material of a polyvalent imaginary for the French public and was manifest in French literature and material

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<sup>11</sup> Claude Henri de Saint-Simon, *Oeuvres Complètes*, p. 158, 1977.

culture. The term Egyptomania is very useful in this context as it highlights the fantasmatic quality of the French fascination with Egypt. By Francophilia, I refer to the Egyptian bourgeoisie's inclination toward French culture and education, which developed in the nineteenth-century after the Franco-Egyptian Saint-Simonian exchange and persisted throughout British colonialism. In this framework, the suffix "philia," serves to emphasize the elitist aspect of that choice made by that particular class.

As Ghislaine Alleaume indicates, "Le moment où le monde savant se préoccupe de fixer enfin l'image ou la réalité géographique coïncide donc, en Egypte aussi, pour marquer la naissance du territoire moderne... Ici comme en France, les ingénieurs sont les principaux acteurs de cette mutation conjointe des pratiques cognitives et des pratiques sociales » [The moment when the scientific world finally focuses on fixing the geographic image or reality, coincides, in Egypt too, with the birth of its modern territory... Here [in Egypt] as in France engineers were the principal actors of this conjoined mutation in cognitive and social practices] (590). For the following century, the Saint-Simonians rose to high ranks in the French administration and in Egypt they strove to fashion a highly technologized world on an unprecedented scale: such was the era of the Universal Company of the Suez Canal, the Universal Exhibitions in Paris, Haussmann's ambitious urban plan and of course the department stores. As David Harvey describes it, "the spreading tentacles of the rail network and the growing regularity and speed of maritime and telegraph connections shook perceptions of space and place to their very roots" (Harvey 265). At this key moment when the human body and geographic space became objects of

measurement and standardization, the ever-expanding department store became the face of empire, but acquired different meanings in each country.

Throughout the chapter, I aim to give a survey of the different moments of cooperation between France and Egypt and its impact on the process of nation-building in both countries. In providing this detailed account, I would like to shed light in particular on the multilayered aspect of what has come to be known as “modern Cairo” by revealing the various and distinct phases of the French-Egyptian exchanges during the nineteenth and twentieth century which resulted in several modernization projects inspired by Saint-Simonianism, such as Ali Mubarak’s city, the Muski and Ezbekieh quarter (1867) and Baron Empain’s quarter, Heliopolis (1905). Although these projects represent different aesthetics and political relations, in today’s contexts they are all considered part of “modern” Cairo, especially when it is seen through a reductive colonial paradigm that only distinguishes between the “European” and the “native” or traditional city. These binary colonial categories, as I will show, will also have an impact on the residents’ self-perception while seeking to recreate their identity and representation as “modern Egyptians.” In turn, France’s relation to Egypt and its process of nation-building is equally complex. The connection to Egypt during the Napoleonic expedition is not identical to the situation of the Second Empire, especially during the Franco-Prussian war and its aftermath, with the traumatic loss of Alsace-Lorraine.

## **Saint-Simon's Mediterranean Dream**

It must have been a bizarre encounter when twenty-four Frenchmen dressed in red and blue landed in Egypt in 1833. They expressed an unmatched zeal and excitement for a modern Mediterranean world that would unite the Orient and the Occident. These men followed the teachings of their spiritual leader Claude Henri de Saint-Simon who maintained that “if the philosophy of the past century was revolutionary, that of the nineteenth century should be organizational” (Saint-Simon 158). Seeking to create this new world order after a short-lived utopian community established in Paris, three groups of Saint-Simon's disciples began their adventure beyond the French capital. A mission traveled to Lyon, another to Constantinople and a third to Cairo to spread their message and propose their services. The Egyptian expedition had a special task, which consisted of convincing Mehmet Ali, the Ottoman viceroy of Egypt who would become the patriarch of the last royal family of Egypt, to grant the Saint-Simonians permission to build the Suez Canal, a colossal project, a “universal association,” which would usher in a new world order (Coilly and Régnier 156).

For Saint-Simon, the momentum of the French revolution had reached stasis without fully achieving its objectives. While theoretically, it had founded the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity, it never reached in practice its aspired goals of creating a new social order that would affect the life of the majority. The present dilemma, then, was how to finish what the French revolution has started in order to reach beyond the circles of the ruling elites and make its impact palpable in the everyday life of all. Saint-Simon's solution was that the new century should adopt

another vision, one that directs human efforts toward changing the order and scale of things (Musso 1999, 9).

Throughout his career, Saint-Simon dedicated himself to developing a modern secular doctrine, which he dubbed *New Christianity*, the basis of an industrial utopian ideology aiming to build a modern society, where work and collaboration on large-scale projects would become the seed for a new liberating order and the means to achieve equality and fraternity. The guiding principle of his vision consisted in replacing the vertical social hierarchy modeled on a feudal system anchored in a Christian worldview with a horizontal one that involved the largest number of individuals (Musso 2003, 181). Saint-Simon's theories had a ripple effect on the writings of his contemporaries, and on the thought of his students, August Comte's positivism, Proudhon's anarchism, as well as Karl Marx's and Emile Durkheim's theories (Musso 1999, 4). His disciples, such as Michel Chevalier, Prosper Enfantin and Émile Barrault, would later translate his vision into a global technical dream that would change the face of France, Egypt and the Mediterranean forever.

Saint-Simon began his career at a point where the study of the human body, its anatomy and physiology, became the central reference in many disciplines, an image which would take on enormous significance in Saint-Simonian ideology. In 1779, he rose to the rank of captain in the French army and travelled to America to participate in the War of Independence. The experience of the American landscape with its large expanse of land, the branches of the Mississippi River serving as the arteries for a dynamic commerce, as well the American capitalist lifestyle based on the concept of enterprise, inspired him to think of reordering and managing society as a large

enterprise founded on the collaborative ethics of work (Musso 1999, 9). According to him, “Une nation n’est autre chose qu’une grande société d’industrie” [A nation is nothing but a large industrial society] (qtd. in Musso 2006, 29). The French word “société” with its double connotation of community and enterprise attests to the traces of Saint-Simon’s utopian concept in French political economy.

In 1798, having returned to France, Saint-Simon attended classes at the school of engineering, the *École polytechnique*, and at the school of Medicine, where he learned about human physiology and blood circulation. Such an education, asserts Pierre Musso, would establish the foundation and the leading principle for Saint-Simon’s model society. If these studies had anything in common, it was the concept of natural and industrial “networks,” the human body with its web of arteries and veins, and the city, mimicking the structure of the human body, with its own sets of arteries, routes and water channels (Musso 1999, 12-13). For Saint-Simon, the dynamics of a modern society revolves around a similar connective network, a tension between solids and fluids (Musso 2003, 59). He constructs his new system, using the same alphabets, in which the modern “social body” represents a living organism interconnected by a triad of “water, blood, and money” (Musso 1999, 15). Whereas water represents different trade routes and channels connecting the society, blood signifies human movement, and money stands for trade and the circulation of wealth . For Saint-Simon, blood to the body was like money to the political body [“l’argent est au corps politique ce que le sang est au corps humain”] (Musso 1999, 56). The role of the new political administrators was to ensure the fluid circulation of money, information and trade across the body of the nation. Pierre Musso elaborates: “La



pratique religieuse saint-simonienne consiste à tracer sur le corps de la France, c'est à dire sur son territoire, les canaux observés sur le corps humain [Saint-Simonian religious practice involves marking out on the body of France, that is its territory, the channels observed in the human body"] (Musso 1999, 92). In Saint-Simon's utopian vision, France becomes a human body subject to study and control. This model, as I argue in the next chapter, would be mirrored in Zola's fictional department store (see Chapter 3).

In his analysis of Saint-Simonian ideology, Musso posits that if the operational dynamics of Hegelianism is dialectical, that of Saint-Simon is connective (Musso 1999, 36). The modern society results from industrial cooperation and the circulation of resources and information, rather than from direct opposition between groups. Through this collaboration, men pass from being subjects to being associates in creating their model community (Musso 1999, 70). Saint-Simon affirms the necessity of work and the central role of the masses in loosening the grip of the ruling class. "Tout par l'industrie...tout par elle," [everything by industry and everything for it], he posits (Musso 1999, 50). There is no need to wait for the afterlife; we can establish "Paradise on earth" through the democratization of technology, as we reduce the distance between the different points of the nation and the globe, while engaging everyone in the process. The grounds of the Universal Exhibitions, with their elaborate simulacra of Nature and Culture, attest to this ideal (Musso 1999, 56). In this society, "men of genius," producers and entrepreneurs collaborate with the people to design and build large-scale public projects, a set of technical networks that transforms the urban and the social body (Musso 1999, 92). Inspired by Saint-Simon, Marx would

later develop this idea further, to affirm the necessity of a heightened class-consciousness paired with a universal active struggle to end the exploitation of workers and resources by the bourgeoisie. A universal utopian vision, the centrality of action, and the competition over the control of the means of production are some of the elements common to Saint-Simonian and Marxist ideology.

Saint-Simon's ambitious vision extended beyond national borders; he called for the prompt execution of the largest number of public projects in order to improve the fate of many people: "Maintenant que la dimension de notre planète est connue, faites faire par les savants, par les artistes et les industriels un plan général de travaux à exécuter pour rendre la possession territoriale de l'espèce humaine la plus productive possible et la plus agréable" [Now that the dimensions of our planet are known, let scholars, artists and men of industry make a general plan for the projects to be executed in order to render the human territorial possession the most productive and the most agreeable possible] (Musso 1999, 91). In Saint-Simon's vision and vocabulary, the disciplines of physiology and geography merge to construct an imaginary of that new world. For him, the world map, like the anatomical chart, occupies a central position in his universal venture that should cover the globe with a grid of public projects. Just as the human body has recently revealed its secrets, the whole planet would have no more mysteries to hide under the lens of its technical experts. In this context, Saint-Simon campaigned for the creation of a European confederation on the model of the British parliamentary system, presided over by France and Britain. This union, which would end European political conflicts, should comprise 240 members divided into four groups of sixty: scholars (*savants*),

entrepreneurs, industrials, and administrators. An interconnected Mediterranean with railroads would also be part of a global industrial system, a “universal” project that brings together European efforts (Musso 1999, 92). The Mediterranean thus plays a central role in the reorganization of Europe, eliminating its internal conflicts and establishing modern relations beyond the antagonism among Britain, France and Germany.

Following Saint-Simon’s death in 1825, his thought took on greater dimensions. The Saint-Simonians interpreted their leader’s writings in a variety of manners. Prosper Enfantin called for a feminist utopia founded on gender equality where women would assume leadership positions. A head priestess, for instance, would participate in managing the Saint-Simonian community (Riot-Sarcey 48) (Nathalie Coilly and Philippe Reigner 54). Others disciples, like Michel Chevalier, downplayed the moral aspect of Saint-Simonian ideology in favor of its practical recommendations, notably the creation of technical networks (Musso 2003, 198). According to this perspective, the Saint-Simonian dream should be achieved by focusing on the strict collaboration of entrepreneurs and engineers in order to realize the required urban projects, networks of trains, banks, canals, tramways, routes and electricity,<sup>12</sup> which would transform the society both technically and morally through work (Musso 1999, 113).

In 1832, Prosper Enfantin, hoping to put into practice Saint-Simon’s ideals, led forty of his disciples to a retreat in the quarter of Ménilmontant where they planted the

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<sup>12</sup> The Suez company in France was also the national company for gas and electricity, which attests to the Saint-Simonian legacy of building national networks.

seed of their future society. As Antoine Picon describes it, “In Ménilmontant utopia turns literally into a spectacle” (73). Saint-Simonian zealots dressed in a special uniform: a blue redingote, a white gilet with a red trim buttoned from the back, to symbolize interdependence, and white trousers. The blue stood for faith, white for work, and red for love. Growing a beard was “de rigueur” (Musso 1999, 54-55). The group took a vow of celibacy and followed a strict and disciplined routine. In this community, all members had to remain on the premises and accept the absence of hierarchy. The social order was reversed; domestics were now served by their former masters who did the bulk of the manual chores (Picon 73). During their ceremonies, they chanted and praised a new world order in which the Orient and the Occident would be united and freed from their shackles, leading to a new Mediterranean. Six months later, the government ordered the dissolution of the Ménilmontant community. Michel Chevalier and Prosper Enfantin spent nearly a year in prison where they imagined the Orient calling upon them for its liberation (Musso 1999, 100). Within the following two decades, the “utopia-spectacle” became the guiding principle for reordering the entire nation and the Mediterranean basin, as Michel Chevalier ascended to the position of Napoleon III’s councilor and a multitude of entrepreneurs adopted this ideology.

In 1833, Saint-Simon’s disciples crossed to the other shore of the Mediterranean during what they dubbed “l’année de la Mère,” [the year of the Mother]. The group called themselves “les compagnons de la femme” [the companions of Woman], where “la femme” symbolized the Orient, an idea that strangely projects Saint-Simonian feminism into an Orientalist mission where the

Orient takes on a feminine guiding role vis-à-vis a masculine technical Europe (Musso 1999, 115). The Saint-Simonian Émile Barrault saw Egypt as “la terre mère,” [the motherland] the site where the world would attest to their virility<sup>13</sup> (Musso 1999, 115). Before this trip, in 1832, Michel Chevalier wrote in the *Globe* calling for the creation of a modern “Mediterranean system.” He presented the history of the region as one of struggle between East and West in which the Mediterranean basin had become a battlefield between the Orient and the Occident. Instead, he suggested, the Mediterranean should turn into a large “forum” and a “nuptial bed” for the East and West, “La Méditerranée va devenir le lit nuptial de l’Orient et l’Occident” [the Mediterranean will be the nuptial bed of the Orient and Occident]” (Chevalier 1832, 116). In another essay in the same journal, he elaborated on the Saint-Simonian teleological vision of history in which the Mediterranean takes center stage:

La lutte la plus colossale, la plus générale et la plus enracinée, qui ait fait jamais retentir la terre du fracas des batailles, est celle de l’Orient et de l’Occident. Cette lutte est le caractère distinctif de la phase de la civilisation qui s’est écoulée depuis les temps historiques jusqu’à nous. C’est la manifestation la plus éclatante de la guerre que se font depuis six mille ans l’esprit et la matière, le spiritualisme et le sensualisme; guerre à laquelle nous venons à mettre fin. (Chevalier, *Système* 29)

The most widespread, monumental and deeply-rooted struggle which has ever made the Earth reverberate with the din of battle is that of the Orient and the Occident. This struggle represents the distinct character of a phase of civilization which has evolved from historical times to the present day. It is the most resounding manifestation of the war that, for six thousand years, has

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<sup>13</sup> Referring to the digging (*percement*) of the Suez Canal, in 1833, Barrault writes from Suez saying: “Suez est notre centre de vie et travail. Là nous ferons l’acte que le monde attend pour confesser que nous sommes mâles” [Suez is the center of our life and work. There, we will accomplish the act which the world awaits to attest that we are males] (qtd. by Musso 1999, 115).

taken place between mind and matter, spirituality and sensuality, a war which we are now bringing to an end.<sup>14</sup>(Chevalier, Systeme 29)

Indeed the Saint-Simonian trip in 1833 aimed to accelerate this course of history. Although the Saint-Simonians' visit to Egypt was welcomed, the Egyptian ruler, Mehmet Ali, did not share the Saint-Simonian zeal or their Mediterranean utopian vision. The idea of the Suez Canal represented neither a similar symbolic nor a similar practical significance, since he had other strategic priorities and goals. He aimed to build a modern army that could secure his position within the Ottoman Empire<sup>15</sup> (Fahmy 9-14). For this reason, he needed to enlist every kind of help to build the necessary modern institutions that would advance his own project, and the Saint-Simonians' appearance on stage came at the right moment. Instead of building the Suez Canal, Mehmet Ali convinced the Saint-Simonians to construct a barrage on the Nile and to draft an urban plan for the new quarter of Shubra (Alleaume 288). Wishing to build a model Oriental city with schools and a hospital alongside the project, the Saint-Simonian leader Enfantin agreed to participate in Mehmet Ali's plan (Levallois and Régnier 103).

The plague claimed the life of many Saint-Simonians. The rest returned to France with a valuable experience that would influence that country's political path. In the eyes of the Saint-Simonians France and its colonies would replace the Egypt of their earlier dream, another terrain on which they would seek to realize their unfulfilled projects. Prosper Enfantin and Thomas Ismaïl Urbain, a Saint-Simonian

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<sup>14</sup> My translation

<sup>15</sup> For more information on Mehmet Ali's army and its role in building the modern Egyptian nation, consult Khaled Fahmi's *All the Pasha's Men*.

who converted to Islam while in Egypt, returned to France to serve their country in the French colonial venture in the Maghreb<sup>16</sup>. Continuously driven by the utopian Egyptian dream, Enfantin wrote *The Colonization of Algeria*, justifying the French presence in the region and recommending the use of Algeria as a “testing ground” for France (Abi-Mershed 32). Because of his experience in Egypt, Enfantin was named a member of the French Geographic and Ethnographic Societies (Société de Géographie et Société d’Éthnologie) (Régnier and Levallois 105). He enlisted the help of Ismaïl Urbain in the hope of reviving the “Institut d’Égypte” and putting together a body of knowledge and expertise for studying North Africa (Régnier and Levallois 104). Mediating between the Algerian population and the military, Enfantin and Urbain collaborated to shape the future of the newly annexed territory. They called for integrationist policies that would give Algerian Muslims the right to French citizenship and education (Régnier and Levallois 111).

Inspired by Mehmet Ali’s successful venture in the production of cotton, Enfantin established an association for the cultivation of cotton in Algeria, *la Compagnie des cotons d’Afrique* (Régnier and Levallois 108). Meanwhile, Alexis Petit, another follower of Enfantin, used his expertise from Egypt to build a model farm in the northern French town of Rville. This project was designed after the Nabarawa farm which the Saint-Simonians had submitted to Mehmet Ali (Alleaume 288; Ribeill 138). In 1834 and 1837, the Saint-Simonian Pierre-Euryale Cazeaux

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<sup>16</sup> For more about the Saint-Simonian adventure in Algeria, see Abi-Merched’s *Apostles of Modernity*.

created several agricultural companies in order to transform barren lands in France into arable spaces (Ribeill 138).

Despite the initial failure of its mission in Egypt, the Saint-Simonians' experience left an indelible mark on the culture of Egyptian national institutions, and their ideology became the epistemological lens used to study and govern the modern Egyptian nation. In addition to a group of French soldiers who had settled in Egypt after Napoleon Bonaparte's expedition, which were called the "French Mamluks," a group of Saint-Simonians, like Charles Lambert, continued their support of Mehmet Ali's project (Alleaume 104). Lambert was appointed director of the engineering school founded by Mehmet Ali from 1838 to 1850. Others, like Bruneau, took charge of the military school in Turah, and Linant de Bellefonds became responsible for water projects (Levallois and Régnier 103). Clot Bey took charge of health services in 1825 and oversaw the school of Medicine and the military hospital in Abou Za'abal in 1827 (Alleaume 1825). Hamont supervised the pharmacy school established in 1829. Perron headed the school of Medicine at Kasr el-Eini. He was succeeded by two of his Saint-Simonian Egyptian students, Ibrahim Adham and Abdel Rahman, who became ministers and consultants to the Egyptian ruler (Alleaume 136.)

Mehmet-Ali's School of Engineering, or Maktab al-Handasa (the Engineering Office), was established in 1815 and lasted until 1855 (Alleaume 255). The school comprised between five hundred and six hundred students whose age ranged from twelve to sixteen, and who became the first generation of technical experts to oversee the major public projects in Egypt (Alleaume 130). Initially, the school culture was a Mediterranean *mélange*. It was only later that it adopted a French framework. Modeled



as it was after its Ottoman counterpart Maktab-i-Handasi of Tophane, it featured Italian language and geography taught by Italian and Ottoman instructors (Alleaume 120). The language of instruction was divided between Italian and Turkish. With the increase of French-Egyptian Saint-Simonian collaboration, Mehmet Ali hired the Frenchman Pascal Coste; the school became predominately French and finally Arabized, with the rise of its graduates to strategic posts (Alleaume 86). During this phase, the school adopted a curriculum largely informed by the Saint-Simonian worldview, especially in the fields of history, geography, political economy and urban planning. The new generation of experts oversaw many of Egypt's public projects, such as the building of the first railroad between Cairo and Alexandria in 1851 (Alleaume 285). Among Lambert's student was the Saint-Simonian Ali Mubarak who wrote a twenty-volume work on Egypt's urban geography, *Al-Khittat*, and was also assigned the task of building a modern metropolis modeled on Haussmann's Paris.

Conversely, in 1826, Mehmet Ali sent an expedition of students to Paris. Although in Egyptian historiography, this mission is considered the first of its genre, Mehmet Ali's convoys had actually started as early as 1809. The ruler initially sent students to Italy. In 1826, the students were of Egyptian, Turkish, Albanian, Circassian and Armenian origin (Alleaume 139). This generation of scholars would shape Egyptian academic scholarship in history and geography (Alleaume 109). For instance, during that era, Mahmud Pacha Fahmy writes a book on universal history, *Al Bahr al Zakhir fi Tarikh al- 'Alam wa akhbar al-Awa 'il wa al-Awakhir* (Alleaume 620). Among the students of the first expedition to Paris was the renowned Rifa'a al-Tahatawi who studied under the tutelage of Auguste Comte and Michel Chevalier

(Alleaume 143). Tahtawi documented his experience in Paris in his canonical book, *Takhlis al-Ibriz fi Talkhis Paris*, edited by his teacher the Saint-Simonian cartographer Edme-François Jomard.<sup>17</sup> Upon his return to Egypt he participated in the shaping the curriculum for the School of Engineering. Tahtawi also occupied the post of Minister of Education and founded the School for Translators. Among his translations was Henri Michélot's book on Universal Geography meant to be taught at the School of Engineering (Alleaume 236). Like many scholars of this generation, he promoted the Saint-Simonian ideological perspective of collaboration between entrepreneurs and learned men and the central role of urban projects in shaping the society. In his *Manahij al-Albab al-Masriyah fi Mabahij al-Adab al 'Asriyah*,<sup>18</sup> (*Curricula*), he elaborates: "Civilization, with its both spiritual and material components, cannot be reached without the necessary cooperation of men of moral superiority (*Arbab al-akhlak*), entrepreneurs and financial administrators (*Arbab al-Iqtisad wa al-Amwal*) and workers." These ideas came directly from Tahtawi's translation of Charles Lambert's classes on industrial economy delivered at the *École polytechnique* in Paris (Alleaume 626). As Alleaume indicates, Tahtawi and Mubarak followed the lead of Saint-Simonians who classified the different groups of the population as a collective, according to their economic role and profession (Alleaume 626).

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<sup>17</sup> The titles roughly translates to *The Distillation of Gold: Giving an Account of Paris*

<sup>18</sup> The titles roughly translates to *Curricula [paths] of Joyful Contemporary Disciplines and Manners for Egyptian Minds*.

## **Achieving the Saint-Simonian Dream**

It was only in 1859 that another disciple of Saint-Simon, Ferdinand de Lesseps, revived the old interest in the Suez Canal and managed to receive the current ruler's accord. Even before obtaining the formal approval, Lesseps took his group to the desert where in a theatrical gesture, he planted the Egyptian flag in the ground and announced that their work would change the destiny of three continents: "In the name of the Universal Company of the Maritime Suez Canal, we are about to commence this work, which will open up the East to the commerce and civilization of the West" (Karabell 4).

In 1867, two years prior to the inauguration of the Suez Canal, Georges Bell, the biographer of Gérard de Nerval, celebrated the progress of this project by giving a detailed account of his trip to Egypt. Bell describes the port town of Ismailia as a model Mediterranean city. For Bell, Ismailia presents a unique mélange between two worlds, a "relaxing" Oriental space endowed with European economic prosperity:

*De toutes les entreprises colossales qu'a vu naître et conduire à bien la seconde moitié de ce siècle, aucune n'est plus populaire en France que le percement de l'isthme de Suez et la construction du canal qui, unissant la Méditerranée et la mer Rouge permettra aux marines de toute l'Europe méridionale d'entreprendre par une voie prompte et sûre les grandes navigations des mers orientales.... Le canal maritime apporte jusqu'à là [Ismailia] les ondes azures qui baignent les côtes de la Syrie, de la Grèce, de l'Italie, de la Provence, de l'Afrique Française. Ismailia sera un port naturel de relâche. On s'y reposera, on y reprendra des forces. L'Europe s'y fera Orientale, L'Orient européen et la prospérité de la ville s'accroitra d'autant. (202)*

Of all the colossal ventures of the second part of the century, none is more popular in France than the digging of the Isthmus of Suez and the construction of the Suez Canal which, by uniting the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, will allow seafarers from the whole of southern Europe to navigate the seas of the East via a secure and quick route.....The maritime canal brings to Ismailia the azure waters which bathe the shores of Syria, Greece, Italy, Provence and

French Africa. Ismailia will be a natural stopover port for refreshing and re-provisioning oneself. There one can rest and regain one's forces. Europe will become Oriental, the Orient European, and the city will prosper accordingly.<sup>19</sup>

Bell's description follows in the footsteps of Barrault's and Chevalier's Mediterranean utopia. He situates the new city overlooking the Suez Canal within the Saint-Simonian discourse of a teleological historical progress. The Suez Canal as a geographic project would guarantee the efficient navigation of "Oriental seas" by reducing all obstacles facing Southern European fleets. Ismailia marks the beginning of a new world order, a proof of success of mind and technology over matter, born of the union of East and West. It is a peaceful site where capitalist rationalism is matched by an Oriental serenity. Ismailia, like many Oriental and colonial sites, represents a promise of rejuvenation and recovery for Europeans.

Lesseps's new victory was equally celebrated and parodied in the Saint-Simonian paper, *Le Boulevard*, in 1862. Perhaps the two images that reflect the tension between the Orient and European control are that of Maxime du Camp in Egypt and the caricature of Lesseps. In both pictures, the Saint-Simonian obsession with scale becomes the central tool of representation, and the expression of dominance and a European masculine anxiety which will later surface in the discourse and representation of the department stores.

In the first image (fig.1), from Du Camp's collection of photographs which he took during a mission for the French government to document Egyptian monuments in 1849, the photographer's assistant poses on top of the statue of Rameses II which

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<sup>19</sup> My translation

decorates the façade of Abou Simbel Temple in Southern Egypt. Dressed in Orientalist attire, he sits on top of the king's crown, his legs dangling in the air. While this position may express dominance and control, the large-scale statue inverts this meaning. The tiny body resembles a small figurine, or a toy soldier, almost disappearing within the background of this colossal statue that dominates the picture and suggesting powerlessness. Ironically, the European expression of control over Egyptian territory takes on the opposite significance in Du Camp's photograph.

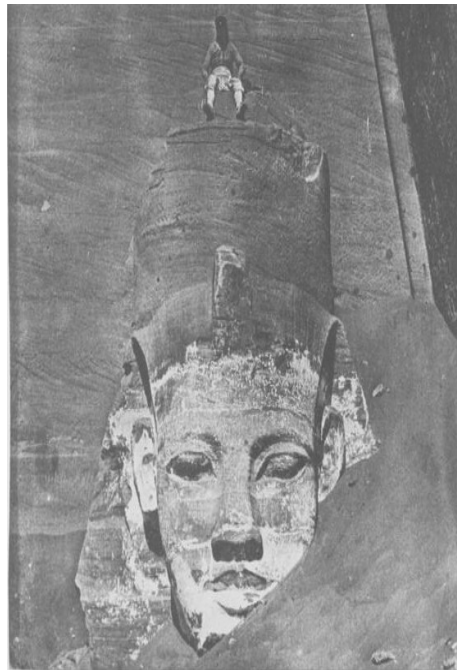


Figure 1. Photograph by Maxime du Camp at temple Abou Simbel, 1849. Source: Gallica, BNF, Paris. The archived photographs come from the collection of the Saint-Simonian Henri Duveyrier who was participated in the Egyptian adventure with Michel Chevalier and Prosper Enfantin.



Figure 2. A caricature of Ferdinand de Lesseps parting the Isthmus of Suez, ill. by Etienne Carjat. Source: the Saint-Simonian magazine. Souce: *Le Boulevard*, 1862, BNF, Paris.

In his *Souvenirs d’Egypte*, Du Camp, who converted to Saint-Simonism after this trip, expressed his ambivalence toward the Egyptian territory. He explains that, his family being of Spanish origins, probably with mixed Arab and European ancestry, he could have easily fallen for the pleasure that Egypt and Africa presented:

... la sensation délicieuse dont j’ai été *pénétré* toutes les fois que j’ai vécu sous la tente, que j’ai dormi sur le sable [...] si les incidents de mon existence ne m’avaient retenu à Paris vers ma trentième année, il est probable que, libre et seul comme je l’étais, je *me serais jeté dans* le continent africain.<sup>20</sup> (Du Camp 139)

... the delicious sensation, which *penetrated* me every time I lived in a tent and slept on the sand [...] If the events of my existence had not kept me in Paris at the age of thirty, it is probable that, free as I was, *I would have thrown myself into* the African continent.<sup>21</sup>[My translation and emphasis]

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<sup>20</sup> My emphasis

<sup>21</sup> My emphasis

A few lines later, Du Camp envies Gustave Flaubert, his travelling companion, whose nature has distanced him from the kind of “exaltation” that Egypt produced in him. Du Camp’s language in the above passage is highly sexual, reminiscent of Michel Chevalier’s writing. Most importantly, it reveals a gender anxiety, a struggle, symbolized in his relation to the African-Egyptian territory. The land is presented as masculine, penetrating the feminine writer, unsettling, denying him a masculine image which the photographer-writer might otherwise project. Such is also the case in Lesseps’s caricature of parting the isthmus.

This caricature celebrates the Saint-Simonian victory in the Suez Canal project. It depicts an oversized Lesseps dressed in animal hide and carrying a large club while straddling the Isthmus of Suez. Legs apart, Lesseps stands like a human bridge letting European ships pass between his feet. By means of a play on scale between Lesseps’s exaggeratedly large body and moustache on the one hand, and a miniaturized Egyptian sphinx on the other, the caricature seeks to present an opposite message to that found in Du Camp’s photograph. The Herculean club evokes phallic dominance, which contrasts with the female, large-bosomed, sphinx located on the right side of the parted land. The imagery of a parted isthmus enforces the idea of a sexualized Orient yielding to Lesseps’s bravado. Lesseps’s gesture, despite its aggressive connotation of rape, recalls Chevalier’s imagery of a Mediterranean nuptial bed uniting the Orient and the Occident. In doing so, the artist expresses a Saint-Simonian virile dominance over an effeminized geography and a miniaturized Orient, but in comic terms.

The comedy, of course, makes fun of this discourse and prevents it from being taken seriously. Moreover, just as in Du Camp's photo, Lesseps's picture communicates an ambivalent message in the depiction of the Saint-Simonian wearing animal hide and carrying a club, suggesting an anxiety of contamination, in which, while separating Egypt from Africa, evoked by the miniaturized crocodile and the bird on top left, Lesseps himself "degenerates" into an African. Seeking to conquer the Orient, the Saint-Simonian is engulfed by the space he tries to dominate<sup>22</sup>. In both pictures, the sexualized Egyptian geography displaces a deeper anxiety about nationalism (Du Camp, as a French writer fantasizing over his Spanish-Arab roots) and racial degeneration.

### **People without Geography**

With the construction of the Suez Canal and the dominance of Saint-Simonian ideology in both France and Egypt, both nations experienced an alienating moment in which they had to make sense of their history and new geographies. On November 17 1869, the Ottoman-Egyptian of Albanian descent Khedive Ismail, ruler of Egypt and Sudan declared: "My country is no longer in Africa; we are now part of Europe. It is therefore natural for us to abandon our former ways and to adopt a new system adapted to our social conditions" (Mansfield 11). For most readers, this sentence might appear an idiosyncratic statement from a ruler who wished to align his nation with modern Europe. Since the Suez Canal connected Egypt to the nineteenth century's

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<sup>22</sup> This idea, I argue will, surface in Zola's novel *Au Bonheur des dames*, in which the Orientalist *grand magasin* would expand to devour the entire metropolis (see Chapter 3).



trajectory of international capital, the khedive sees Egypt's territory sutured to the northern side of the Mediterranean and its modern history plotted onto a teleological course of Enlightenment that equates modernity with the adoption of laissez-faire economy and heavy industrialization. The rest of the world occupies an imaginary earlier position on that historical timeline as "not yet modernized," until they undergo the civilizing mission and reach the same industrial caliber (Chakrabarty 113). The Suez Canal, which allowed Egypt to adopt a strategic role in the modern economy of Europe, represented the symbolic gates that ushered the country into modern history. The Khedive reflects this newly found position and overcomes the historical dichotomy by redrawing Egypt's map and connecting it to Europe. Two years before the inauguration of the canal, Ismail had already been preparing for this moment of transition. Upon his return from the Universal Exhibition of 1867 where he saw a miniature of Egypt displayed for the visitors, he assigned Ali Mubarak to chart and build a modern European city similar to Haussmann's Paris in order to receive his guests during the inaugural ceremonies. The Khedive's speech and his new urban project severed his society from its previous geographical ties and accomplished an act similar to that of Amerigo Vespucci's towards the natives in America when he disconnected the *New World* from its inhabitants to present it as the natural terrain for European progress. The incorporation of Egypt into European trade routes, and the consequent elimination of Africa from them, made it possible for the khedive to cast the residents of Egypt as Europeans. This interpellation, which mostly concerns the upper strata of Egyptian society, dictated a change in their subject positions vis-à-vis geography, history and social context, and led to a dilemma of representation for

Egyptians. The residents of Egypt had become not only, in Derek Gregory's words, "‘people without history’ ... but also ‘people without geography’ ... human beings whose relationship to their own land is denied...through a discourse which...separates people from place, and effaces the speaking self" (Gregory 1994, 131).<sup>23</sup>

This new posture was paired with a European imperialist worldview, with its hierarchy of races and cultures. Such a situation is manifest in the ambivalent Egyptian position vis-à-vis the African continent<sup>24</sup>. Ironically, the Egyptian government assumed the same role as the Napoleonic expedition in Egypt in relation to the rest of Africa. In 1875, hoping to expand his political control, Ismail established the Khedival Foundation of Geography. Just as Napoleon's scientific mission took charge of documenting Egypt's population, flora and fauna, the khedival foundation included members of the army, botanists, geologists and doctors who subjected the continent to their study, charted new maps, prepared detailed ethnographic reports, and participated in the discovery of the White Nile (Alleaume 591).

Upon close inspection, the new situation of Egypt bore many more resemblances to France than the simple emulation of imperial ambitions. France also was a nation that found itself suddenly "without geography." Interestingly, both Napoleon III and Khedive Ismail were blamed for the financial ruin of their respective nations, due to their overspending on lavish projects such as building an opera house

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<sup>23</sup> Gregory refers to Marie-Louise Pratt's reading of the colonial discourse of travel writing; see Marie-Louise Pratt, "Scratches on the face of the country; or, What Mr. Barrow Saw in the Land of the Bushmen," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1985) pp. 119-143.

<sup>24</sup> For more about Egyptian imperialism in Sudan, see *Daly's Imperial Sudan. The Anglo-Egyptian Condominium*.

(Wolff 229; Abu-Lughod 113). Describing the new urban changes that took place in Paris, David Harvey posits: “In these years Paris looked around and was unable to recognize itself. Another large city had overflowed into the unaltered framework of streets, mansions, houses and passageways, piling man on man and trade on trade” (Harvey 95). In his memoirs, Haussmann recounts the historical moment when he began his post as a Prefect of the Seine department and thus of Paris. He states that he received a map of the city by the emperor on which the latter had traced different colored lines to show him the necessary transformations that he should oversee to change the city’s urban plan (Harvey 8). While, as Harvey suggests, the story is probably apocryphal, it is telling of the changes that took place, in which Parisians struggled to make sense of their city and of their nation at large. As is well known, during the Second Empire, public projects were undertaken on an unprecedented scale. The population in the metropolis grew from 786,000 in 1831 to 1,538, 613 in 1856 (Harvey 92). Significant parts of the city were demolished; the suburbs annexed, to create a modern metropolis of twenty *arrondissements* (districts), each with a radiating web of large boulevards and open vistas. The newly merged omnibus company navigated the modern city and transported over 110 millions passengers by 1860. A railway network of 17, 4000 kilometers and 23,000 kilometers of telegraph lines connected the entire nation, placing Paris at the center stage of a modern network of transport, communication and commerce (Harvey 109-113).

## A Double Display of France and Egypt at the Universal Exhibition



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Figure 3. Picture of old Paris at the Universal Exhibition of 1900. Ill. In *35 phot. des différents pavillons de l'Exposition universelle de Paris en 1900* 35 Paris en 1900. Edouard Martel, 1900. Source: Gallica. BNF, Paris.

The building of the modern French metropolis was the highlight of the Universal Exhibitions held in Paris, which served to accentuate France's world leadership. In *Colonising Egypt*, Timothy Mitchell describes the theatricality of these events in which Egypt's geography served as public entertainment. For Mitchell, the Universal Exhibitions of 1867 and 1889, in particular, aimed to reconstruct the world's image by reordering it into framed tableaux.

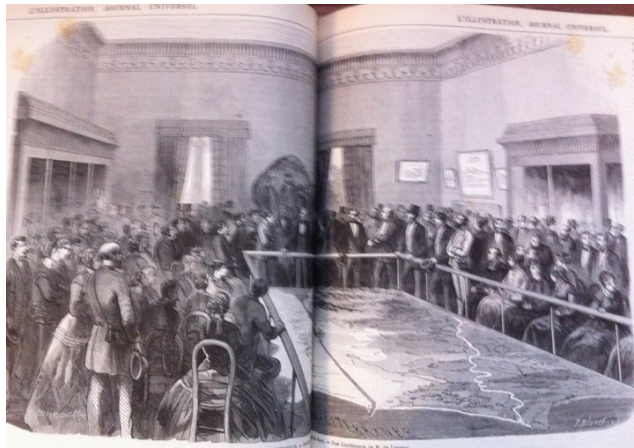


Figure 4. Picture of the Isthmus of Suez Canal at the Egyptian pavilion, the Universal Exhibition of 1867. Source: *L'Illustration*, 28 Sep 1867, BNF, Paris.

The setting at the exhibitions carefully nuanced the hierarchy between the different nations, through a layout that separated the technologically advanced European countries, including France, from other nations and colonies. Mitchell depicts the Ottoman-Egyptian khedive's experience as he strolled in the Orientalist Egyptian pavilion, which turned the khedive himself into an exotic object of display. Yet the Universal Exhibitions did not only constitute a mirror for the colonial subject, but also served to showcase both French and Egyptians. Just as the Egyptians saw a simulacrum of their city being carefully reenacted at the exhibitions of 1867 and 1889, the French also encountered a model of old Paris at the Universal Exhibition of 1900. The miniature city was set in contrast with its larger, actual modern one, which continuously acquired new monuments in order to impress its visitors. In his analysis of this moment, Walter Benjamin claims that "the world exhibitions are places of pilgrimage to the commodity fetish," a space in which the worker occupies center stage briefly as a client. (Benjamin 7). In such exhibitions, modern Paris, in its new

Saint-Simonian layout, was the commodity fetish par excellence, the main product delivered to the “consumer.” While workers were meant to enjoy the fruits of their labor and celebrate their Saint-Simonian paradise, the foreign visitor’s eyes acknowledged and admired France’s status as a modern nation. As Jacques Derrida explains, hospitality consists of a performative event that reenacts the house rules before the guest. It constitutes a key occasion where the patriarch asserts his authority and renews the house members’ affirmation for obedience (Derrida 1997, 27). For France, the Universal Exhibitions served as a similar definitive moment on the national level, in which visitors acknowledged France’s leadership before its workers and residents. In fact, most of the now-iconic Parisian monuments were specially built for that international event: the Eiffel Tower, the Grand Palais, the garden of the Champ de Mars, the Metro, the Grand Magasin du Louvre. Describing a similar, if earlier, moment of estrangement, Théophile Gautier affirmed, “The city was being adorned for foreigners. Tourists were the audience for this great spectacle of change and were sufficiently distanced not to feel implicated in the plot” (Wolff 228).

It was not only Paris that was divided into old and modern, into an object of display and a product of advanced technology. Egypt also was the subject of such a double display. In addition to showcasing the traditional Egyptian towns and the various ancient Egyptian temples, in 1889, the exhibition constructed for the public a model of the isthmus of Suez. Egypt in this context was not simply another nation in the international community to which France demonstrated its technological advancement, but was presented as a product of France. In digging the Canal, France redesigned more than its capital or the exhibition grounds; it reconfigured Egypt’s map

and that of the world . Reordering Egypt's geography served to locate France in modern history. This reconfiguration of Egyptian territory through the Suez Canal recalled Napoleon's Egyptian mission of 1798. The first expedition, which included "167 scholars, scientists, engineers and artists," constructed such a map through the massive scientific documentation which was compiled and the encyclopedic *Description de l'Egypte* which resulted from it (Abi-Mershed 19). Napoleon aimed to consolidate the image of France as an empire and tie it to the history of enlightenment whose depiction of civilization starts in the East (Egypt, Babylonia) and moves westwards (Europe). The discourse on the Canal replicates the First Empire's propaganda and brings it to completion. The return to Egypt with the Suez Canal fixed the image of the Second Empire as the world leader in technology and the bearer of the civilizing mission from France to Africa and further to Asia.

### **Egyptomania, Francophilia, and Modern Nationalist Representation**

The most telling moment of this revived Egyptomania was when the French sculptor Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi designed a statue of an Egyptian Marianne holding a beacon, to be placed at the entrance of the Suez Canal. He called it "Egypt Carrying Light to Asia" (Gregory 329). The statue aligned the Enlightenment values of the French Republic with the Saint-Simonian Mediterranean network of trade and transport. Not only does this translate French Republican ideals into a universal mission, but it also highlights the centrality of the Suez Canal project in affirming their success.



Figure 5. Picture of Statue of Liberty. Source: [architectureabout.com](http://architectureabout.com)

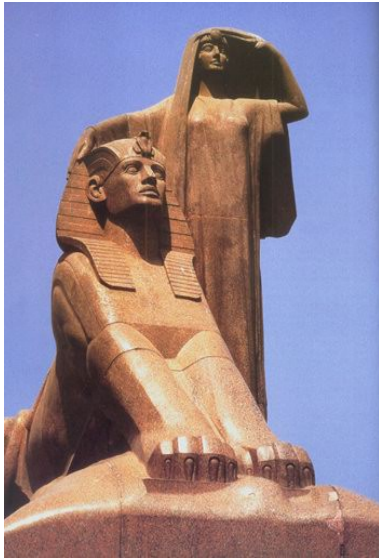


Figure 6. Picture of Nahdet Masr, le réveil de l’Egypte, by Mahmoud Moukhtar, currently located by Cairo University. Source: [www.huffingtonpost.com](http://www.huffingtonpost.com)

*Egypt carrying light to Asia* represents the Egyptian nation in the image of a native woman who has undergone successfully the French civilizing mission and whose voice is appropriated to become the spokesperson of French enlightenment in a European hierarchy of races and cultures, in which Asia becomes the subject of



another French subject, Egypt. Derek Gregory suggests that this artwork stood for a Saint-Simonian Orientalist imaginary ‘to justify domination of an irrational Orient by railroads, canals and commerce, in the name of a superior Enlightenment’ (1994, 330). Yet what is striking about this image is that through this Orientalist fantasy of an Egyptian Marianne, the French nation is embodied in the image of a native Egyptian woman. The statue then becomes an ambiguous moment of national masquerade in which the empire disguises itself as a colonial subject, where “France” dresses up as “Egypt.” And through this overlapping and exchange of images and histories, the French empire affirms its impact, and perhaps also its dependence, on the region.

Nevertheless, despite its Orientalist aspect and the hierarchal distinctions between France as an imperial power and Egypt, this incident also represents a moment of mutual recognition. By using the nationalist iconography of Marianne, the sculptor concocts a symbolic image of the Egyptian nation, which would be dominant later in Egyptian nationalist iconography. By conflating French and Egyptian histories, then, the *universal* project of the Suez Canal and Bartholdi’s sculpture served a double mission for both Egypt and France at a critical time of their histories. On the one hand, the progressive French historical narrative that frames the building of the Suez Canal documents the various failed attempts across Egyptian history until France made such a dream a reality. On the other hand, by writing this version of French history, the project (perhaps inadvertently) constructs a narrative in which Egypt exists as a transcendental national entity that has persisted and survived across the ages. Interestingly, after being rejected by the khedive, a modified design of Bartholdi’s statue made its way to the United States, acquired a new context and became the

Statue of Liberty (fig. 5), a now-iconic symbol of American culture. Ironically, the dream of a modern Mediterranean which began by Saint-Simon's visit to the United States comes full circle and returns to America to play a central role in its national culture.

In Egypt, the imagery of the *Egypt Carrying Light to Asia* also made its way back in the work of Mahmoud Mukhtar (1891-1934) who studied at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris in 1911. Mukhtar's famous statue, *Nahdat Masr*, or *le réveil de l'Égypte* (fig. 6), draws its symbolic significance from the Egyptian nationalist movement of 1919. Mukhtar began this design in 1918 while he was still in Paris and received a prize for his work at the Grand Palais in 1920 (Habib). In Mukhtar's statue, Egypt stands proudly holding the Sphinx by her left and commanding it to rise. Thematically, both statues symbolize the renaissance of the Egyptian nation. *Nahdat Masr* represents Egypt as a native Egyptian peasant. The resemblance between the posture and attire of the Statue of Liberty and *Nahdat Masr* is striking. With Mukhtar's statue, French Egyptomania, conjured up by the Egyptian Marianne and the Sphinx, makes its way back to Egyptian nationalist representation, and in a Saint-Simonian gesture, the statue was originally placed by the gates of Cairo's central train station to be the first image to receive visitors and travelers (Colla 228).

### **Translating the Haussmannian Urban Pan**

The turn toward the rearrangement of Egyptian space was a central experience that shaped Egyptians' relation to their own cities. Before visiting France in 1867, Ismail had just received from the Ottoman Porte the title of Khedive, a position that

would grant him autonomous rule of the Egyptian province (Raymond 308). Recreating the Egyptian metropolis was meant to anchor that new status. After Ismail's return from the Universal Exhibition, he appointed Ali Mubarak as minister of Public Works. Mubarak's first task was to design an urban plan for a modern city similar to Haussmann's Paris. Taking the lead from Haussmann, Mubarak demolished old palaces and monuments, and installed new streets with broad pavements. Ismail granted free land along these boulevards to any anyone who was willing to build a house with a European façade. Mubarak's plan consisted of building a city with straight-lined streets made of twelve interconnected arrondissements (Maydans) over the map of the medieval city (Raymond 311).

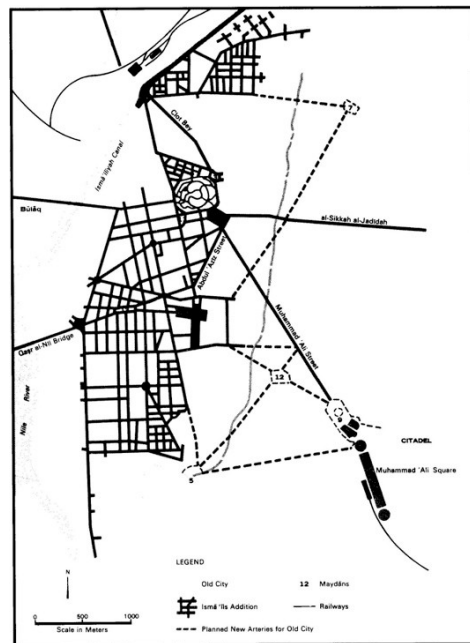


Figure 7. Ali Mubarak's original urban plan of Cairo designed after Haussamann, with twelve arrondissements. Source: Abu-Lugoud's *Cairo, 1000 Years of the City Victorious*, p.110.

However, only three squares, Khazindar, Opera and Attaba, were finished since the project required significant demolitions (Abu-Lughod 110). After the

inauguration of the Suez Canal, the construction slowed down and eventually ceased. In 1869, the new streets, as Abu-Lughod observes, looked more like a façade, a reminder of the setting of the Universal Exhibition, rather than an actual lived space, since there was no popular demand for the area. Nevertheless, the subsequent urban developments which were undertaken by the British authority remained within the urban map charted by Mubarak. It was only later, during the twentieth century, that Mubarak's city actually took shape on a large scale.

The significant urban changes which took place between 1867 and 1869, were in the Muski district. In addition to the new boulevards, Ismail assigned Barillet-Deschamps, the French landscape architect and designer of Bois de Boulogne and Champ de Mars, to create a similar park (Abu-Lughod 107).



Figure 8. Picture of the French Opéra house in Paris, designed by Charles Garnier. The construction began in 1865 and was finished in 1871. Postcard. Source: archdaily.com



Figure 9. Picture of the Egyptian Opera House, le theater Khedival, previously located at the Haussmannized area of Cairo, across of Ezbekieh Garden (see map of Cairo further below). Postcard. Source: UTK.edu



Figure 10. Picture of La Scala, Milan. Postcard. Source: Postcardparadise.com.

Yet despite its aspiration of emulating French spaces and culture, the new Haussmannian city built by Egyptian, French and Italian architects embodied a broader Mediterranean outlook. The opera house bore the architectural characteristics of both Opera Garnier and La Scala in Milan (Raymond 312). Such significant Italian influence which was continuously present in the different aspects of the Egyptian modernizing project, including for instance Mehmet Ali's educational missions, is carefully suppressed in Egyptian historiography, which begins modern Egyptian history with the French-Egyptian encounter during Napoleon's 1798 expedition.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> For more on the legacy of Italian architecture in Egypt see Milva Giacomelli's and Ezio Godoli's *Architetti e ingegneri italiani in Egitto dal diciannovesimo al ventunesimo secolo. Italian Architects and Engineers in Egypt from the Nineteenth to the Twenty-First Century*, 2008; see also Marta Petricoli's *Oltre il mito : l'Egitto degli italiani (1917-1947)*, 2007.

After the opening of the Suez Canal, the population of Cairo increased from 374,000 in 1882 to 1,312,000 in 1937. In 1927 out of more than a million Cairenes only 614,000 were born in Cairo (Raymond 311). The new residents came from Greece, Italy, France, Britain, Sweden, and Belgium and English. They belonged to different social classes and backgrounds (Abu-Lughod 115). The large demand for housing led to another urban project in 1905, this time from the collaboration of Prime Minister Nubar Pasha and the Saint-Simonian Belgian entrepreneur Édouard Empain, the main contractor for the Parisian metro. Once again, Egyptomania propels a modern urban project in Cairo. A lover of Egypt, Baron Empain enlisted the aid of several British, Belgian and French entrepreneurs, among whom were André Bertholt, the director of la Compagnie du Métro parisien and the Société parisienne pour l'industrie des chemins de fer et tramways électriques (Ilbert 1981, 8). This project aimed to build a new residential quarter in the suburbs of Cairo connected to the center via a modern network of trains and tramways (Raymond 321). Baron Empain's company had a strong presence in Egypt already. Since 1894, he had overseen the construction of thirty lines of tramway in Cairo (Raymond 321). The Baron's dream also bore the typical aspects of Egyptomania, since he fantasized about reviving the ancient city of Heliopolis. Although the archeological excavations did not lead to the discovery of the old city, the modern city emerged in the process (Ilbert 1981, 9).

Heliopolis, promoted as "the Champs Elysées of modern Cairo" (Ilbert 1981, 58), was a mélange of the Saint-Simonian emphasis on transportation networks and the British suburban model of a "garden-city" (Ilbert 1981, 49). The project had offices in Brussels, Paris and Cairo. Some of the directors leading the enterprise from Paris

never set foot in Egypt (Ilbert 29). Unlike the earlier Haussmannian plan, this new project sought to avoid the clichéd colonial dichotomy between a modern European city and a medieval one. The design and setting of Heliopolis attempted to integrate Near Eastern architectural aesthetics into the project. The new neighborhood unfolded over two central axes featuring Heliopolis's main landmarks, a neo-byzantine basilica and Baron Empain's Orientalist palace, with a distinctive Hindu architectural design (Ilbert, 1981, 64). Most of the monuments, like the neighborhood's arcades, which in some manner resembled the arcades of the *Grands Magasins du Louvre*, were designed in a "neo-Moresque" style (Raymond 333).

While both Ismail's urban plan and Empain's Heliopolis are currently considered part of modern Cairo, they represent two conflicting interpretations of Saint-Simonian urban planning and modernity in general. Ismail's project stressed the European aspect of Cairo and for that reason he emulated some of the iconic landmarks of the Second Empire: the Opéra, Parc Monceau and Parisian avenues lined with shops and boutiques. Baron Empain, on the other hand, projected an Orientalist vision onto the Egyptian space. Although the design suggests a merger of Near-Eastern and European aesthetics, the original zoning for the project still revealed a colonial framework. The original plan of the city (fig. 11) shows that its organization is centered on carefully ordering the prayer spaces and schools that serve the different ethnic communities. By foregrounding the prayer spaces as the main axes for that new quarter, the planning reveals the traces of a colonial ideology that implicitly seeks to categorize and distribute the populations according to religion and ethnicity.

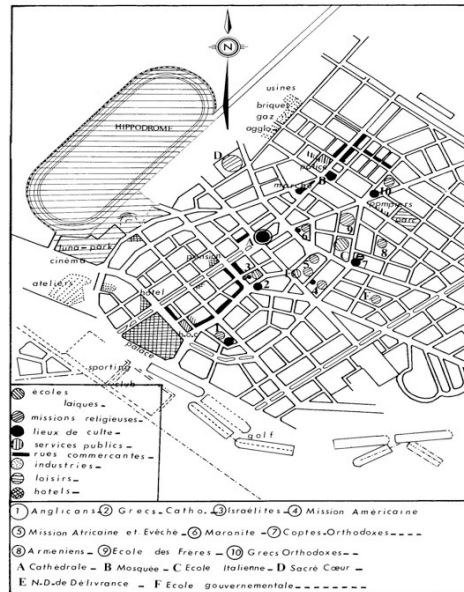


Figure 11. Original map of Heliopolis, with the basilica at the center, hippodrome, and detailed zoning based on ethnicity and class. Source: Robert Ilbert's *Heliopolis*, 1981.

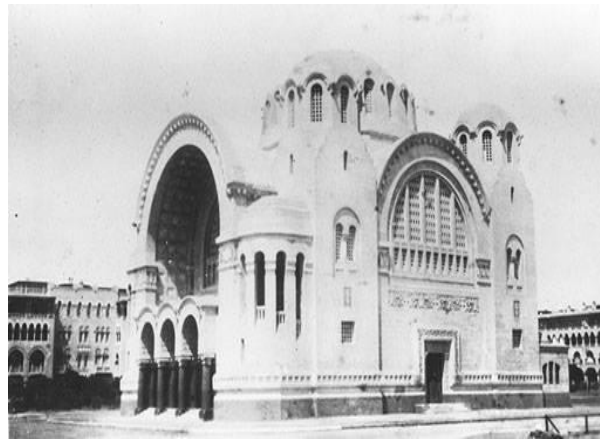


Figure 12. The Basilica located at the center of Heliopolis characterized with its neo-byzantine style. Source: theegyptianchronicles.com





Figure 13 The arcades at Heliopolis located at Ismail Street (currently Korba street). Source: theegyptianchronicles.



Figure 14. Baron Empain's famous palace in Heliopolis, designed as a Hindi temple. Source: touregypt.net

### **A New Human Geography**

Not only did these rapid urban changes within Egypt have an effect on Egyptian human geography, but they also played a central role in shaping the residents' definition of modernity and national identity. When Maxime Du Camp met Charles Lambert in Egypt in 1849, the Saint-Simonian mission had already reached its end. Du Camp notes that Mohamed Ali's dream had vanished, leaving everything to

return to its former unchanging course. Du Camp admired Lambert's character and upon his return to France, he converted to Saint-Simonism. Edward Said describes the products of Du Camp's and Flaubert's adventure in Egypt as an example of an Orientalist literature, which defined and represented the region for Europe (Said 7). Yet what stands out in Du Camp's account is his description of a new human geography which started to take shape in Egypt, a geography onto which he projects the European anxiety of the Orient. Du Camp found in Egypt an Orient full of comic European characters drifting aimlessly and whose fortune ranged from living in unparalleled luxury to extreme misery. He met ancient officers from the French military, actors and translators who communicated in a multitude of languages and did not fit a typical French national image. As mentioned earlier, this perhaps explains his personal anxiety of ceding to the exaltation that Egypt produced in him, due, as he claims, to his Spanish-Arab roots. Du Camp met, for instance, Colonel Langlois, the famous creator of the Parisian diorama and panorama, who got his inspiration from Napoleon's battles in the Levant. He also met Lubbert, the former director of the Paris Opera, and Joseph Sève, or Soliman Pacha, who was responsible for building Mehmet Ali's modern army and securing his victories over his Ottoman masters (Du Camp 118-140). Sève would become the grandfather of the last Egyptian king, Farouk (Raafat 2005, 19). Even Lambert, whom Du Camp admired, had decided to separate himself from his compatriots and become "Franco-Arab" (Alleaume 258).

Du Camp's description of the characters he saw embodies a nineteenth-century Eurocentric lens obsessed with strict classifications and uniformity and unable to fathom difference beyond a European nationalist perspective highly informed by 19<sup>th</sup>

century Human Geography (see La Blache's writing in Chapter 1), in which the individual has to match the "landscape" where he lives. In this case, the human body, the social body and that of the city are simultaneously constructed to portray an imagined homogenous character. This idea is also manifest in the department store and the emergence of fashion where a person's attire and looks should "fit" with the entire society and the space he or she inhabits, as I will discuss later.

A fine example of the new human geography in Egypt occurs in the words of French writer Jehan d'Ivray, who married an Egyptian doctor and moved to Egypt in the last decade of the nineteenth century (fig. 17). Jehan d'Ivray's work reveals how the nineteenth-century multicultural context of Egypt, which developed after the Suez Canal project, challenged the colonial cliché of an archaic, immutable Orient. It also did not fit the European idea of a modern national identity hinging on the creation of a homogenous monolithic culture. In her novel, *Les porteuses de torches* (1923), *the Torch Bearers*, a French baron, seated at the terrace of the famous Mena House hotel, overlooking the pyramid plateau, attempts to explain to a female friend the dissonance between the landscape before their eyes and the actual character of the society that she encounters on the terrace. The hotel terrace with the pyramid as a backdrop proves, in the narrator's words, that "civilization has no limit" (72). For the French tourist, the romantic Mademoiselle Hermine and the baron, the hotel terrace marks the disconnection between an imagined Oriental landscape and the actual lived space. The Baron, then, seems compelled to give Mademoiselle Hermine a lesson in human geography:

L’Egypte. Vois-tu, c’est tout simplement une terre africaine, turque de nom, anglaise de droit; on y trouve des Egyptiens qui parlent l’arabe, des hôtels où des cuisiniers allemands vous fabriquent des mets français, servis par des garçons suisses, des tziganes napolitains qui jouent des airs russes, des femmes valaques qui se font passer pour des Parisiennes, et des juifs espagnols qui se disent Anglais. Seuls, les Anglais de toutes marques sont bon teint et le prouvent par la façon dont ils mènent les gens et les choses. Eux seuls, sont rois, parce que, seuls, ils savent être pratiques. (Ivray 1923, 72)

\_\_Egypt, you see, is simply an African land, Turkish in name, English in law, We find Egyptians who speak Arabic; hotels where German chefs cook French meals, served by Swiss waiters; Neapolitan gypsies playing Russian tunes; Wallach women passing as Parisians; and Spanish Jews who say they are English. Only the English of all types are steadfast, and they prove it by the manner they manage people and things here. Only they are kings, because they know how to be practical. [My translation]

This brief version of the *Description de l’Egypte*, filtered through a French aristocratic colonial lens, seeks to address his friend’s disappointment in the lack of authenticity of their surroundings. What is most striking in the baron’s description, however, is not the artificiality lamented by his friend, or even what he claims to be the accurate rendition of Egyptian society. The baron’s statement struggles to reconcile the French Orientalist image of Egypt with that which he is actually experiencing, between an abstract and an actual lived social space, what Neil Smith calls “deep space” (qtd. In Gregory 3.) The cosmopolitan society that the baron and his friend have encountered is not based in any specific national identity, language, nor culture. Above all it cannot be logically connected to the vista of the pyramids facing them. The multicultural aspect of the Mena House hotel, like Egypt itself, renders all these categories questionable and performative to the extent that looking at the pyramids from that comfortable cosmopolitan terrace disturbs the creation of a timeless authentic Egyptian tableau.

Jehan d'Ivray's description reflected the dominant imperialist views of Egypt projected by British colonialism. The baron's view does not differ much from the Earl of Cromer's understanding of Egyptian society. The British Consul General in Egypt quotes Lord Milner's description of Egypt "a land of paradox." Cairo is a mismatched combination of "old ruin and modern café, [a] dying Mecca and a still-born Rue de Rivoli" (Baring 127). Egypt is neither an old nation in ruin nor a modern French state. For him, the population of Egypt reflects that hybrid space, where "half-breeds of every description, and pure-blooded Europeans pass by in procession" (Baring 128). Lord Cromer struggles to make sense of the 1897 population census, which expresses the diverse population. For him the inhabitants of Egypt do not reflect any homogenous features or cultural character that tie them to a specific national identity. Walking in the streets of Paris, London, or Berlin, he says, one can find "nine out of ten of the people with whom he meets bear on their faces evidence, more or less palpable, that they are Englishmen, Frenchmen, or Germans" (Baring 127). He asks: "Who, in fact, is a true Egyptian?" (Baring 128). For both Lord Cromer and the Baron, the *mélange* of cultures in Egypt was defined as a hybrid anomaly rather than cosmopolitanism.

A survey of Huda Shaarawi's Francophone newspaper *L'Egyptienne* reveals how the multicultural upper-class residents of Egypt reacted to the image of their society filtered through the reductive colonial dichotomy of an "archaic" East and "modern" West. In this view, Egyptian cultural diversity was also considered a form of backwardness and a failure of Egyptian nationalism. In particular, the magazine

shows how the upper classes grappled with the dilemma of reconciling modernity with Egyptian national identity, human and urban geography.

In their attempt to present modern Egyptian women, the editors, Huda Shaarawi and Céza Nebaraoui, chose a permanent cover featuring an Egyptian woman from the working class standing coquettishly, dressed in European attire, but wrapped in the traditional black fabric (*milaya laf*). The model is slightly Europeanized and modernized. She has a slim figure and wears an elegant necklace. In the background, we find a Moresque doorway, an architecture that is more common in the Maghreb and probably better known among French readers than in Egypt. The magazine cover creates a unique Egyptian cityscape and human geography, which projects what upper-class Egyptian women perceive as a traditional Egyptian woman. One of the few pointers which bring the reader back to a modern Egyptian urban space is the magazine headquarters' location, typed in bold font on the cover, "Kasr El Nil Street," located in the modern Haussmannized district of Cairo.



Figure 15. Magazine Cover for *l’Égyptienne*. Source: *L’Égyptienne*, January 1925, Vol. 1.1, Microfilm Collection, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, France.

In contrast, the content of the magazine is replete with photos of women from Egypt whose portraits do not fit the unchanging cover’s illustration of “a traditional” Egyptian woman. Observe the following photos taken from the magazine (figs 16-21). The top picture, for instance (fig. 16), shows Huda Shaarawi and Céza Nébaraoui, the founders of the magazine, along with Madame Regina Khayatt and Mrs. Esther Fahmy Wissa, two major feminist figures of the time, at a feminist convention in Paris. The bottom pictures show Jehan d’Ivray, the French Saint-Simonian writer who lived in Egypt (fig. 17), Huda Shaarawi in her house (fig. 18), and Eugénie Lebrun, Madame Ruchdi Pasha, the French Muslim writer (fig. 19). To describe some of the photos, the magazine uses the title “les grandes figures féministes d’Egypte” or “the great feminist personalities from Egypt.” The word “figures,” however, which means both “personality” and “face” in French, highlights one of the main concerns of the

magazine, which is the question of presentation of the modern Egyptian woman, and the desire to create a face for that newly imagined persona both on the national and international levels.



LA DELEGATION EGYPTIENNE  
De droite à gauche : Mme Khayat bey, Mme Esther Wissa, Mme Hoda Shaarawi,  
Mlle Céza Nebaraoui.

Figure 16. Huda Shaarawi and feminist delegates in Paris. “Le Congrès Internationale pour le suffrage des femmes à Paris. Source: *L’Egyptienne*, 2.18, July 1926, p.162, Microfilm Collection, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, France. The caption reads: The Egyptian delegation. From right to left: Madame Khayatt Bey, Madame Esther Wissa, Madame Huda Shaarawi, Mademoiselle Céza Nebaraoui.





**MADAME JEHAN D'IVRAY.**  
 Romancière, historicienne, et forte personnalité archéologique, Madame Jehan d'Ivray est de tous les écrivains français modernes celle qui a été la plus marquée dans son œuvre à notre pays qui est pour ainsi dire devenue le sien. Actuellement parait sous le titre de « L'Égypte », sous le pseudonyme de Jehan d'Ivray un ouvrage qui constitue un ouvrage sur « L'Égypte dans l'histoire et les Femmes », dont une partie se déroule en Égypte.

Figure 17. Jehan d'Ivray. *L'Égyptienne*, 2.18, July 1926. The caption says “The Great Feminist Personalities of Egypt. Madame Huda Shaarawi Pasha. We are pleased to publish the portrait of Madame Houda Charaoui Pasha, the founder of that active magazine and president of Egyptian Feminist Union. She is loved by thousands of foreigners as well as the Egyptian people who consider her an incarnation of patriotism and heroine of liberty. The great title for Madame Huda Shaarawi is her tireless dedication and extreme generosity.

LES GRANDES FIGURES FÉMININES D'ÉGYPTÉ



**Madame Houda Charaoui Pacha**  
 Nous sommes heureux de publier le portrait de Madame Houda Charaoui Pacha, fondatrice de cette active revue et Présidente de l'Union Féministe Égyptienne. Très aimée des égyptiens, étrangers et du peuple égyptien qui la considère comme l'incarnation du patriotisme et l'héroïne de la liberté, le plus grand titre de Madame Houda Charaoui Pacha est son inlassable dévouement, son extrême générosité.

Figure 18. Huda Shaarawi. From *L'Égyptienne*. January 1926, vol 2:17, Microfilm Collection, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, France.

LES GRANDES FIGURES FÉMININES D'ÉGYPTE



Madame Rouchdi Pacha

Figure 19. Madame Rouchdi Pacha (Niya Salima). From *L'Égyptienne*. January 1926, vol 2:17. Microfilm Collection, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, France.

The tension between what is seen as traditional and what is seen as modern is even more evident in another event. In 1927, the newspaper reported on a Kermess, fundraising event organized by the Egyptian Feminist Union founded by Huda Shaarawi. During this event, different Cairene women dressed up as female characters from Egyptian history for a theatrical show written by the Francophone poetess Nelly Zananiry. What is striking in these tableaux is the diverse backgrounds of the women performing these sketches.



Figure 20. Photographs of a play performed at a Kermess, from *L’Egyptienne*. Vol. 4.36. March 1928. Microfilm Collection, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, France.

The participants included Mademoiselle Solé (a Syrian Egyptian perhaps related to writer Robert Solé), Mademoiselle Jabès (a Francophone Jewish Egyptian, probably a relative of the writer Edmond Jabès), Nelly Zananiry (a Francophone Syrian Egyptian poetess), Mlle Schmeill, Mlle Generopoulo, Mlle Habachi and Madame Eid. The group represents very diverse backgrounds — Jewish, Syrian, Germanic, and Greek, among others. In the tableaux, the group presented female characters from Egyptian history, such as Cleopatra, Hatshepsut, Teti Sheri, and Shajarat al-dor, or sometimes allegorical figures, such as the Bride of the Nile, Turkish dancers and the modern Egyptian woman. Although the event aimed to provide entertainment for the Egyptian elite, the ceremony reveals the dilemma of a society grappling with the definition of the modern Egyptian, in terms of both national identity and gender roles. In one of the symbolic moments in the show, Nelly Zananiri evokes Mukhtar’s statue, *Le réveil de l’Egypte*. She stands before the “mute” Sphinx and asks him about “the future of the

Egyptian woman” (Nabaraoui 50). In search of a new national and cultural representation of the modern Egyptian woman, the tableaux created a historical continuum between Egyptian contemporary society and the Egyptian past, by having Muslims, Jews, and Christians of Lebanese, Syrian, Ashkenazi, Greek, and Sephardic backgrounds perform what they saw as Egyptian women across the ages, ending with the final sketch where Nelly Zananiry dressed up as the contemporary Egyptian woman, wearing a modern head scarf (bottom right medallion portrait of fig. 20). Interestingly, the picture suggests that in contrast to French culture, this Egyptian multicultural society did not necessarily see the scarf as antithetical to modernity or feminism. In addition, the performers represented the plurality of cultures that composed Egyptian society, and neither the sketches nor the different characters referred to a homogenous Egyptian history, despite the fact that all of the tableaux presented Egyptian women. The sketches created a panorama of Pharaonic, Hellenic, Mamluk and Ottoman periods. The part played by Nelly Zananiry, an Egyptian Christian Francophone poetess of Syrian origins, offered a single portrait of a modern Muslim Egyptian woman, but one that was inherently diverse, plural in its very identity.

## From Empires to Emporia

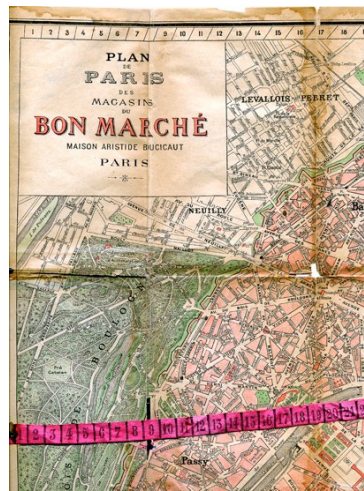


Figure 21 Map with a ribbon from Bon Marché illustrated guide, *Souvenir of the Bon Marché*. Source: D.H Ramsey Library, special collections, university of North Carolina at Asheville.

In 1889, the prestigious Parisian department store, *Le Bon Marché*, published a thirty-six-page promotional booklet in English, which provided a brief history of the store, a map of the capital, and detailed tables of street names. The booklet proposed an innovative technique to help the visitors navigate the city: attached to the map, readers would find a graded ribbon. After figuring out the street number from the index, the reader would use the ribbon to locate it on the map and vice versa. The booklet gives the following instructions: “to find instantly any street, you have only to stretch the ribbon so as to cover the number in the margin, the street sought for will be found under the number on the ribbon” (36). What stands out in this booklet and this technique is the strong resemblance between the map’s ribbon and the tape used by tailors and department store clerks for body measurements. In a typical Saint-Simonian gesture, the department store merges the image of the body and that of the city, subjecting both to a standardizing grid of calculations. The measuring tape itself

was a new phenomenon in the nineteenth century, invented in 1820 in order to provide standardized measurements necessary to produce the military uniform (Ross 55). With the advent of the department store and the democratization of ready-made garments, the measuring tape became the yardstick and the reference for both the citizen and the city, like the department store itself which occupied the double position of a social institution and an urban landmark.

The first department store, *Bon Marché*, opened its doors to the public in 1869, the year of the Suez canal. The store, founded in 1854, by Aristide Boucicaut, expanded from a small boutique for drapery to become a *grand magasin*. *Bon Marché* is credited with being the prototype of the *grand magasin*, not simply for its large-scale operation, but also for setting the standards and the stage for other enterprises of the same type and scale. Some of the other stores' owners worked first at *Bon Marché* and modeled their own stores on it. They also adopted Boucicaut's administrative and commercial strategies and management philosophy. In 1877, upon his death, Boucicaut left a considerable business empire with 3500 employees and 30 departments (Gaston-Breton 12).

Throughout the years many department stores emerged in Paris but apart from *Bon Marché* only four others became central to its urban space and culture. In 1855, Auguste Chauchard, a salesclerk at the *Pauvre Diabl,e* in partnership with Auguste Heriot from *la Ville de Paris* and Charles Eugène, established *le Grand Magasin du Louvre*. In 1856, Xavier Ruel founded *Bazar de l'Hotel de Ville*. In 1865, Jule Jaluzot, the head clerk of the silk department at the *Bon Marché*, opened the famous *Printemps* store close to the Gare Saint-Lazare to benefit from the continuous traffic coming from

the new train station. After the destruction of *Printemps* in 1882, Jaluzot assigned Paul Sedille to rebuild the store. For the first time in history, Sedille integrated wrought iron into the store's architecture, making *Printemps* the prototype for subsequent department stores (Caracalla 50). In 1872, Ernest Cognaq married Louise Jay from the *Bon Marché* and expanded his boutique *La Samaritaine* into a large department store. Finally, in 1912, Théophile Bader and Alphonse Kahn inaugurated the youngest of the *grand magasins*, *Galeries Lafayette*, also located in the proximity of Saint-Lazare, to benefit from the influx of travelers and strollers from Boulevard des Capucines which became a popular destination because of its cafés (Gaston-Breton 10-14).

Composed of a large number of aisles and alleyways, the department store represents a miniature Saint-Simonian universe connected by a web of arteries. Distinctive to the business culture of the department store is its paternalistic utopian system, which highly resembles the Saint-Simonian utopian society of Ménilmontant. Most of the historiographies on department stores trace the common theme of benevolent patriarchy and a culture of perpetual work despite any social and national challenges<sup>26</sup>. The stores marketed themselves as one large family presided over by a father and a mother with the enterprise as their "oeuvre," or their life-work. The workers at *La Samaritaine*, for instance, called their manager-patriarch, Ernest Cognaq, "Père Laborem," or Father Labor (Jarry 77). The myth spun around the Cognaq couple is that money was never their primary motive, but rather the pleasure of working and being productive (Jarry 77).

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<sup>26</sup> See Michael Miller's *Au bon Marché*, Jean-Paul Caracalla on *Printemps*, Jarry on *La Samaritaine* and Gaston-Breton on *Galeries Lafayette*.

Like a typical Saint-Simonian community, the stores followed a strict discipline. The employees had their unique uniform and participated in an educational and social support program for their employees. They also oversaw a variety of cultural activities. Stores like *Bon Marché*, *La Samaritaine* and *Galeries Lafayette* introduced music to develop the employees' skills and taste (Miller 107).

In its culture and history, then, the department stores surpassed their function as a marketplace and emphasized a representation that emulated the nation's territory. If anything distinguishes the department store from its predecessors, the arcades, it is its centralized management system, a key factor that mirrors the political system during the Second Empire and the Third Republic. Although the Second Empire ended in 1870, the Third Republic took imperialism to another level both internally and externally, not only by adding territories but also by seeking to secure its hegemony over its national provinces. Obviously, this internal colonization was a response to France's national crisis that sought to redefine itself after the Franco-Prussian war and the Commune. In this process, French imperialism turned inwards to subject its citizens to a wide-reaching civilizing mission in order to homogenize French culture by developing, under the direction of Jules Ferry, a standardized national education system and a curriculum that fashioned the individual in the image of the French bourgeoisie. That centralized system developed a hierarchy of local languages and dialects in which French was deemed superior to its regional counterparts. The new curriculum used a number of books specially written for elementary education, such as Ernest Lavissee's history manual, known as *Le petit Lavissee* (1884), and Augustine Fouillée's *Le Tour de la France par deux enfants* (1877), which told of two orphaned



boys traveling across the country and understanding their national duty. Pierre Nora describes Fouillée's and Lavissee's works as unique *lieux de mémoire* that synchronized the educational experience across an entire nation, which was expected from that moment to internalize a single geographic image and narrative of France:

*Le Tour de la France par deux enfants*...like the *Petit Lavissee*, trained the memory of millions of French boys and girls. Thanks to it, the Minister of Public Instruction could draw his pocket watch at 8:05 A.M. and declare, "All of our children are crossing the Alps." Moreover, the Tour was an inventory of what one ought to know about France, an exercise in identification and a voyage of initiation. But... a close reading shows that as of its publication in 1877, the Tour portrayed a France that no longer existed, and that in this year, when May 16 saw the consolidation of the Third Republic, it drew its seductive power from a subtle enchantment with the past. (Nora 20)

The Third Republic coined France as a single idealized image such as it was also presented in the work of Vidal de la Blache (see Chapter 1). This ideal was not foreign to the operations of the department store. Through its advertising techniques and programs, the department store came to adopt a similar strategy to that of Jules Ferry's centralized education system. As Michael Miller puts it:

In one respect the Bon Marché came to serve essentially the same role as the Republican school system...it became a bourgeois instrument of social homogenization, a means for disseminating the values and life-style of the Parisian upper middle-class to French middle-class society. The Bon Marché showed people how to dress, how to furnish their home, and how they should spend their leisure time. It defined the ideals and goals for French society...in its pictures and its displays the Bon Marché became a medium for the creation of a national middle-class culture. (183)

In addition to educating, dressing and disciplining their employees, department stores published a large number of catalogues, posters and almanacs, which synchronized the French citizen's experience around their sales events, giving them at the same moment, through pictures, window displays and fashion shows, the illustrated

guidelines for model behavior fit for a modern French family of the middle class. By showing them how to dress, how to furnish their houses, what pasttimes to choose and where to travel, the department store fashioned the French public into an idealized normative image for a new era.

In other instances the department store's story became a metonym for national territory, embodying its political tensions and traumas. A great example of such occurrence is the historical narrative constructed around *Galeries Lafayette*. The narrative stresses the origins of its owner Thomas Bader, a Jewish man from Alsace who, after the German annexation of Alsace-Lorraine, proudly chooses, as a true patriot, to keep his French citizenship and moves to the French part of Lorraine (Gaston-Breton 14). The insistence on the French identity of the owner replicates a larger national discourse after the Franco-Prussian war. In this account, Bader's decision almost stands for a symbolic return of the lost province to the hexagon. The Franco-German conflict is further emphasized by narrating the history of the *Lafayette* and its owner during the Vichy regime, when the German authorities took control of the store and began a process of "Aryanisation", an anti-Semitic plan to purge the French economy of any Jewish influence. Through a subtle accord with the French banks, the owners of *Lafayette* transferred their ownership temporarily to the banks in order to protect it from German control. The owners reclaimed their stores after the French liberation, having participated actively in the resistance to German occupation (Gaston-Breton 63).

This particular story reveals how in the historization and representation of the department store, the *grand magasin* comes to surpass its economic function as a

marketplace and acquires a nationalist symbolic meaning. In this account, the map of the store is conflated with the entire map of France. Crossing the gates of the department store becomes tantamount with crossing national borders. The arynisation of the *grand magasin* and the presence of German army inside the store refer directly to France's loss of sovereignty. This idea will also surface in Emile Zola's novel *Au Bonheur des dames* (see Chapter 3).

### **The First Parisian Arcade: Passage du Caire**

In describing French department stores, a German critic in 1899 wrote: “department stores grow like weeds. You should see how these arrogant bazars and their branches multiply and grow using commercial sensational tactics to take root everywhere” (Whitaker 17). French commercial spaces reflected not only the political structure of the nation, but also imperialist expansionist ambitions. In *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin was one of the first to note that “The first department stores appear to be modeled on oriental bazaars,” especially in the rugs and tapestries which regularly covered the balustrades of the staircases (48). The famous *grands magasins* of the Second Empire emulated many aspects of their predecessors, including the modernist architectural design, the unique setting that gathers a large number of products under one roof, its use as a central space for entertainment and socialization , and a luxurious Orientalist decoration. Just as the imaginary of imperialism began with Egyptomania, so did the modern culture of commerce.

Upon his return from the Egyptian expedition, Napoleon renamed a cluster of streets after Egyptian sites: le Caire, Alexandrie, Aboukir, Dammiette and Nil

(Hillairet 258-259). In doing so, he inscribed his first imperial venture on the urban memory of modern Paris. Located on rue Le Caire, not far from the Gare Saint-Lazare, the hub of department stores, stands the first Parisian arcade, constructed in 1799, just after Napoleon's return: *Passage du Caire* decorated with distinctive Egyptian motives (Andria 14).



Figure 22 Photograph of passage du Caire, Paris, 2013. Photo by author.

As Benjamin indicates, even French material culture of the era was strongly influenced by the Egyptian mission: “In 1798 and 1799. The Egyptian campaign lent frightful importance to the fashion for shawls. Some generals in the expeditionary army, taking advantage of the proximity of India, sent home shawls of cashmere to their wives...From then on, the disease that might be called cashmere fever took

significant proportions” (Benjamin 55). The modern fantasy of shopping was thus articulated in the language of the first French imperialist propaganda, namely that of the Egyptian expedition.

Inspired by such an imaginary, and fed by the Saint-Simonian ambition of expansion, the department stores reenacted in their campaigns the dynamics and tension of the empire in which they were enmeshed.



Figure 23 Advertisement for rugs from Maison a la Plache Clichy. 1898. Gallica. BNF, Paris.

The above poster from *Maison Place Clichy* promoting Oriental rugs reveals the tension inherent in the imperialist fantasy. In the poster a statuesque, bearded old man of Near Eastern origin and dressed in traditional garb stands opposite a European in safari clothes. In the background an oversized camel evokes desert caravans. Both men hold a cane, suggesting rivalry. The European man’s attire recalls that of Orientalist adventurers in the Orient, including the military. He poses his left foot on the rug and points toward it with his cane. In this context, the poster suggests

indirectly that the rug itself becomes a metonym for the Orient under the competitive negotiation between colonizer and colonized.

Just as in the case of the arcades, the architectural design of the new department store emphasized its Oriental decoration. In 1919, when Thomas Bader assigned the architect Ferdinand Chanut to design his new store, *Galeries Lafayette*, he specifically asked for an Oriental setting that would stimulate the fantasy of the shoppers (Gaston-Breton 33). The new shop extended over eighteen thousand meters, on five levels with a distinctive neo-byzantine cupola. For a long time, the wall colors and lighting were selected to give a golden glow that would evoke an oriental bazaar (Gaston-Breton 34). The case of *Lafayette*, built two decades after Zola's novel *Au Bonheur des dames* (1883), raises the question whether of Zola's narrative had a direct influence on that choice, or whether Bader made his choice based on the tight connection between Orientalism and commercial culture more generally.

Following in the footsteps of empire, French department stores expanded further across its territories and beyond its national borders, either via founding actual stores and showrooms or by mail orders. For instance, in 1874, *Printemps* expanded its activities in Germany, Alsace Lorraine, Denmark, Russia, Romania and Norway. Using the service of the Orient Express train, the store delivered its merchandise to the Balkans and Turkey (Caracalla 40). Similarly *Au Bon Marché* opened branches in Vichy, Toulouse, Algiers, Buenos Aires and Cairo (Barkhardt 10) and *Galeries Lafayette* in Cairo, Alexandria, Algiers, Tunis, Meknes, Casablanca, Rabat, Tangiers, and Aleppo (Gaston-Breton 42-47).

## Other Empires, Another Emporia

When *Le Louvre*, *Bon Marché*, *Printemps*, and *Lafayette* opened branches in Egypt, they were neither the sole department stores operating in the country, nor the only ones marketing themselves as French spaces, or at least as French cultural hubs. The competing stores, however, such as Sednaoui, Cicurel, Chemla, Benzion, Orosdi Back, Gattegno, Hannaux, Chalons and Trémode did not belong to French owners. These local stores dominated the market and together commanded a significant share of the market. Most of them still operate in Egypt under the administration of the Egyptian government.

Unlike France, where only Alphonse Kahn and Théophile Bader, the owners of *Galeries Lafayette*, were Jewish, most of the stores in Egypt, except Sednaoui, were founded by Jewish families who moved to the country as part of the internal migration common within the Ottoman Empire. As Uri Kupferschmidt comments in his article “Who Needed Department Stores in Egypt,” despite the limited number of Jewish owners, the stereotype of Jewish founders is anchored in the global imaginary, specially in the United States and Germany (Kupferschmidt, WNDP 175). Egypt, however, is exceptional since the number of actual Jewish entrepreneurs who owned department stores represented the majority, mostly because these families had connections across the Mediterranean, which enabled them to develop their businesses (Kupferschmidt, WNDP 175). In one case the network of department stores was also linked to marriages across the Mediterranean. Such is the story of Nessim Mosseri who managed *Galeries Lafayette* in Cairo and Alexandria. In 1930, Mosseri married the widow of the late Alphonse Khan. By 1936, as the heir of the late Madame Kahn,

Mosseri was elected member of the administrative council of *Galeries Lafayette* in Paris. In this case, not only did the relationship between the center and margin take a reverse direction, but also the network of department stores led to building kinship across the sea.

Department stores in Egypt emerged primarily in the Muski, the Haussmannized part of Cairo close to the new opera house and the Ezbekieh garden, and later moved to the Western side of town with the migration of the affluent classes. Some of them started as small boutiques and gradually reached a large scale of operation. The Muski area tells another story of a *mélange* of enterprises ranging from traditional to Western spaces of different scale and for various commercial activities. Unlike the dual competition between traditional boutiques and the ever-expanding department stores in France, memorialized in Zola's *Au Bonheur des dames*, department stores in Egypt did not represent a competition for small shopkeepers who had their own clientele from other cultural and social backgrounds.

Among the many department stores that appeared in the Muski quarter was the *Tiring* store owned by the Austrians Victor, Gustav and Konrad Tiring. The brothers started in Istanbul in 1842, and expanded their business across the region with stores in Salonika and Beirut. The Tirings inaugurated their Cairo store in 1865. Another Austrian citizen, Salomon Stein, founded Stein Oriental Goods Store, which began its operation between 1865 and 1867 in Attaba Square in Cairo and between 1875 and 1879 in Alexandria (Kupferschmidt, WNDP 176). Stein stores catered to both local and foreign clientele and delivered its merchandise in both Egypt and Sudan. The store had branches in Alexandria, Mansura, Tanta, Minya, Asyut, Istanbul, Salonika and



Vienna. The Tiring department store, with its famous cupola and Atlas carrying the globe, located across from the old opera house, still dominates the Muski's cityscape.

After operating a successful shop in Muski (see fig. 32), Moreno Cicurel decided to open in 1909, a department store on the Western side of town, on Fuad Street, where the affluent clients have settled (see fig. 33). The store employed eighty workers. Moreno Cicurel had migrated from Izmir to Cairo; both cities were still part of the Ottoman Empire. Just like Jaluzot and Cognacq in France, Moreno began as a salesclerk in another *grand magasin*, Hannaux, until he bought the business in 1887. Cicurel left the store to his sons: Solomon, Yusuf and Salvator who transformed it into a large empire with branches all over Egypt. Cicurel's was considered the most prestigious shop catering to the elite. Like *Lafayette* and *Printemps*, the store sought to capture a larger share of the market by opening another chain of stores for the less affluent classes. Oreco and Trémode, a more modest chain, similar to *Printemps'* *Prisunic* and *Lafayette's Monoprix*, had branches in Cairo, Alexandria and Asyut<sup>27</sup>. Although the Cicurels were Francophone, the family possessed Egyptian citizenship and participated actively in Egyptian social and economic life. The Cicurels were founding members of Egypt's National Bank, Bank Misr. They also founded the Association for Department Stores and Wholesalers. Salvator Cicurel represented Egypt in the 1928 Olympics for fencing (Reynolds 2012, 57-58).

Also on the same street, in 1907, the Chemla Brothers inaugurated their department store designed by the same architect who built Cicurel. The Chemlas, the

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<sup>27</sup> Oreco, Trémode, Prisunic and Monoprix, are chains of popular department stores offering a range of affordable products for customers within the low-income brackets.

grandparents of the writer Jacqueline Kahanoff (see Chapter 5) moved to Cairo from Tunis; they spoke mostly Arabic, but as French subjects they lived under the protection of French law. The two brothers Chemla began as ambulant sellers of olive oil in Monastir (Reynolds 2003, 58). By 1880, they expanded their business to sell imported clothing from France. They opened a department store called *Au Petit Louvre*, which emulated the insignia and the iconography of the original French Magasin du Louvre. The family members recall proudly the distinctive French design of the store and the innovative marketing campaigns modeled on the *grands magasins* in Paris (Shohet 18).

In 1913, the Sednaoui store opened its doors. Unlike the other stores, the owners of Sednaoui were Greek Catholic Levantines from Sednaya, Syria. Salim and Sama'an Sednaoui moved from Damascus to Cairo where they worked in Cairo's commercial district. Also the Sednaouis possessed Egyptian citizenship by the 1940's (Reynolds 2012, 60-61). They boasted about their new store's architecture, which resembled the Parisian *grands magasins* of *Lafayette* and *Printemps*. It is remarkable that Thomas Bader's fantasy and Chanut's architectural design of a modern "Oriental bazaar" return to the Near East as a quintessential French architectural style.

In addition to these, there also existed Orosdi-Back/Omar Effendi department stores. After the Hungarian revolt of 1848, Adolph Orosdi converted to Islam and become an Ottoman subject. The first store Omar Effendi, named after a Turkish bazaar, was founded in Cairo in 1856 in the Muski area as part of large network across the Mediterranean region and the Balkans, including Salonica, Izmir, Bucharest, Aleppo, Beirut, Tunis, Varna, Adana, Samsun, Beirut, Baghdad, Casablanca, Fez, and

Meknes (Kupferschmidt, *Orosdi*, 178). Similar to the other enterprises, a new store with a distinctive cupola and French architecture opened in 1905 on the Western side of the city, to occupy the corner of Abdel-Aziz and Ruchdi Street (Kupferschmidt, WNDP 178) (see figure).

Most department stores designed their stores on the model of their French counterparts and advertised Paris as their main source of imports. Despite the insistence on the French image, the context of Egypt and the operation of the *grands magasins* were far more heterogeneous than that of France. In Cairo and Alexandria, the department stores also mirrored their territory with its complex network of cultures and class divisions. Cultures and languages intermixed daily. French, Italian, Greek and Arabic were equally used. In some cases, French culture served for more than prestige, and became a matter of survival. For instance, after World War I, with the end of Ottoman suzerainty over Egypt, Austrian stores such as Stein and Tiring were under severe pressure from the British authority, and were forced to obtain a special license to continue their operation. The owner of the Stein store registered his business in London but to no avail. His stores were later acquired by British chain Morums. Omar Effendi, however, was able to overcome most hardships since it was registered as a French company (Kupferschmidt, *Orosdi* 34). After the war, the store increasingly hired French personnel to establish that French image which placed it beyond the grasp of British authority. The store's marketing and sales strategies took the opposite direction, increasing investment in Arabic advertising, targeting effendya or the emerging white-collar stratum. The store, for instance, prided itself on the promotion of the fez, which was part of the national attire for the Egyptian middle classes,

especially the effendya. In the end, the store could not escape nationalization after Egyptian independence (Kupferschmidt, *Orosdi* 44).

*Le Bon Marché*, as Reynolds indicates “assumed an ambivalent role in Egyptian commercial culture” (Reynolds 2003, 84). The store targeted the French expatriate community and participated in annual parades and events. For instance, on July 14, 1923, the windows were decorated with the French flag, the figure of Marianne and the words: “Vive la France, liberté, égalité, fraternité” (Reynolds 2003, 83). The store also promoted itself as being the main supplier to the royal family (see fig. 30) (Reynolds 2003, 83). Most of the Parisian *grands magasins*, however, closed by the 1930s, due to the economic crisis between the Great Wars (Reynolds 2003, 83). Yet, the other chains such as Sednaoui, Cicurel and Chemla remained open. These stores still highlighted their status as a French marketplaces and mediators between France and Egypt as seen in their advertisements (see fig. 31 and 42). If anything, this fact reveals a moment where a specific imaginary of French culture becomes dominant and more influential than reality. The Francophilia sustained by Egyptian department stores was not only central to their commercial activity, but it also had a stronger impact on the population than the actual French *grand magasin* which could not thrive equally in Egypt.

## Scale, the department Store and Modern Gender Roles



Figure 24. Yesterday and tomorrow. Caricature from el Lata'if al-Musawarah. Source: Mona Russell, *Creating the New Egyptian Woman*. 44.

One aspect of representing the modern role of women in French and Egyptian society, and the anxiety surrounding it, is the manipulation of scale, which is also a central mechanism used by department stores in their advertisements. Whereas French department stores were seen as spaces dominated by women, their Egyptian counterparts were not associated with that image from the beginning, perhaps because purchasing the family's needs, including clothing for the female members, was the task of the patriarch or was conducted by ambulant sellers. Since the Muslim bourgeoisie was not at center stage in these spaces, the question of morality often

associated with the dominant middle class was not addressed until a few decades later when shopping became the task of bourgeois women.



Figure 25. The Queen at Printemps. Advertisement. Source: Jean Paul Caracalla, *Le Roman du Printemps*

By the 1950's, more caricatures emerged in Egypt parodying the freedom of women in department stores.<sup>28</sup> In 1919, however, the main public concern was focused on the process of modernity and national independence. The question of women's presence in public spaces, such as schools and streets, was addressed within a broader scope and not necessarily in relation to department stores. Huda Shaarawi would become one of the early Egyptian feminists who would connect the department store to the larger question of women's presence in public and their political

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<sup>28</sup> See Mona Russell's *Creating the New Egyptian Woman*; also Nancy Reynold's *A City Consumed*.

participation (fig. 16) (see Chapter 4). Russell reproduces the caricature above from *al-Lata'if al Musawarah*, in 1919 (fig. 24). The veiled woman of yesterday is robust and strong, while the Europeanized one of tomorrow is skinny and sickly (Russell 40). The image of the modern woman imprisoned within the strong, free moving, traditional woman, contradicts the actual situation at that era when women's seclusion was at the height of public debate and European women's presence in public spaces was frequently contrasted with the limitations and barriers placed before their Egyptian counterparts. Yet, the caricature inadvertently communicates a double message. Published in 1919 during the first Egyptian national demonstrations in which women have actively participated, the caricature reveals the fear that a modern woman contained within, with different gender role, would eventually be born.

The above advertising from *Printemps* (fig. 26) portrays many of the anxieties surrounding gender roles and imperialism. The Poster shows a gigantic, Gulliver-like, female client, whose stature dominates the landscape and parallels the large store in the background. The queen of the department store presides over her tiny subjects who come from all races, which evokes commercial exchange, but also the history of French imperialism. Ironically, the iconography sends a double message: whereas the bourgeois woman is the queen of the store, she could also crush her subjects under her feet. The image also invokes discourses of containment and excess. As Harvey puts it:

The "good wife" had a number of important ideal roles in bourgeois thought. Increasing constraints on women's access to public life, the separation of home and workplace, and the growing disorder and chaos of urban life revolutionized the role of bourgeois women in nineteenth-century. Bourgeois women became not only managers and governors of the household but also took on the role of creators of order, particularly a spatial and temporal order, within the interior space of the household...The discipline was simultaneously an expression of

capitalist rationality and a kind of structured and controlled response to the perceived disorder and uncontrolled passions that reigned not only in the streets but also in the marketplace. This outer space of excessive stimulation and passion was supposed to be closed to them. “A contained woman, contained in a corset, contained in a house, was an orderly kind of woman. (Harvey 168)

Just like the Egyptian caricature, the poster reverses the image of containment. Mona Domosh affirms that the nineteenth-century industrial ideology stressed the separation of spheres, defining women’s social roles as consumers and men’s as producers (148). With the emergence of department stores and the increasing presence of women in public, department stores were sources of male anxiety. For once, the large-scale stores and their developed techniques turned the established normative role against itself, since it threatened the bourgeois male’s financial status at a moment when women took control of the household’s finances and were expected to represent discipline and order. Also the anxiety around promiscuity and women’s behavior was manifest in the new public and scientific concern over kleptomania. Bourgeois shoplifters constituted a riddle, since they defied the distinction between the social classes, made by sociologists and moralists, who could not in light of this contradiction simply associate crime or transgression with the working classes. In his book, *Les voleuses des grands magasins*, an early study of this phenomenon, Dr. Dubuisson, explains the phenomenon in the following words: “the patient [the French bourgeois woman] outside of the ordinary circumstances, is driven to commit acts that are controlled neither by his reason or feelings; acts that are refused by his conscience, but the will can no longer repress” (13). The poster suggests that the long idealized image of a “contained” woman in charge of the household has come to an end. As Mary Poovey



argues, the expanding role of women as caretakers and agents of discipline and control in the household took an unexpected turn in which the distinction between the public and private were blurred and the entire world became a domesticated space subject to a feminine notion of order (Poovey 164). Poovey cites the story of Florence Nightingale who, after being the caretaker in her household becomes a nurse traveling across the globe and teaching English woman the fundamentals of hygiene, and in doing so she transforms the entire Empire into an image of the household.

### **Multiculturalism and National Identity**

Despite the emphasis on the French aspect of the stores in Egypt and the use of French as lingua franca in them, the actual interaction within the stores took place in many languages at once. The advertising campaigns and catalogues were also published in several languages. The Cicurel stores published a bilingual catalogue in French and Arabic (Reynolds 2003, 66). Many of the employees were Syrian, Lebanese, Greek and Italian, who also could communicate in Arabic and French. As Nancy Reynolds puts it: “Code switching between Arabic and French (or other European languages) resonated with a more fundamental aspect of Egyptian linguistic structure, the diglossic nature of classical and colloquial Arabic, in which speakers pitched linguistic registers as a form of power and status” (Reynolds 2003, 67). Some of the storeowners preferred hiring the majority of employees with the same background as theirs. Yet diversity still existed, varying widely from one store to another. This multicultural setting represented an advantage to business since it helped to cater to different communities at once, rendering the space familiar to a wide array

of clients. Shoppers would often find an employee who spoke their native language and would directly communicate with them without the need for translation. The language in the store was as fluid as that of the outside milieu; switching from one language to another, the stores' staff and clients navigated the many cultures that made up the Ottoman-Egyptian Francophone British colony. In some cases this meant moving between French and at least four other languages (Reynolds 2003, 180).

In 1952, most of the stores in Cairo were consumed by the fire whose origin is attributed to the Muslim Brotherhood. Despite the fact that some of the owners possessed Egyptian citizenship by that time, the stores were considered foreign colonial businesses. Quickly the stores were rebuilt and opened their doors to the public. After Egyptian independence (1952), the nationalization of the Suez Canal (1956), and the start of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the stores were nationalized in 1961 and adopted a homogenous Arabic culture (Raafat 1997). The multiethnic stores were anchored to the national territory, ushering in a new era with new social relations and practices of space.

The history of French-Egyptian cooperation which began around the Suez Canal project reveals the complex context in which the department stores in both nations emerged. Mehmet Ali's ambitious plan coincided with the Saint-Simonian dream. Although the development and changes in both nations were asymmetrical, Francophilia and Egyptomania were key to the consolidation of Egypt's and France's national identities. These two elements were equally sustained by Egyptian and French commercial cultures throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The many phases of French-Egyptian exchanges reveal how the history of Mediterranean

modernity breaks down into many modernities. It was an ongoing and multilayered process propelled by both nations. For France, Napoleon Bonaparte's expedition and the Suez Canal project, for Egypt, Ismail's Haussmanized city and later Baron's Empain's Heliopolis attest to this multifaceted aspect of urban modernity to which Egyptian and French citizens had to adapt and redefine themselves, as the following chapters will show.



Figure 26. Photograph of Sednaoui department store, Cairo, 2013, by author.



Figure 27. Photograph of Omar Effendi department store in Cairo, 2013, by author



Figure 28. Photograph of the interior hall at Galeries Lafayette, 1914, © archives *Galeries Lafayette*, Paris.

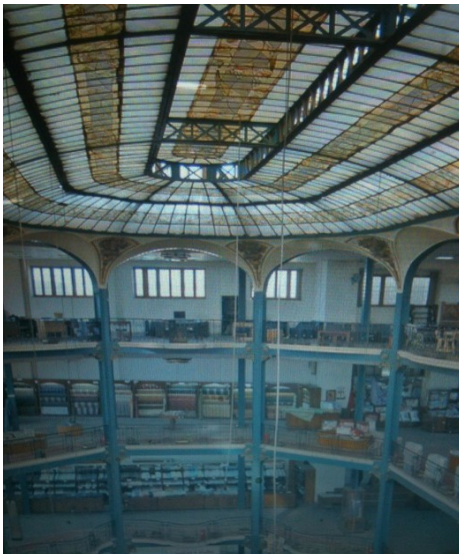


Figure 29. Photograph of the interior of Sednaoui department store, 2013, by author.



Figure 30. Advertisement for Bon Marché in Cairo, from *l’Egyptienne*, 1927. Source: Agence Nationale de recherches. CNRS. Alexandria. 2012

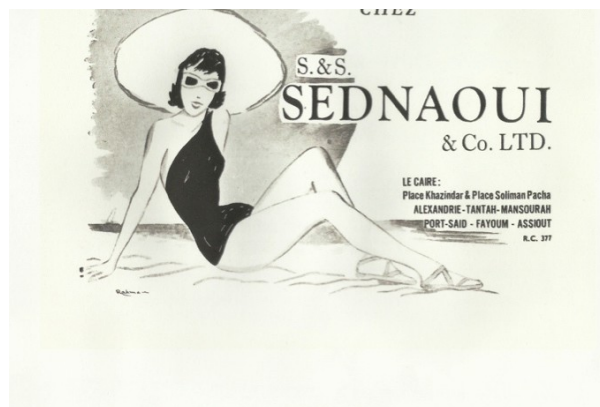


Figure 31. Advertisement for Sednaoui, from *La Femme nouvelle*. Summer 1950. Source: Agence Nationale de recherches. CNRS. Alexandria. 2012

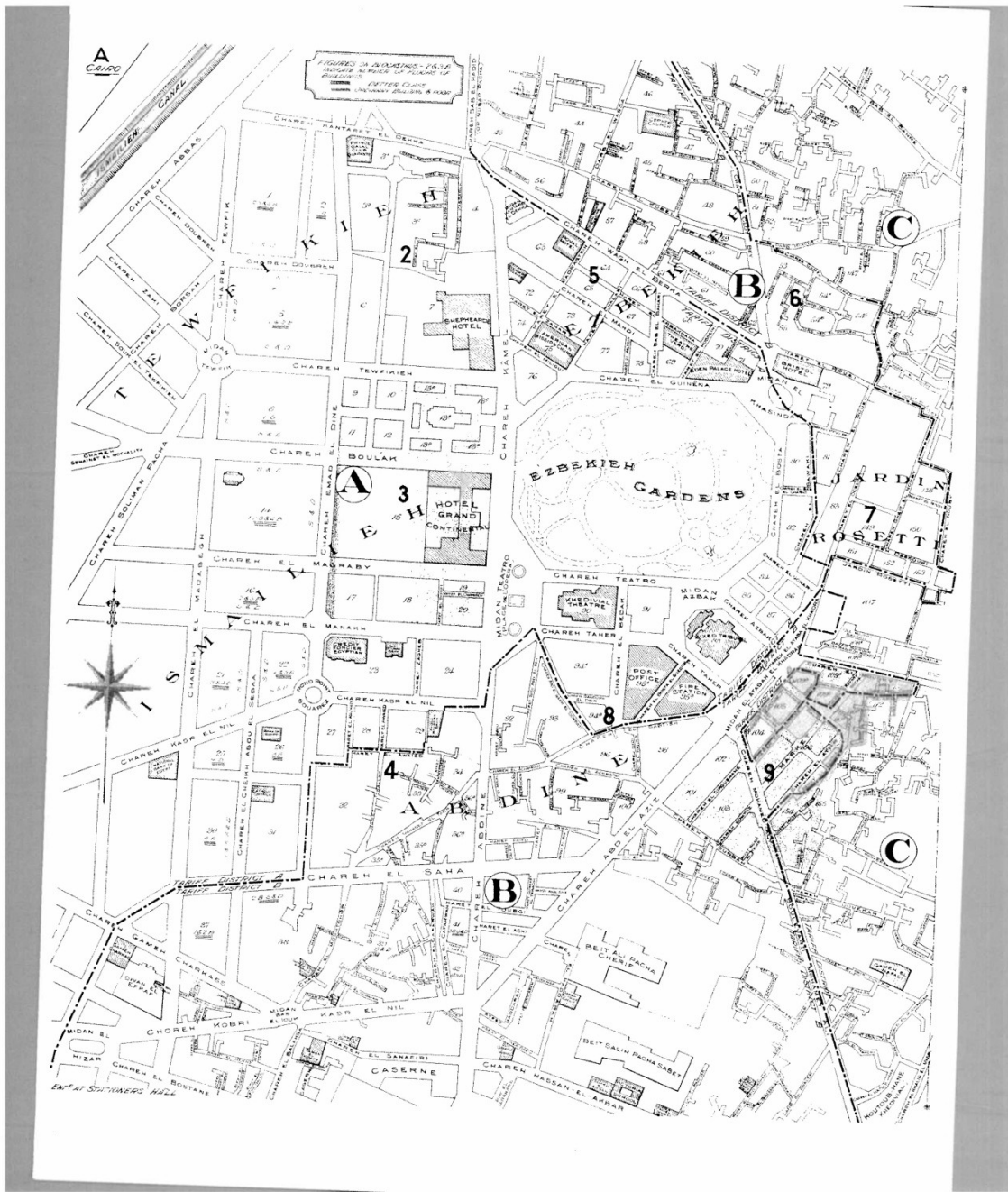


Figure 32. Map of Haussmannized Cairo, Opera House and Ezbekieh Garden  
 Source: Insurance Plan of Cairo, 1905. American University of Cairo Rare Books and Special Collections





### Chapter 3

#### Émile Zola's *Au Bonheur des dames*: Shopping at the Harem

##### An Oriental Cannibal at the Heart of the Modern Metropolis

[Du milieu de la place Gaillon on apercevait ce salon oriental, fait uniquement de tapis et de portières [...] Cette tente de pacha somptueux était meublée de fauteuils et de divans, faits avec des sacs de chameau [...]. La Turquie, l'Arabie, la Perse, les Indes étaient là. On avait vidé les palais, dévalisé les mosquées et les bazars. L'or fauve dominait, dans l'effacement des tapis-anciens, dont les teintes fanées gardaient une chaleur sombre, un fondu de fournaise éteinte, d'une belle couleur cuite de vieux maître. Et des visions d'Orient flottaient sous le luxe de cet art barbare, au milieu de l'odeur forte que les vieilles laines avaient gardée du pays de la vermine et du soleil. (Zola 141)

From the middle of Place Gaillon passers-by could catch a glimpse of this oriental hall, composed entirely of carpets and door-curtains [...]. This sumptuous Pasha's tent was furnished with armchairs and divans made from camel-bags [...]. Turkey, Arabia, Persia, the Indies were all here. The palaces had been emptied, the mosques and bazaars stripped. Tawny gold was the dominant tone in the worn antique carpets, and their faded tints retained a sombre warmth, the smelting of some extinguished furnace, with the beautiful burnt hue of an old master. Visions of the Orient floated beneath the luxury of this barbarous art, amid the strong odour which the old wools had retained from the land of vermin and sunshine. (Zola 2008, 87-88)

Readers of Emile Zola's *Au Bonheur des dames* (1883) soon come upon a lavish setting recalling the Orientalist masterpieces of Ingres and Delacroix. But for all its allusions to painting, Zola's description is neither an account of an artwork, nor that of a traveler's experience in the Levant. That sumptuous "Pasha's tent," depicted in Chapter 4, is set in the Place Gaillon in the middle of Haussmann's Paris, the emblematic urban space representing French modernity. What Zola describes here is

his fictional department store, Au Bonheur des dames, during a special sale event, the *Oriental salon*.

In the passage quoted above, the author highlights the organization of the department store hinging on the interplay between public and private spaces. Its windows seem to vanish, erasing as such the borders between the boulevard and the *magasin*. This is a characteristic layout for department stores of which Michel de Certeau has written: “les grand magasins sont insérés dans un environnement urbain...avec lequel [ils] sont en parfaite osmose... Cette porosité les rend indéfiniment traversables; [ils] sont une continuité de la rue, on s’y promène comme au milieu des étals des trottoirs” (De Certeau 1994, 147) [The department store is inserted into an urban environment...with which it is in perfect osmosis. This porousness renders the store infinitely traversable; it is a continuation of the street and one can stroll through it just as one does through sidewalk stalls”(De Certeau 1980, 103)]. In many passages, Zola stresses this seamless continuity between the store and the street. The owner’s ultimate goal is to have the boulevard run through the store, making the street and the store’s aisles indistinguishable from each other, if not interchangeable (Zola 1998, 302). The flâneur, the shopper, and readers of the novel, then, all encounter a new city map entwined with that of the department store. They confront an ambiguous cartography, which distorts and disrupts their everyday practice and notion of space. Significantly, that space is specifically an “Oriental” one. Strolling through the streets of Paris, Zola’s shoppers would run into that Oriental oasis at the heart of the French capital, much like the readers themselves who would be taken by surprise in the midst of a text intended to be, in the author’s words, “a

poem of modern life.”<sup>29</sup>

In contrast to this fantastic Orientalist image, near the end of the novel (Chapter 13) Zola draws another map of Paris, a nightmarish image of a city that has become almost unrecognizable: “Paris s’étendait, mais un Paris rapetissé, mangé par le monstre (Zola 1998, 468) [Beyond, Paris stretched out, but a Paris which was dwarfed and eaten up by the monster” (Zola 2008, 392)]. Gradually, the voracious, ever-expanding, *grand magasin*, presented as a “harem” and a “bazaar,” reaches Gargantuan proportions; it devours the surrounding traditional businesses, Paris and the entire nation. Ironically, Zola sketched this violent background as the setting of a love story between Denise, a worker from the provinces, and Gustave Mouret, the owner of the department store. How can we make sense of this monstrous Oriental cannibal materializing at the center of the French metropolis? What function does it serve in the text and in the imaginary of modernity more generally?

In the introductory chapters, I outlined the history of French-Egyptian connections revived by Saint-Simon’s disciples as part of a larger project to create a modern Mediterranean society. Turning to the figures of the human body and the machine, Saint-Simon illustrated the dynamics of his urban system as a web of natural and artificial networks (Musso 1999, 15). In this new utopia, the interconnected Mediterranean symbolized the end of an eternal battle between East and West and the

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<sup>29</sup> “Je veux dans *Au Bonheur des dames* faire le poème de l’activité moderne. Donc, changement complet de la philosophie: Plus de pessimisme, ne pas conclure à la bêtise et à la mélancolie de la vie, conclure au contraire à son continuel labeur, à la puissance et à la gaité de son enfantement.” (Zola, *Au Bonheur des dames* dossiers préparatoires, BNF). [I want in *Au Bonheur des dames* to make the poem of modern life. Thus, a complete change of philosophy, no more pessimism, not to conclude with human stupidity and life’s melancholy, quite the opposite, on life’s continuous labor, on the power, and gaif its parturiciencies.] (My translation)

beginning of a new modernity that pairs the technology of the Occident with the aesthetics and sensuality of the Orient (Chevalier, *Systeme* 29). This adventure came along with an ambivalent attitude toward the Orient vacillating between a desire for control and a fear of contamination and engulfment (see Chapter 2).

In this chapter, I aim to examine the historical and urban contexts of Zola's *Au Bonheur des dames*, to shed light on the *grand magasin* as part of this larger interconnected Mediterranean utopia. I suggest that by recreating a cannibalistic colonial map inside the boundaries of the metropolis, a map which defies the European desire to impose reason and order, Zola's text expresses an anxiety about the dissolution of traditional social spaces and social relations during a time of unprecedented national transformation. Zola portrays the precarious image of an Empire that has suddenly awakened from its megalomaniacal Saint-Simonian dream onto the trauma of German occupation. In this context, his novel, narrating the love story of Denise Baudu and Gustave Mouret, symbolizes the modern transformation of France to a new rationalized order, a Saint-Simonian Mediterranean ethos of harmony, cooperation, and prosperity.

As Palmira Brummett indicates, European narratives about the Mediterranean frequently adopt an itinerary that goes eastward: "the takers of the Grand Oriental tour (always going "east," more or less, and returning "west," if they can)" (Brummett 10). In contrast to this trajectory, *Au Bonheur des dames* brings the readers back to the French metropolis following the path of a material culture that makes its way from the East to Europe. In doing so, Zola reveals the central role of Orientalist materiality in configuring French culture and social relations. He strategically transforms the

Orientalist setting of the department store into a dystopic site, a stage for that mythological apocalyptic battle between an Orientalist sensuality and modern Occidental technologies<sup>30</sup>. Using Saint-Simon's metaphors which served to illustrate his utopia as a mechanized human body, Zola depicts the *magasin* as a grotesque creature, part-female, part-animal, part-machine, part-European, and part-Oriental, filled with avid, ambitious employees and clients driven by a sexualized consumer desire. In Zola's work, the highly organized commercial and social hub becomes a nightmare that emphasizes the discrepancy between Saint-Simonian utopianism, and its actual effect on people's lives. The novel presents a progressive narrative that describes a simultaneous process of destruction and creation, where the Europe of industrial capitalism takes shape by incorporating and manipulating the irrational, sensual, and fetishistic forces of a fantasmatic Orient. This battle leads to an unsettling present founded on the violent obliteration of traditions and an anxious, yet hopeful, outlook toward an unknown future. Paradoxically from the belly of that giant harem-bazaar a modern French society is born whose leaders, Denise and Mouret, impersonate a new national character. They become orchestrators of the modern Mediterranean system. Cast as androgynous, both Eastern and Western, they are themselves the site of a struggle between the dissonant and ambivalent elements that make the Saint-Simonian Mediterranean project.

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<sup>30</sup> For more on the language of war in *Au bonheur des dames*, see Vaheed Ramazani's "Gender, War and the Department Store: Zola's *Au bonheur des dames*," (207).

## Mapping *Au Bonheur des dames*

*Au Bonheur des dames* recounts the story of Denise Baudu, a young provincial woman from Normandy who moves to Paris after the death of her father. She works at a new department store and falls in love with the owner, Octave Mouret. Denise, who is constantly described as a “savage” by her coworkers, gradually overcomes the ruthless competition and proves herself in this modern workspace. She recognizes, however, that the success of the department store comes at the expense of the demise of traditional businesses and the social and human relations which they involve. She witnesses the ruin of the neighborhood’s boutiques, including that of her own uncle, and the disappearance of the old city of which they are part. Near the end of the novel, Denise comes to understand that department stores are an expression of the spirit of the age, which no one can stop. “Elle avait conscience que cela était bon, qu’il fallait ce fumier de misères à la santé du Paris de demain [...] toute révolution voulait des martyrs” (Zola 1998, 451) [She was even aware that it was a good thing: this manure of distress was necessary to the health of the Paris of the future” (Zola 2008, 375)]. The novel concludes with a marriage proposal from Mouret. Denise’s self-realization and marriage correspond to Zola’s preparatory notes; both suggest the desire to celebrate modernity as part of a larger cycle of life, one that ends with the modern supplanting the old. The department store brings an end to the boutique; Mouret and Denise, as a couple, become prototypes of the modern citizen; they displace Denise’s sickly cousin and her timid and morally weak fiancé, the heirs of her uncle’s traditional shop.

Diachronically, Zola draws directly from Balzac’s novel, *La maison du chat*

*qui pelote* (1842), which he mentions in his preparatory notes as one of the main references on French commercial culture. In Balzac's story, the daughter of a boutique owner, Augustine, falls in love with and marries Théodore, a painter. As Augustine leaves her very traditional and pragmatic life in the boutique, she strives to adapt to the manners of upper-class socialites. She loses her husband's love to an aristocratic woman, Madame Carigliano, who also becomes his muse. Madame Carigliano has an outstanding talent in manipulating Théodore's behavior and desires. While the novel paints a portrait of a conservative middle-class family, the tragic struggle of Augustine in keeping the painter's love points toward the limitations of the emerging bourgeoisie and their inability to break the tight grasp of the upper classes on art, taste, and manners. Zola's novel takes the history of this class further by examining the later ascension of the bourgeoisie to power and their control over art, aesthetics and social relations through their modern enterprises. In contrast to Balzac's heroine, Denise, the poor niece of a boutique owner, manages to win Gustave Mouret's heart and unwittingly outmaneuver her upper-class competitor. As managers of a modern department store, Denise and Mouret become the main players in shaping French urban planning, social connections and taste for the masses.

In directing his lens toward the department store, one of the emblematic sites of the Second Empire closely connected to Haussmann's Paris, Zola conducted extensive archival and field research. He observed some of the renowned Parisian stores, such as *Le Bon Marché* and *Les Grands Magasins du Louvre*. He interviewed employees and took notes of the merchandise, the setting, and the working conditions. He also exchanged correspondence with the renowned architect Frantz Jourdain, who

began his work on the famous department store *La Samaritaine* in 1883. Jourdain indeed helped Zola create the blueprint for his fictional store (Clausen 21). Octave Mouret recalls Henri Boucicaut, the founder of *Le Bon Marché*. Baron Hartman, a friend of Mouret's, refers directly to Baron Haussmann, the creator of modern Paris, and is modeled on the financiers, the Pereire brothers.

In the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin quotes *L'histoire de Paris* by Lucien Dubech and Pierre d'Espezel describing the modern condition of the city: "if we had to define, in a word, the new spirit that was coming to preside over the transformation of Paris, we would have to call it megalomania. The Emperor and his prefect aim to make Paris the capital not only of France but of the world" (Benjamin 133). In Zola's novel, the expanding department store comes to embody this ambitious Haussmannian scheme, which left an indelible memory on the city and its dwellers. The expansive scale of the department store was a common theme in the advertisement of the era (fig.34). The following catalogue from *Le Bon Marché* of 1878 depicts the monument in exaggerated scale to highlight this monumentality. In the picture Paris recedes, and is almost effaced, in the background. The colossal building, with its rectilinear form, surrounded by an orderly line of trees, shows the store as the most modern and organized space in the city, much like earlier images of royal palaces such as the Louvre.



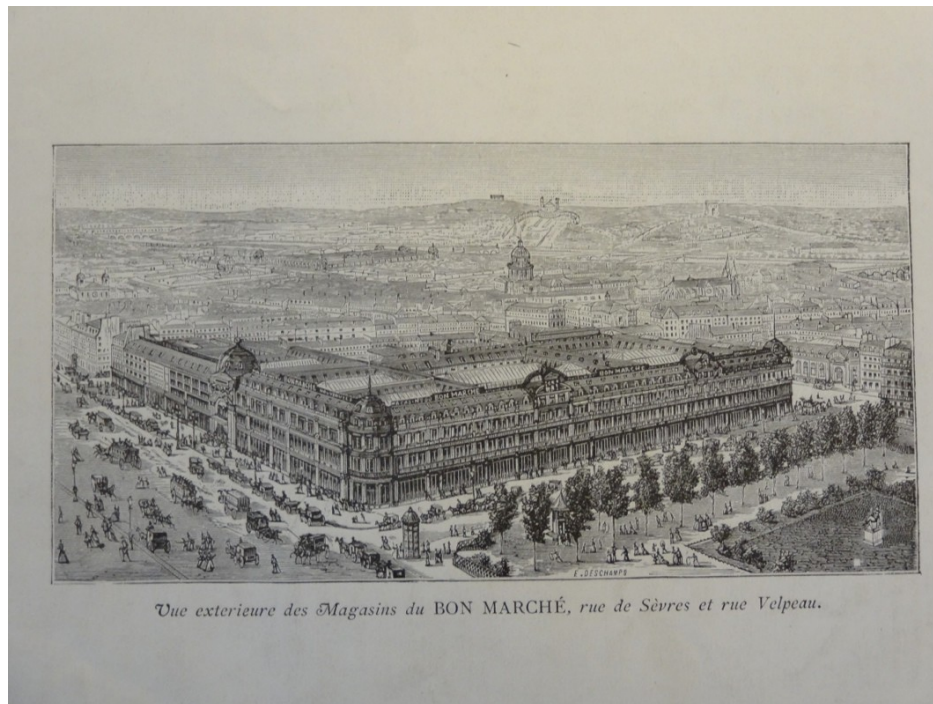


Figure 34. Poster of *Bon Marché*. Source: catalogue Nouveautés-été 1878: BNF, Paris. Fol. Wz. 211

Similarly, Zola gives an account of a poster for *Au Bonheur des Dames* which emphasizes its monumentality in relation to Paris:

Vu à vol d'oiseau [...] Paris s'étendait, mais un Paris rapetissé, mangé par le monstre: les maisons, d'une humilité de chaumières dans le voisinage, s'éparpillaient ensuite en une poussière de cheminées indistinctes; les monuments semblaient fondre, à gauche deux traits pour Notre-Dame, à droite un accent circonflexe pour les Invalides, au fond le Panthéon, honteux et perdu, moins gros qu'une lentille. L'horizon tombait en poudre, n'était plus qu'un cadre dédaigné... jusqu'à la vaste campagne, dont les lointains noyés indiquaient l'esclavage. (Zola 1998, 468)

Seen from a bird's eye perspective [...], Paris stretched out, but a Paris which was dwarfed and eaten by the monster: the houses that surrounded it had the humility of thatched cottages, and were scattered beyond it in a dust of blurred chimneys. The monuments seemed to be melting away: two marks on the left-hand side indicated Notre-Dame, there was a circumflex accent on the right for the Invalides, and in the background was the Panthéon lost and shamefaced, no bigger than a pea. The skyline, crumbling into dust, had become nothing but a pathetic frame for the picture [...] as far way as [...] the open country, was now enslaved. (Zola 2008, 392)

Just like the real poster reproduced above, the passage paints the department store as an out-of-proportion monster which dwarfs all the other monuments. Through the manipulation of scale between the store and its surroundings, the fictional poster foregrounds the store as the central spatial and cultural referent in the city. The narrator highlights the puny status of three monuments that embody important periods of French history: the Dome of the Invalides (also seen in the poster), a colossal, baroque-style, military hospital and the burial place of kings and veterans; the Panthéon, a memorial to great national figures, built in a neo-classical design, where many military heroes, writers, and artists are buried; and the gothic cathedral of Notre-Dame. Standing in the middle of ruins, the department store then turns into an antithetical site that negates national memory. Zola's description, "the skyline crumbling into powder," "lost and shamefaced," "the monuments seemed to be melting away," reveal a moment of crisis, in which everything seems to collapse in the face of a growing modernity. Here the mind fails to make sense of the landscape, to restore things to order, to command the space and take control of the landscape, a process which Derek Gregory defined "cartographic anxiety" (Gregory 1994, 33) (see Chapter 1).

Zola's imagery resembles what Ann McClintock describes as a central part of the discourse on paranoia in which one "finds simultaneously...in [a] condensed form both delusions of grandeur and delusions of engulfment" (McClintock 151). Zola's choice of words contrasting the colossal store with its vanishing surroundings actually moves between these two extremes. A similar stance is also patent in the Saint-

Simonian representations of the Orient, vacillating between their highly ambitious universal projects (the Suez Canal) and the power of a phantasmic Orient that would consume them (see Chapter 2). Ann McClintock examines the iconographic significance of fictional maps in Haggard's novel, *King Solomon's Mine*. For McClintock, the colonial map is a mark of failure, which embodies a political and cultural crisis, an expression of both imperial megalomania and male anxiety, often displaced onto a symbolic feminized cannibalistic body. In frequent cases, the description of the female body and that of space become interchangeable. She posits: "the edges and blank spaces of colonial maps are typically marked with visible signs of the failure of representation, symptoms of a collapse of mimesis ... The unrepresentable appears on the surfaces of these maps in the form of "cannibals," "savages," mermaids and monsters...(McClintock). Zola's department store, described as a bazaar and a harem, shares many aspects with McClintock's description of the colonial map.

That unfathomable phenomenon, or "failure of knowledge," in Zola's world stems from the rapid process of modernization that took place during the Second Empire, and "shook the perception of space and time" (Harvey 265), a moment when Paris was set for an international role based on industrialism and global trade. The exotic became central to Parisian modernity, as in the case of the Universal Exhibitions and department stores, constantly evoking distant lands and their fantastic imaginary. This new experience of modern space and large-scale consumerism, with its heightened manipulation of the senses, challenged the will for imposing reason and control.

Similarly, the Orientalized store expresses a moment of crisis vis-à-vis an emerging French modernity concocted from dissonant elements, and a foreign material culture brought to the heart of metropolis and producing novel sensations. Unlike McClintock's example, Zola's Oriental setting is not located at the remote periphery of the French empire; the harem-like bazaar occupies the center of Haussmann's Paris, which makes its strategic position even more unsettling. Just like the cannibals and savages displayed on the colonial map, the fictional store was depicted as a feminized monster that would grow to "devour" the surrounding businesses and neighborhoods. After the Oriental salon, Zola compares the store to a battlefield and the female shoppers to a "swarm of locusts" devouring the corpses:

Dans les rayons, peu à peu déserts, il ne restait que des clients attardées [...]. C'était comme un champ de bataille du massacre des tissus [...] les vendeurs, harassés de fatigue, campaient parmi la débâcle de leurs casiers et de leurs comptoirs, que paraissaient avoir saccagé le soufflé d'un ouragan [...]. Il fallait enjamber [...] une barricade de cartons [...]. Liénard sommeillait d'une mer de pièces, où des piles restés debout, à moitié détruites, semblaient des maisons dont un fleuve débordé charrie les ruines [...]. Les confections s'amoncelaient comme des capotes de soldats mis hors de combat [...] Une peuple de femmes [...] se seraient déshabillé là. Le hall restait nu, tout le colossal approvisionnement du Paris-Bonheur venait d'être déchiqueté, balayé, comme sous un vol de sauterelles dévorantes. Et, au milieu de ce vide, Hutin et Favier feuilletaient leurs cahiers de débits. (Zola 1998, 173)

In the [slowly deserted] departments there only remained a few belated customers [...]. It was like a battlefield still hot from the massacre of materials. The salesmen, harassed and exhausted, were camping amidst the havoc of their shelves and counters, which they looked as if they have been ravaged by the raging blast of a hurricane. [...]. It was necessary to step over a barricade of boxes [...] Liénard was dozing on a sea of materials in which some half destroyed stacks of clothes were still standing, like ruined houses about to be carried away by an overflowed river [...] ready-made clothes were heaped up like the greatcoats of disabled soldiers [...]. An army of women had undressed there [...]. The hall was bare. The whole colossal stock of Paris-Paradise has just been torn to pieces and carried away, as if by a swarm of ravenous locusts. In the midst of this emptiness Hutin and Favier, out of breath from the struggle, were turning the pages of their cashbooks. (Zola 2008, 117)

After the end of the Oriental Sale, the inside of the store falls in ruins; the employees, like dead and mutilated soldiers lie in the middle of a void, fabrics and a “sea of materials” resemble a sea of blood, houses in ruins, barricades, greatcoats of soldiers; the hallway is devoured by a swarm of women. Through this vivid language of war, the day of the Oriental salon is also a day of confrontation between the Orient and the Occident. The scene bears a strong resemblance to the Saint-Simonian apocalyptic battle between the Orient and the Occident, preceding the union of the Mediterranean. In Zola’s novel, this decisive moment is enacted inside the department store, when its hallways were metamorphosed clearly into a vision of the East, and store’s grounds became a metonym for that region. Like the Orient itself in the novel, the battle is depicted in the language of material culture, as a confrontation between shoppers, employees and goods. Typical of the Saint-Simonian battle, the Orient in Zola’s novel, exemplified by “an army of naked women” and swarms of “locusts,” is endowed with a voracious and highly seductive femininity that consume the store. It is equally seductive, profitable and threatening.

Yet in its historical context, the crisis comprised more than just the urban modern experience and the Saint-Simonian Mediterranean fantasy. Zola published his novel in 1883, when his readers were well aware of the tragic fate of this era of “progress” ending with Commune and the occupation of Alsace-Lorraine. This moment of national crisis, as Gregory indicates, called for a revision of history and French national identity (Gregory 1994, 33). The barricades and the battlefield in the passage also evoke these decisive events. Zola’s colossal series, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, evolves within a similar framework to the works of Vidal de La Blache and

Michelet discussed in Chapter 1, which attempted to make sense of French national identity and history at this critical moment. The series comprises twenty novels narrating the society of the Second Empire and the causes which led to its fall. As Gregory indicates, Vidal presented in *his tableau de la géographie de la France* an innovative attempt to look at France national identity from a spatial perspective by studying each province's geographical and cultural landscape. As Vidal shifts the focus from history, with its temporal representation, to space, France is rendered as a collection of tableaux, or "landscapes" united by human labor<sup>31</sup> (Gregory 1994, 33:35). Just as Vidal analyzes French society through the depiction of geographic, or spatial, tableaux, Zola depicts iconic sites or spaces of the Second Empire, and follows the story of the "evolution" of this family in its relation to them. He centers each volume on a specific space, such as the railways, the mines, the department store, the stock market, the working-class pub, and so forth. These sites are the milieux shaping the fortunes of the different members of the Rougon-Macquart family. In other words, Zola's naturalist writing is itself a *tableau de la géographie de la France*, which takes into account the impact of milieu on the individual. Just as Vidal de La Blache and Michelet asked what circumstances made France and Frenchmen into what they are, and how they shaped, and were shaped by, their environment, Zola's series tracks the history of the members of this family and its behavior in different locales, as a way to answer a similar question about the fate of France during the Second Empire and the early Third Republic.

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<sup>31</sup> This idea of interconnectivity, as I indicated in Chapter 2, is inherent to Saint-Simonism and reflects its impact of the national representation, history and cartography of France.

## Translating the Saint-Simonian Mythology into a Modern Arabian Nights

As he rewrites French history against the backdrop of the department store, Zola weaves in the Saint-Simonian mythology that integrates East and West, by broadly constructing his novel over a widely known Orientalist narrative framework, namely *The Thousand and One Nights*. Zola's Octave Mouret is an Orientalized entrepreneur (repeatedly referred to as a "Jew" or a "pasha"). A wealthy widower and an eligible ladies' man, he decides not to remarry and instead engages in numerous romantic affairs. He builds his commercial empire from his wife's inheritance and develops new strategies to manipulate women's desires for consumerism. In the novel, the store is described as a royal court, a harem, a kingdom, and a marketplace. Mouret is presented as an Oriental "despot" who rules over several "provinces" with a council of ministers (Zola 1998, 508) (Zola 1998, 79). Like Schahriar of *The Thousand and One Nights*, Mouret measures his power by disposing of women. In one of the early scenes, the following conversation takes place between him and his assistant Bourdoncle:

Alors, il s'égayait davantage, il laissa percer le fond de sa brutalité, sous son air d'adoration sensuelle. D'un haussement d'épaules, il parut déclarer qu'il les jetterait toutes par terre, comme des sacs vides, le jour où elles l'auraient aidé à bâtir sa fortune. Bourdoncle, entêté, répétait de son air froid: Elles se vengeront [...]. Il y en aura une qui vengera les autres, c'est fatal. (Zola 1998, 81)

At that Mouret became even more expansive, allowing his fundamental brutality to show through his air of sensual adoration [of women]. With a shrug of his shoulders he seemed to declare that he would throw them away like empty sacks on the day when they had finished helping him to make his fortune [...]. 'You know, they will have their revenge.' (Zola 2008, 32)

Mouret's commercial exploitation is often described as a horrific assassination of

women. The image of “empty sacks” borrowed from the vocabulary of commerce evokes Mouret’s sadistic character, building his empire at the expense of women. The image of killing and decapitation is further enforced, by the depiction of female shoppers “crushed” between the wheels of the modern commercial machine and through the description of headless mannequins showcased in the windows: “le grand manteau de velours, garni de renard argenté, mettait le profil d’une femme sans tête, qui courait par l’averse à quelque fête, dans l’inconnu des ténèbres de Paris” (Zola 1998, 74). [The great velvet coat trimmed with silver fox suggested the curved outline of a headless woman, running through the downpour to some festivity in the mysterious Parisian night” (Zola 2008, 28)].

Zola creates a mythology for the store tightly connected to female sexuality and violence against it. In the first chapter, Madame Baudu gives a detailed history of the department store in which she describes the recent mysterious death of the owner’s wife, Madame Hédouin, during the construction. Madame Hédouin had fallen into a hole while visiting the construction site of the department store; she dies three days later. Madame Baudu intimates a circulating rumor that Mouret might even have assassinated his wife: “Il ya du sang sous les pierres de la maison [...].(Zola 1998, 67) [“There is blood under the stones of that shop! [...]” (Zola 2008, 22). Like the *Nights*, “the fairy tale” of the department store is haunted by women’s deaths; it is even propelled and gains its momentum by that fact. Similarly, the department store itself, the modern machine, comes to life as more women succumb to Mouret’s temptations. Bourdoncle, Mouret’s assistant, doubles as an “executioner” the term used for firing under-performing or redundant sales clerks. He is “l’homme...qu’il chargeait



d'ordinaire des exécutions”(90). [The man...whom [Mouret] charged with the executions]. As Bethany Hetrick suggests: Bourdoncle’s trademark “passez à la caisse” [go to the till] is itself so sharp and swift that it almost feels like the blade of the guillotine” (Hetrick). Bourdoncle has the right to fire, “execute,” anyone immediately without giving any reason. The image resembles that of the famous vizier of *The Thousand and One Nights* in charge of the daily execution of the king’s new wife.

Soon, Bourdoncle’s prophecy is realized and Denise begins her work at the *grand magasin*. Unlike other women, Denise is not fascinated by consumerism and resists Mouret’s advances. Significantly, Denise begins her new job at the store during the Oriental sale. On her first day, she literally steps into “un décor de harem.” She feels overwhelmed and loses her sense of orientation: “Denise, qui allait justement débiter ce lundi-là, avait traversé le salon Oriental, elle était restée saisie, ne reconnaissant plus l’entrée du magasin, achevant de se troubler dans ce décor de harem” (Zola 1998, 142) [When Denise, who was starting work that very Monday, had crossed the Oriental hall, she had stood still in astonishment, unable to recognize the entrance of the shop, her confusion compounded by the harem scene set up at the door” (Zola 2008, 88)]. Denise checks into the women’s dormitory and, by extension, into Mouret’s house, since he lives in an interconnected building. Once admitted into *Au Bonheur des dames*, she leads a life of seclusion and imprisonment like that of an odalisque, spending her time between the store and the dormitory, the bazaar and the harem. As she grows more familiar with the interior of the store, Paris becomes distant and foreign: “elle était heureuse de sa solitude, de cette sauvagerie où elle vivait

enfermée, comme au fond d'un refuge" (Zola 2008, 191) ["She was happy in the unsociable [wild] life in which she shut herself away as if in a sanctuary" (Zola 2008, 133)]. This modern French *Nights* reaches its conclusion when Denise manages to survive in the competitive culture of the store, win Mouret's heart and become the head salesgirl, "la première" and later a full partner both personally and professionally. She then attenuates Mouret's brutal business strategies by modifying the store's policies to improve the life of workers and clients.

### **Orientalism and the Phenomenology of Modernity: Reconstructing the Orient inside the Store**

Zola did not invent the Oriental salon. Department stores such as *Au Bon Marché* and *Printemps* used the same technique depicted by the author for the exhibition of rugs and marketed this event as an adventure in the Orient. Several catalogues for *Au Bon Marché* describe the store's agents as explorers who, despite great challenges, were able to bring back authentic Oriental artifacts to the French public (*Au Bon Marché*). The following pictures, from *Au Bon Marché*'s catalogue of 1878, advertised the yearly Oriental salon that took place during the fall season (23 September). The pictures appealed to French Orientalist fantasies by providing viewers with both a panoramic vista of the East and an insider's peek into the private space of the harem.



Figure 35. Harem scene. Catalogue Au Bon Marché: Tapis & Portières. Source: BNF, Folio Wz 211.

Both pictures are framed to look like decorative pieces of Orientalist art. The catalogue's front cover (figure 35) shows a painting of a harem set against Moorish architecture. The harem portrayed has a similar floor plan to that of the department store, where clients standing in the upper balconies could also enjoy a panoramic view of the lobby. The textile hanging from the staircase, featuring the shop owner's name, conflates the space of the harem with that of the store, or suggests that the harem belongs to the store's owner, just like the situation of Mouret who lives in an apartment above the store in proximity to the female workers' dormitory. Interestingly, the women depicted are fully covered and are not portrayed as nude odalisques, perhaps because the catalogues reach specifically bourgeois households. The catalogue reflects the nineteenth-century "embourgeoisement" with its regulative measures for sexuality (Said 190).

Zola depicts the Oriental salon in the same fashion. He chooses the date of 10 October for the sale, which synchronizes with *Bon Marché's* timing for similar events. The sale also includes rugs and door-curtains (portières). Likewise, Mouret stages the Oriental salon in the hallway (vestibule), which is central to the space of the store as the patio is in the depicted picture. Mouret also hangs rugs from the ceiling and puts door-curtains in the four corners of the room to give the impression of an Oriental harem or household (Zola 1998,141). Just like the catalogue, clients standing on the upper floors and on the stairs could enjoy the panoptic pleasure of watching other people navigating the Oriental salon, fulfilling the Orientalist fantasy of capturing the entire Orient in a panoramic view (Said 240). Mouret's favorite spot in the store is the central stairs where he could watch the entire place (Zola 2008, 175). Standing on the stairs and on the upper floors, he occupies the powerful position of the "Orientalist [who] surveys the Orient from above, with the aim of getting hold of the whole sprawling panorama" (Said 239). In that sense, the Orientalist layout of the department store, including that of *Au Bonheur des dames*, incorporates the Mediterranean Saint-Simonian ideology of subjecting the Oriental space to Western mechanisms of power and control, in which the region unfolds as an easily readable map.



Figure 36. Back Cover. Scene of Trade Caravans catalogue *Au Bon Marché: Tapis & Portières*. Source: the collection of BNF, Folio Wz 211.

Indeed the back cover of the same catalogue (figure 36) gives a totalizing map of the Near East as an accumulation of monuments and artifacts; it lumps together Ancient Egypt, Assyria and Babylon, as Zola does in describing the Oriental salon. Amid the desolate ancient ruins, at the center of the picture, a caravan of camels, heavily laden with goods and monitored by Europeans, moves toward a fleet of ships waiting on the distant shore. Finally, the lines beneath the picture supplied with a stamp of the store's owner's name (Boucicaut) confirm the authenticity of the merchandise. The catalogue, then, as it shows on the front and back covers, establishes its reputation by referring to colonialism (the armed European leaders of the caravan), to commercial networks across the Mediterranean (the distant ships), and to a general nineteenth-century Orientalist discourse and iconography (the desert, the ruins, the

harem, archeological expeditions, army missions, trade, the hunt for hidden treasures and sexual adventures). In so doing, the catalogue situates the store's owner as both an insider and an outsider to the Orient. He is a trader, explorer, archeologist, sociologist, and artist, but also a colonizer, and perhaps the owner of a harem as well. Mouret assumes some of these roles. On the hand, he owns and manages a space occupied by a large crowd of women. On the other, acting as an adventurous trader, he bargains for antique rugs in the Levant (Zola 1998,141). He also sends his agents to scour the East, its palaces, mosques, temples, and bazaars, in search of artifacts to please his French clients: "on avait vidé les palais, dévalisé les mosques et les bazars" (Zola 2008, 142); "Chaque année, il remuait tout l'Extrême-Orient, où des voyageurs fouillaient pour lui les palais et les temples (Zola 1998, 525) [Every year, he scoured the Far East, getting travellers to rummage for him in palaces and temples.] Zola's words "dévalisé" [stripped] and "vidé" [emptied] emphasizes an avid and violent drive for appropriation on the model of the military acquisition of booty. The words "remuait" [stirred, turned], "fouillaient" [scoured] evoke the operation of an archeological expedition in which the land is dug and destroyed in search for hidden treasures to be displayed and sold to customers.

Other catalogues from *Au Bon Marché*, such as those of 1910, 1911, and 1912, refer to specific Orientalist artists or explorers to promote their annual Oriental salon. The catalogue cover from 1910 is decorated as a hand-painted page from an Arabic manuscript, most probably the opening page of the Koran. On the cover is the following title: "The Orient by Alberto Pasini *offered*, in the commercial sense, by les

Grands Magasins du Bon Marché,”<sup>32</sup> referring to the Italian Orientalist painter Pasini’s art. In this situation, the objectified Orient is packaged and “offered” to the French public through a series of mediations between artists, writers, and the store. Ironically, the Orientalist specialist also becomes another commodity marketed by the *grands magasins* to guarantee the authenticity of their products. And through this chain of relations with the East, the store’s merchandise acquires its aura as genuine artifacts which can transmit the Oriental experience to the Parisian consumers. In the novel, Zola indirectly alludes to this connection when a bourgeois customer standing in the Oriental salon naively exclaims to her friends that the salon resembles “an authentic Delacroix” (Zola 2008, 173).

In this situation, the salon acquires its validation of authenticity via a comparison to Orientalist artworks. The Orient itself becomes a set of fantastic projections, monopolized and displaced by the body of knowledge or cultural artifacts created around it which, in Said’s words: “[puts] into cultural circulation a form of discursive currency by whose presence the Orient henceforth would be spoken for” (Zola 2008, 122). In this context, the individual authenticates his or her own experience through the consultation and comparison to the collection of Orientalist works (Said 93). On another level, by staging the shopper’s comment, “an authentic Delacroix!” Zola ridicules bourgeois taste, which evaluates art according to its ability to replicate details and confuses the commercial with the aesthetic. Zola’s art criticism specifically targets this superficiality:

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<sup>32</sup> My emphasis, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Folio 4- WZ- 13721

La vérité, c'est que le public s'entiche purement et simplement des tours de passe-passe de l'artiste. Il distingue les boutons sur un gilet, les breloques sur une chaîne de montre tant et si bien qu'aucun détail ne s'y perd; voilà ce qui suscite cette admiration inouïe...La foule est flattée dans ses instincts les plus enfantins, dans son admiration de la difficulté vaincue, dans son amour des tableaux bien dessinés et surtout bien détaillés. Elle ne comprend que cela en art. (Zola 1999, 384)

The truth is that the public is infatuated purely and simply by the artist's games of hide and seek. They recognize very well the buttons on a cardigan, the charms in a chain watch; no detail is lost on them. This is what brings about their admiration...The crowd feels flattered for their infantile instincts, for their admiration of a surmounted hardship, for their love of insignificant well-painted tableaux and above all rich in details. They only understand this in art. (Zola 1999, 384)<sup>33</sup>

The group of women who gather in the salon and express their fascination with its authenticity resemble the bourgeois crowd mentioned here. Zola also mocks Orientalist artists who strive to follow in the footsteps of Delacroix, but lack his “neurotic sensibility.” Unlike their master, they create dull paintings that resemble a warehouse for oriental goods. Their works serve merely as ornamentals object to “decorate the bourgeois salon” (Zola 1999, 340). Similarly, the store catalogue and the Oriental salon achieve the same kitsch effect to promote their sales.

In describing the Oriental salon, Zola follows the strategies of these catalogues. The salon comes to present a totalizing, theatrical, commodified experience of the East, with its various fantasies, anxieties, and control mechanisms:

Chaque fois qu'une cliente se présentait, il y avait un mouvement parmi les garçons de magasin, rangés sous la haute porte, habillés d'une livrée, l'habit et le pantalon vert clair, le gilet rayé jaune et rouge. Et l'inspecteur Jouve, l'ancien capitaine retraité, était là, en redingote et en cravate blanche, avec sa décoration, comme une enseigne de vieille probité, accueillant les dames d'un air gravement poli, se penchant vers elles pour leur indiquer les rayons. Puis,

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<sup>33</sup>

My translation



elles disparaissaient dans le vestibule, changé en un salon oriental sous ses ordres [...]. D'abord, au plafond, étaient tendus des tapis de Smyrne, dont les dessins compliqués se détachaient sur des fonds rouges. Puis, des quatre côtés, pendaient des portières: les portières de Karamanie et de Syrie, zébrées de vert, de jaune et de vermillon; les portières de Diarbékir, plus communes, rudes à la main, comme des sayons de berger ; et encore des tapis pouvant servir de tentures, les longs tapis d'Ispahan, de Téhéran et de Kermancha, les tapis plus larges de Schoumaka et de Madras, floraison étrange de pivoinies et de palmes, fantaisie lâchée dans le jardin du rêve. À terre, les tapis recommençaient, une jonchée de toisons grasses: il y avait, au centre, un tapis d'Agra, une pièce extraordinaire à fond blanc et à large bordure bleu tendre, où couraient des ornements violâtres, d'une imagination exquise; partout, ensuite, s'étalaient des merveilles, les tapis de la Mecque aux reflets de velours, les tapis de prière du Daghestan à la pointe symbolique, les tapis du Kurdistan, semés de fleurs épanouies; enfin, dans un coin, un écroulement à bon marché, des tapis de Gheurdès, de Coula et de Kircheer, en tas, depuis quinze francs. Cette tente de pacha somptueux était meublée de fauteuils et de divans, faits avec des sacs de chameau, les uns coupés de losanges bariolés, les autres plantés de roses naïves. La Turquie, l'Arabie, la Perse, les Indes étaient là. (Zola 1998, 141)

Whenever a customer appeared, there was a stir among the page-boys lined up beneath the high porch, dressed in a livery of light green coat and trousers, and yellow and red striped waistcoat. Jouve, the retired captain who worked as a shopwalker, was there too, in frock-coat and white tie, wearing his medal like a sign of respectability and probity, receiving the ladies with an air of solemn politeness, bending over them to point out the various departments. Then they would disappear into the entrance-hall, which had been changed into an Oriental hall. [...] First of all, the ceiling was covered with carpets from Smyrna, their complicated designs standing out on red backgrounds. Then, on all four sides, were hung door-curtains: door-curtains from Kerman and Syria, striped with green, yellow, and vermillion; door-curtains from Diarkebir, of a commoner type, rough to the touch, like shepherd's cloaks; and still more carpets which could be used as hangings, long carpets from Ispahan, Teeran, and Kermanshah, broader carpets from Schoumaka and Madras, a strange blossoming of peonies and palms, imagination running riot in a dream garden. On the floor there were still more carpets; thick fleeces were strewn there, and in the centre was a carpet from Agra, an extraordinary specimen with a white background and a broad border of soft blue, through which ran purplish embellishments of exquisite designs. There were other marvels displayed everywhere, carpets from Mecca with a velvet reflection, prayer rugs from Daghestan with symbolic pointed design, carpets from Kurdistan covered with flowers in full bloom; finally, in a corner, there was a large pile of cheap rugs, from Geurdis, Kula, and Kirghehir, priced from fifteen francs upwards. This sumptuous Pasha's

tent was furnished with armchairs and divans made from camel-bags, some ornamented with multi-colored lozenges, other with simple roses. Turkey, Arabia, Persia, the Indies were all here. (Zola 2008, 88)

Jouve, a retired army commander who, significantly, had served in Algeria, greets the clients in the entry hall along with a number of salesclerks to guide them through the store. Jouve plays the role of a stage manager, having overseen the transformation of the vestibule into the Oriental salon. Theatricalization, indeed the perception of the East as a stage-set, is a common trope of Orientalist representation, and was a metaphor used by countless travellers to the region. As Edward Said claims: “The Orient [turns into a] stage on which the whole East is confined. On this stage will appear figures whose role it is to represent the larger whole from which they emanate. The Orient [...] seems to be, not an unlimited extension beyond the familiar European world, but rather a close field, a theatrical stage affixed to Europe” (63). The Oriental salon comes to embody this relation. Yet, as the novel proceeds and the store becomes the dominant landmark in the city, Zola inverts the relationship between center and periphery, and the Oriental *magasin* comes to “annex” the French nation.

Mouret’s layers of rugs and woolen door-coverings serve as a metonym for the Near East; they concoct a homogenous space where borders collapse and specificity, despite the seeming abundance of detail, is lost. In the process of listing and naming the country of origin of every rug, like the act of creation in Genesis, the East is called, named, and summoned into existence for the European consumer. With this detailed, encyclopedic indexing, the Orient turns into a reified space that acquires “imaginative geographies” and “dramatic boundaries” and thus loses its cultural specificity (Said 73). Shopping offers a panorama of the East from central Asia to North Africa, a

vicarious travel experience with its promise of escape and sensuality. The salon inundates the senses, from the bright color of gold dazzling the eyes, recalling the sunny warm weather of the East and its material riches, to the different tactile aspects of wool, leather, and wood, to the smell of wool. Here, the customer could capture in one glance the entire region via a wide array of Orientalist categories “culture, religion, mind, history, [and] society” (Said 122). Every rug recalls a painting and a repertoire of Orientalist themes and characters: the enchanting rose garden, the pilgrimage to Mecca, the mountains, the desert, the different Oriental “types” (Said 259): the Arab Bedouin, the shepherd, the Pasha, and the despotic ruler, but also, as the narrator and visitors describe it, the “harem” and old master paintings.

The salon is at once luxurious, animalistic, and barbaric. It embodies the double aspect of the Orient seen simultaneously as a site of fascination and abjection, or as Zola puts it: “the land of vermin and sunshine” (Zola 2008, 88). Zola’s language brings to the forefront the dream-like aspect of that simulacrum and the sensual pleasure derived from that visual and tactile experience. As they enter the store, the clients are engulfed in this artificial Orient. They literally “disappear” in that fantasy world. In the midst of the modern city, they find themselves immersed in an enchanting garden, surrounded by flowers in full blossom and thick foliage evoked by the different decorative details and the patterns on the carpets: “strange blossoming of peonies,” “palms,” “naïve roses.” The author communicates this overwhelming experience that inundates the shoppers’ senses by an endless listing of details and a syntactic structure that does not allow the reader any respite: he proceeds through a spectrum of textures and colors, “velvet,” “camel hair” “thick fleece,” coarse wool,

“red,” “yellow,” “vermillion,” “purplish,” “tawny gold” supplied with the “velvet reflection.” The vocabulary dominating the passage, borrowed from Orientalist fiction and travel-narratives, highlights the luxurious and dreamy aspect of the place: “the imagination running riot,” “garden of dreams” “marvels” “sumptuous tent.” “visions of the Orient floated” “luxury.”<sup>34</sup> Through Zola’s brush, the Oriental salon transports the shoppers, as well as the readers, into the French imaginary of *The Thousand and One Nights*, with its fantasies strongly connected to the exuberant details of its material culture, as later portrayed in Orientalist art and literature.

Despite this fantastic quality bestowed on the salon, Zola’s description communicates a double message. While it portrays the intense impact of an Orientalist materiality on the senses, it also suggests a fear of losing control over one’s desires, and the anxiety of being consumed by that overwhelming experience. As in many other incidents in the novel, this idea resembles the Saint-Simonian attitude toward an Orient that would contaminate, if not take possession of, the traveller. In this sense, the Oriental salon mimics the ambivalent aspect of Saint-Simon’s Mediterranean project, with its mythology of a struggle between East and West (see Chapter 2). The image of the clients “disappearing” into the salon, the endless listing of details, “the imagination running riot” are as threatening as they are fascinating. They suggest a sense of disorientation where the senses overcome reason. The crowd is not simply visiting the salon but is also consumed by it, engulfed in its elaborate and overwhelming setting.

Along with this chaotic, dizzying space comes the opposite drive for imposing

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<sup>34</sup> For example, see Sarga Moussa, *La Relation orientale. Enquête sur la communication dans les récits de voyage en Orient 1811-1861*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1995.

order. Nothing is more indicative of this than the line of salesclerks dressed in green, yellow and red, acting like dragomans (Levantine interpreters and guides) waiting in a servile manner to assist the clients in navigating the store<sup>35</sup>. Most importantly the figure of Commander Jouve who stands at the door wearing his war medals from his battles in Algeria, embodies a long imperialist legacy of control and surveillance and its theatrical display of power.

The arousal of the shoppers' desires announces the simultaneous birth of a mechanism of control reflecting the anxiety produced by an unruly crowd. The democratization of luxury by the *grand magasin*, a Saint-Simonian ideal, brings forth the democratization of Orientalism. Capitalizing on its sensationalist aspect, the French bazaar, located the middle of the metropolis, delivers to an unprecedented number of people, especially women and the working classes, a material culture associated with an extensive Orientalist imaginary and clichéd fantasies of sexual promiscuity and transgression. This is particularly significant because Zola writes at a time when the image of crowds brings to mind the memory of the Commune of 1871 and the myth of "les femmes pétroleuses"[female arsonists] who supposedly instigated the crowds to set Paris on fire (Gullickson 10). Analyzing the social and medical discourse and the iconographic representation of nineteenth-century crowds, Ann McClintock explains: "the crowd became the metonymic symbol of the unemployed and unruly poor; who were associated with criminals and the insane, who were in turn

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<sup>35</sup> Providing an assistant and interpreters was part of the culture of the department store. In 1878, *Printemps* hired out its employees as interpreters for the visitors of the Exposition Universelle, an innovation for which it received 2 silver medals (Caracalla 40).

associated with women, particularly prostitutes and alcoholics, who were in turn associated with children; who were associated with “primitives” and the realm of empire” (McClintock 119). As the novel collapses the borders between the Orient and the French metropolis, between the working class and the bourgeoisie, Zola’s crowd comes to embody a multitude of images connected with transgression, chaos and lack of control. One of the recurring incidents in the novel is that of shoplifting by Madame de Boves, a bourgeois woman whose cryptic behavior is presented through the framework of hysteria and rampant eroticism. De Boves takes pleasure in stealing petty items from the store. She stuffs her red leather bag with stolen merchandise:

Depuis un an, Madame de Boves volait ainsi, ravagée d’un besoin furieux, irrésistible. Les crises empiraient, grandissaient, jusqu’à être une volupté nécessaire à son existence, emportant tous les raisonnements de prudence, se satisfaisant avec une jouissance d’autant plus âpre, qu’elle risquait, sous les yeux d’une foule, son nom, son orgueil, la haute situation de son mari. Maintenant que ce dernier lui laissait vider ses tiroirs, elle volait avec de l’argent plein sa poche, elle volait pour voler, comme on aime pour aimer, sous le coup de fouet du désir, dans le détraquement de la névrose que ses appétits de luxe inassouvis avaient développée en elle, autrefois, à travers l’énorme et brutale tentation des grands magasins. (Zola 1998, 502)

Madame de Boves had been stealing like this for a year. The attacks had been getting worse, increasing until they had become a sensual pleasure necessary to her existence, seeping away all the reasonings of prudence and giving her enjoyment which was all the more keen because she was risking, under the very eyes of the crowd, her name, her pride and her husband’s important position. Now that her husband let her take money from his drawers, she was stealing with her pockets full of money, stealing for stealing’s sake as people love for the sake of loving, spurred on by desire, possessed by the neurosis which had been developed within her in the past by her unsatisfied desire for luxury when confronted by the enormous, violent temptation of the big stores. (Zola 2008, 422)

Zola’s description of Madame de Bove expresses the effect of Mouret’s emporium on women’s desire. Like the irrational forces of the Orient, the store dominates the

bourgeois shopper's behavior, leading her to act in an unexplained and uncontrolled manner. Shoplifting becomes a unique source of pleasure that does not conform to bourgeois propriety, a pleasure that is not put into the service of capitalism, patriarchy, or the nation. De Boves transgresses a distinction between social classes, which associates morality with the bourgeoisie and criminality with the working classes. As Zola puts it, she "was risking before the eyes of the crowd her name, her pride, and her husband's important position." At the center of this new anxiety is the exposure of the husband's name and title. As she risks becoming subject to the gaze of the crowd and its judgment, she inadvertently reverses the role between the ruling class and the masses.

Like a two-headed snake, the elements of fantasy and control work in tandem in the text. Jouve circulates throughout the shop, greeting and monitoring both employees and customers: "l'inspecteur Jouve se promenait de son allure militaire, étalant sa décoration, gardant ces marchandises précieuses et fines, si faciles à cacher au fond d'une manche" (Zola 1998, 167). ["Jouve the shopwalker [inspector] was slowly pacing up and down with his military air, flaunting his medal, watching over those fine, precious goods which were so easy to conceal up a sleeve" (Zola 2008, 111)]. Sometimes he roams quietly, observing customers and eavesdropping on salesclerks; at other times he parades across the store with a militaristic gait, reminding the crowd of his presence, reaffirming the panoptic illusion of constant surveillance. Through his militaristic mien and surveillance strategies, Jouve subjects the store to strict regulatory measures to keep the desiring crowd in check. These images of the ancient commander and war overlap the map of the metropolis with that

of the colonies and enforce a parallelism between the imperialist mechanism of control and the chaotic space of the department store.

**Denise and Mouret: Modern Mediterranean Subjects**  
**Pasha Osman and Mouret: The Oriental Despots**

Perhaps one of the central examples of power and control in Zola's novel is the Haussmannian urban plan, inspired by Saint-Simonism. Presiding over his emporium, Gustave Mouret oversees the operation of the Saint-Simonian machine with its networks of money, people, and trade. Mouret meets with Baron Hartmann to discuss the construction of a new boulevard and the possibility of expanding his department store by taking over the neighboring buildings. Ironically, like a true Saint-Simonian, Haussmann was also self-orientalizing. As Walter Benjamin indicates in *The Arcades Project*, Haussmann nicknamed himself "Pasha Osman...[the] artist demolitionist" (Benjamin 127). In that sense, the urban planning of Paris was tied to an Orientalist imagery of despotism. Haussmann's framed vistas of Parisian streets compete with the pedestrian's control over space. As is well known, the highly organized city was designed to prevent another workers' uprising as well as to force the pedestrian to follow a carefully designed trajectory.

The two despots of the Empire and the Emporium, Haussmann and Mouret manipulate the modern Parisian space, indoors and outdoors. Zola is a true Saint-Simonian entrepreneur who orchestrates the circulation of economic capital and crowds. Like Haussmann, Mouret is a master of crowds who specializes in surprising the shoppers and challenging their control over their surroundings (Zola 1998, 299).



Zola emphasizes Mouret’s “artistry” in display and spatial organization, which recalls Haussmann’s technique. He stands on the central staircase to have a command over the entire store, to study his clients’ behavior and manipulate their trajectory (Zola 1998, 175). Mouret’s organizational strategy follows the quick rhythm of commerce. He constantly anticipates the crowd’s practices of space and steps ahead to challenge their sense of orientation. Sometimes, he shifts the location of the departments unexpectedly to force them to circulate through the entire store. At other times, he closes an entry door to give an impression of a crowded store and attract the curious passers by (299).

In Zola’s own blueprint of the fictional store, included in his preparatory notes, we find that the department store’s aisles and counters mirror the highly organized and controlled Parisian urban plan with its large boulevards and rectilinear façades. The map that Zola drew of the streets of Paris surrounding the *grand magasin* follows a similar pattern and linearity to his map for the store’s internal layout.

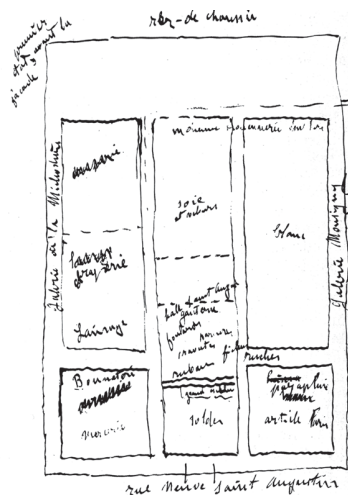


Figure 37. Map of Au Bonheur des dames drawn by Zola. Source: Emile Zola, Dossier Préparatoire, BNF.



voisins. Quatre ans venaient de suffire au Japon pour attirer toute la clientèle artistique de Paris. (Zola 1998, 497)

[But on the landing of the big, central staircase, [Japan stopped her again.] This counter had grown since the day when Mouret had amused himself by setting up in the same place a little auction stall, covered with a few shop-soiled trinkets, without foreseeing its enormous success [...] he was ransacking the whole Far East, where travellers were pillaging palaces and temples for him. And new departments were still being opened: they had tried two new ones in December [...] a book department and a children's toy department which would also grow and sweep away more businesses in the neighbourhood. In four years the Japanese department had succeeded in attracting all the artistic clientele of Paris (Zola 2008, 418)

Mouret literally redraws the Oriental map to capture the shopper. Madame Marty's experience resembles that of an Orientalist traveler lost in an adventure that promised excitement and riches. She roams the aisles of the store unable to find an exit from the Oriental maze. Similarly, throughout the novel the scenery shifts from one passage to another, throwing the reader, like the shoppers, into unexpected corners of the world. Both lose their sense of geographical reference, wondering whether it is still the store, or rather the Universal Exhibition, a library, or a toy department.

In this passage, we also see Mouret's agents transforming the world's heritage into cheap commodities. The store's exotic façade thus depends on a distant and invisible act of violence in the East, a violence which then returns, crucially, to haunt the metropolis, "sweeping away" the local stores and radically transforming the commercial and urban landscape. In describing this tension, Zola reverses the relationship between subject and object. He places Japan as the subject of the sentence, and Madame Marty as the object: "Japan stopped her once more." Not only does Madame Marty lose control over her surrounding space, to find herself in a distant East engulfing her, but she also falls under the power of a fantasmatic Orient and its

commodities. The initial violence in the East turns into a form of commodity fetishism via a promotional campaign that in its turn takes control of the French consumer.

### **From Monitoring the Traffic of the Crowd to Trafficking in Women: Dislocating Desire in the Political Economy**

Throughout the text, Mouret figures as an exemplary Saint-Simonian entrepreneur with a hybrid character that brings East and West together and masters the art of the circulation of money, people and commodities. Zola cast Mouret as a neurotic investor whom he qualifies according to the racial and racist category of the “Jew.” Although Mouret is not actually Jewish, he adopts a self-perception associated with a nineteenth-century economic discourse that projects a particular character to Jewish entrepreneurs: In describing himself, Mouret proudly states:

Il déclara qu’il était au fond plus juif que tous les juifs du monde : il tenait de son père, auquel il ressemblait physiquement et moralement, un gaillard qui connaissait le prix des sous ; et, s’il avait de sa mère ce brin de fantaisie nerveuse, c’était là peut-être le plus clair de sa chance, car il sentait la force invincible de sa grâce à tout oser. (Zola 1998, 81)

He declared that basically he was more Jewish than all the Jews in the world: he took after his father, a cheery fellow who knew the value of money, whom he resembled in both looks and character; and if he had got his excitable imagination from his mother, it was perhaps, his most obvious asset, for he was aware of the invincible force of his daring. (Zola 2008, 35)

Typical of the Saint-Simonians’ Mediterranean ideal, Mouret embodies a duality of reason and passion that resembles that imagined geography where the sciences of the West meet the sensibility of East. Mouret’s body is also a site of the mythical Saint-Simonian battle between European reason and the irrational East. Having inherited his father’s rationality and his mother “nervous imagination,” he embodies a queer

mélange, the stereotypical character of a neurotic, effeminate Oriental and a European rationality that could strategize and foresee future opportunities (Said 149). For this reason, he can identify with women and understand their thoughts and desires; he is repeatedly attributed “feminine” characteristics, and at Henriette’s reception the women consider him “one of them”. As a true Saint-Simonian, he turns this knowledge into a science to ensure the maximum circulation of capital, commodities and people inside the store, through the exploitation of women. Mouret’s character is an androgynous one, a woman in a man’s body. In the novel this ambiguous gender projects an embodiment of the modern Saint-Simonian ethos that blurred the deeply rooted distinctions of class and gender in traditional French society.

Yet Zola also turns this profile of the modern Saint-Simonian entrepreneur upside down to represent the most dreaded outcome of the Mediterranean utopia. Having this unique character, Mouret manipulates the desires and passions of his public. He renders them mindless and childlike, “orientalizing” them. He turns against Europe the strategies of control intended for the Orient itself. Gil Anidjar would analyze this particular profile as the product of a nineteenth-century discourse on Semitism that constructed both Jews and Arabs as an Oriental enemy. One from within the European borders this other outside (Anidjar 33).

Zola expands on the image of Mouret’s exploitation of the crowd. He portrays it as a bacchic ritual whose participants have reached a frenzied state and fallen under the spell of their leader “l’or sonnait dans les caisses; tandis que la clientèle, dépouillée, violée, s’en allait à moitié défaite, avec la volupté assouvie et la sourde honte d’un désir contenté au fond d’un hôtel louche. C’était lui qui les possédait de la

sorte, qui les tenait à sa merci”(Zola 1998, 507) [gold was clinking in the cash-desks; while the customers despoiled and violated, were going away in disarray, their desires satisfied, and with the secret shame of having yielded to temptation in the depths of some sleazy hotel. And it he who possessed them all like that, who held them at his mercy” (Zola 2008, 427)]. The shoppers are objectified, prostituted, enslaved and swindled. They leave the store-brothel-temple with mixed feelings of sexual satisfaction and shame. In another passage, Zola borrows from the Biblical narrative of Exodus. He describes the store as a temple for the golden calf, toward which the voice of the crowd rises in worship: “De proche en proche, le brouhaha s'élevait, devenait une clameur de peuple saluant le veau d'or”(Zola 1998, 510) [with every step he took the noise increased, becoming the uproar of a nation bowing down to the Golden calf” (Zola 2008, 430)]. Mouret paralyzes their reason, leading them to follow their impulses. The scene recalls Hippolyte Taine’s analysis of the crowd, (Taine was one of Zola’s favorite historians): “A solitary man can control his bestial instincts, but once he joins a crowd, mutual contagion inflames the passions; crowds...end in a state of drunkenness, from which nothing can issue but vertigo and blind rage” (qtd. in Barrows 77).<sup>36</sup> By directing the crowds through the store’s aisles, Zola channels this powerful force into his economic machine, turning it into profit. In the scene, the rising clamor of the inebriated crowd is paired with the metallic ringing of golden coins, as if the crowd’s desire transforms literally and instantly into economic gain.

From another perspective, the exploitation of female shoppers’ desire in the

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<sup>36</sup> Zola once described himself as “Taine’s humble disciple” (Barrows 93).

department store, which Zola depicts as an unruly force, draws the attention to the place of desire within the political economy. Zola depicts the public's attitude toward new practices of space and its growing anxiety about female desire. This idea is reinforced by Zola's Orientalist imagery of the harem in which women are also exchanged as property and are part of economic capital. Within the context of the harem, female desire is strongly suppressed and controlled by the patriarch.

In her article "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex," Gayle Rubin examines the location of women and the function of desire in the patriarchal economic system. Rubin draws on structural anthropology to underline the unstated economic role of women, not as unpaid housewives and mothers, or even as slaves and prostitutes, but just as women whose exchange, through matrimony, was the basic form of establishing kinship and political status in primitive tribes (158). Zola's novel is filled with examples which associate "the exchange of women" with the men's political, social and spatial control. For instance, Mouret and Baron Hartmann, the director of the *Crédit Immobilier*, are introduced by a common lover, Henriette Desforges: "Sans doute il aurait pu voir le financier dans son cabinet, pour causer à l'aise de la grosse affaire qu'il voulait lui proposer. Mais il se sentait plus fort chez Henriette, il savait combien la possession commune d'une maîtresse rapproche et attendrit. Être tous les deux chez elle, dans son parfum aimé [...] lui semblait une certitude de succès" (Zola 1998, 123) [No doubt he could have seen the financier in his office, and discussed at leisure the deal he wanted to propose to him. But he felt more confident in Henriette's house; he knew how much the possession of a mistress in common brings men together and softens them. For them both to be in her house, amid

the beloved scent of her presence [...] seemed to him a guarantee of success (Zola 2008, 71-72)]. Implicit in the business transaction between Baron Hartmann and Mouret is that common intimate relationship that tied both men to Henriette, whose role as a lover represents an unstated surplus value in the economic equation. Her presence is necessary to facilitate the agreement between both men who make crucial decisions on their future investment and the planning of modern Paris. In another sense, Henriette's body figures as a double for the two kinds of capital, Haussmann's Paris and the new financial investment in the department store.

The same type of relationship finds its echo in the patriarchal business tradition. Mouret marries his wife and takes over her uncle's boutique. Denise's uncle marries Hauchecorne's daughter, who passes the shop to her husband, who, in his turn, will offer it to his salesclerk Colomban, along with his daughter. Circulating, almost like currency, among men, the female body is continuously entwined with that of money and property. Rubin sets female desire as the antithesis to the patriarchal tradition of establishing social classes and order, where the exchange of women provides for social and economic bonding between men. In this context, the suppression of female desire is necessary to the maintenance of the patriarchy, since female desire could contradict the father's decision to give his daughter to a specific man (Rubin 172:176). Similarly, in the novel, Baudu's daughter, Geneviève is entangled within this patriarchal network of relations. She is expected to be in love with, and dedicated to, Colomban while, initially, her betrothal to him is also a business agreement between the salesclerk and the father. Here, however, the system breaks down in the face of modernity's relentless pursuit of capital: entranced by one



of the salesgirls from *Au Bonheur des dames*, Colombar loses his head. Enslaved to his desire, like the female shoppers in the store, he cannot resist this “merchandise,” even as he knows that he is squandering his reputation and his future. The sickly Geneviève dies out of sorrow for not being able to gain Colombar’s love.

As a master of the Saint-Simonian networks of transport and trade, Mouret shifts women’s practice of space, claiming control over their bodies and their desire at once. Capitalizing on female desire, an element that is deeply enmeshed within, and central to, the Patriarchal economic system, he destabilizes this order in his favor. Exploiting further the stereotype of the Jew in the European imaginary, Zola describes him as a modern Shylock who transforms women’s bodies and desires into financial profit. The text draws attention to the connection between the circulation of capital and the circulation of women in the city and the store:

Elle [la femme] y régnait [dans le magasin] en reine amoureuse, dont les sujets trafiquent, et qui paye d’une goutte de sang chacun de ses caprices. Mouret laissait ainsi passer la brutalité d’un juif vendant de la femme à la livre: il lui élevait un temple, la faisait encenser par une légion de commis.” (Zola 1998, 129)

She [the Woman] reigned there [the department store] as an amorous queen whose subjects trade on her, and who pays for every whim with a drop of her own blood. Mouret thus allowed the brutality of a Jew selling woman by the pound: he was building a temple to Woman, making a legion of shop assistants burn incense before her [...] (Zola 2008, 77)].

In this passage, the female shopper quickly passes from being the “queen” of the store and a goddess in a temple to being an offering burnt on the altar of the same temple for the sake of Mouret’s profit. Greeted as a queen by Mouret’s “army,” she is sold by the pound and she pays for her desire with her blood. Mouret, the modern Shylock, uses his “brutal” and exploitative “Oriental” sensibility as a weapon to build his own

empire. In Shakespeare's play, Portia attempts to save her lover, Antonio, by posing as a man and using her knowledge of the European legal code to defeat Shylock, sparing Antonio from paying his debt from his own flesh. By protecting her love, she restores order in the European social and economic system, where money and sexual desire are returned to the advantage of the European patriarchal and economic system. Shylock, in contrast, loses his daughter and his investment to Christian men. By losing his claim over his daughter's desire and body, and his money, Shylock is deprived of wealth, status and descendants; he roams the city lamenting his loss. Zola offers us the reverse example. The modern Shylock returns with his army of salesclerks to conquer the nation's capital. He takes revenge on the female, who now has to pay with her flesh. In a sense, the shoppers turn into wandering Jews who have lost their money, reputation, and future.

### **Denise: The Moral Industrialist**

Only one character in the novel is indifferent to the Saint-Simonian machine. Neither its advanced and innovative techniques nor its sensational aspect excites Denise's imagination or arouses her senses. She lives a life structured around moral propriety. The orphaned Denise stands for an example of a female desire that is not integrated in the patriarchal political economy. Having lost her father and maintaining a draconian control over her desire, she becomes the only female who is not appropriable. This fact makes her an object of obsession for Mouret the ladies' man, who continuously attempts to seduce her. But his calculated strategies fail to ensnare her. Unlike the other female characters in the novel, she is the only one who resists his

advances, and she thus renders him impotent. This resistance is linked to her resistance to consumption, for Mouret's ultimate strategy is to buy her affection by offering her whatever she wants, however much it costs. She thus renders capitalism impotent, becoming an obstacle in the desire-profit machine. In the end, Mouret realizes that he must marry Denise to prove his love. In doing so he also helps her ascend the social ladder and become partner in managing the Saint-Simonian network. The marriage of Denise and Mouret strangely reverses the patriarchal tradition, since it is she who acquires Mouret and the store.

While Mouret is cast as an androgynous man, Denise's femininity, too, is highly ambiguous, both erotic and castrating. In the initial scene she is described as puny and lacking beauty in contrast to her adolescent brother. From the beginning, she is set as a virginal mother figure, who takes care of her brothers (Zola 1998, 50). She is depicted as having a masculine figure which contrasts with that of her brother's soft feminine features:

Il avait la beauté d'une fille, une beauté qu'il semblait avoir volé à sa soeur la peau éclatante, les cheveux roux et frisés, les lèvres et les yeux mouillés de tendresse. Près de lui, dans son étonnement, Denise paraissait plus mince encore, avec son visage long à bouche trop grande, son teint fatigué déjà, sous sa chevelure pâle. (Zola 1998, 48)

He had the beauty of a girl, beauty which he seemed to have stolen from his sister—dazzling skin, curly auburn hair, lips and eyes moist with love. Denise, by his side, in her astonishment, looked even thinner, her mouth too large in her long face, her complexion already sallow beneath her light-coloured head of hair. (Zola 2008, 6)]

Throughout the text, Denise is mocked for her unkempt hair and her heavy work boots ("sabots" "galoches"). She is derided by the others as "la mal peignée" and "tête de pioche" [pickaxe-head] (Zola 1998, 179). While Mouret's androgyny highlights his

transgressive character of mastering reason and passion and turning them into tools for making profit, Denise's androgyny stands for another hybrid Saint-Simonian Mediterranean character. As a part of a new social group that blurs the distinction between the working class and the bourgeoisie, and as someone who sees industry as a central moral value, Denise becomes an example for the Saint-Simonian social doctrine which pairs social responsibility with industrial liberalism. Her struggle as a worker will lead her to construct a novel role for the emerging class of entrepreneurs that imposes on the enterprise a humane role and a responsibility toward its employees and customers. In this way, she fulfills the Saint-Simonian aspiration of making industry an act of collaboration that ensures the sharing of resources and information as a way to create a new social relationship beyond the rooted traditions of French feudalism.

Zola highlights how Denise's experience as a worker and her story of social ascension makes her a socially androgynous character. Her job as a sales girl provides an opportunity for the worker to master the subtle distinctions that mark the difference between the two classes. The salesgirls at the time constituted a novel group, which shared traits from both the working class and the bourgeoisie. By not fitting completely with either group, salesgirls enjoyed an unusual mobility, which challenged the firmly established marks of distinction. Hence, despite the rules and restrictions imposed on the workers' movements, the shop girls still manage to disturb the established social hierarchies. Zola underscores the threat that the salesgirls embody to bourgeois women:

Presque toutes les vendeuses, dans leur frottement quotidien avec la clientèle riche, prenaient des grâces, finissaient par être d'une classe vague, flottant entre l'ouvrière et la bourgeoise ; et, sous leur art de s'habiller, sous

les manières et les phrases apprises, il n'y avait souvent qu'une instruction fautive, la lecture des petits journaux, des tirades de drame, toutes les sottises courantes du pavé de Paris. (Zola 1998, 215)

From their daily contact with rich customers, nearly all the salesgirls had acquired airs and graces, and had ended up by forming a vague class between the working and middle classes; and often, beneath their dress sense, beneath the manners and phrases they had learned, there was nothing but a false, superficial education, picked up from reading cheap newspapers, from tirades in the theatre, and from all the latest follies of the Paris streets. (Zola 2008, 155)

The salesgirls, who have the opportunity of interacting with bourgeois clients daily, manage to transgress class lines and to become part of a liminal group that “floats” between classes. They are neither marginalized prostitutes who exist at the fringes of the social order, nor domestics who live under the complete control of the bourgeoisie. Inside the carefully designed setting of the store, the new group lives within an ambiguous zone between the public and the private. The daily interaction with the bourgeoisie in the store creates an opportunity for performance, where salesgirls in their expensive silk dresses mimic middle-class manners. Zola is clear about the superficiality of this performance, its “falseness” and silliness, the culture of the music hall and the illustrated journal. The salesgirls did not have control over their surrounding space; the displayed merchandise was part of an act. Only Denise, the “authentic” girl from the country, exceeds this performance.

With the democratization of luxury, art and means of information via newspapers, modern Paris was no longer under the complete control of the bourgeoisie. The strict division between classes became blurred. The streets of the city, like the aisles of the store, presented a new phenomenon, a crowd more challenging to read and categorize socially. The tension and power struggle between

the working class and the bourgeoisie over the mastery of cultural capital unravels over the course of the novel. In the following passage, Denise is asked to model a coat for Madame Desforges, a *bourgeoise* who is Mouret's lover. The coat is too large and looks awkward on the slim Denise. As an inexperienced model, she becomes the laughing stock of the store:

Elle [Madame Desforges] jetait à Mouret le regard moqueur d'une Parisienne, que l'attifement ridicule d'une provinciale [Denise] égayait. Celui-ci sentit la caresse amoureuse de ce coup d'œil, le triomphe de la femme heureuse de sa beauté et de son art. Aussi, par gratitude d'homme adoré, crut-il devoir railler à son tour...

- Puis, il faudrait être peignée, murmura-t-il. (Zola 1998, 171)

She [Madame Desforges] gave Mouret the mocking look of a Parisian amused by the ridiculous get-up of a girl from the provinces [Denise]. He felt the amorous caress of this glance, the triumph of a woman proud of her beauty and her art. Therefore, in gratitude for being adored [...] he felt obliged to laugh at her in his turn.

'And she should have combed her hair,' he murmured. (Zola 2008, 114)

Denise fails to embody bourgeois ideals, which she wears like the overly large coat. Mouret's obsession with fixing her hair, which is repeated throughout the text, stands for his desire to tame her behavior to conform to the norms of the bourgeoisie and erase her connection to her peasant past and her working-class present. Denise fails to fit within the normative standards placed by the bourgeoisie. Coming from the provinces and from a peasant background, she does not know the subtle traits by which the bourgeoisie makes itself distinct. Her boots, her hair, her old woollen dress contradict the modern measures of normativity offered in the store, in which the body has to conform to the newly standardized material culture.

Like a colonized subject, Denise undergoes a sort of civilizing mission that seeks to shape her in the image of the bourgeoisie. As a salesgirl, she must wear a black silk dress, a uniform which represents the regulatory measures taken by Mouret's emporium to purge all signs of manual labor, poverty, and the flaws of capitalism. That elegant attire serves to appease the sensibility of middle-class clients, who should find in the department store an uncanny resemblance to their own household. Just as the Oriental salon depicted an ambiguous borderless, Orient, the black silk dress blurred class distinctions within the store. For Denise the silk dress symbolizes an oppressive conformity to bourgeois sensibility. She would rather wear her old woollen dress that betrays her origins than the silk uniform, which anchors her in the bourgeois culture of the department store. The luxurious silk dress represents an illusion of wealth and comfort that hides the actual exploitation of labor. In a sense, the salesgirls' condition—dressed in expensive silk, but paradoxically at the mercy of Mouret's draconian power—resembles the life of odalisques who live in abundance in a wealthy harem but cannot control their own lives. Denise is constantly struggling to adjust between her old woollen black dress and her new silk uniform.

Puis, elle s'aperçut qu'elle était vêtue de soie ; cet uniforme l'accablait, elle eut l'enfantillage, pour défaire sa malle, de vouloir remettre sa vieille robe de laine, restée au dossier d'une chaise. Mais quand elle fut rentrée dans ce pauvre vêtement à elle, une émotion l'étrangla, les sanglots qu'elle contenait depuis le matin crevèrent brusquement en un flot de larmes chaudes. Elle était retombée sur le lit, elle pleurait au souvenir de ses deux enfants, elle pleurait toujours sans avoir la force de se déchausser, ivre de fatigue et de tristesse. (Zola 1998, 176)

Then she noticed that she was dressed in silk; her uniform depressed her, and before unpacking her trunk she had a childish desire to put on her old woollen dress, which had been left on the back of the chair. But when she was once more dressed in her own poor garment she was overcome with emotion, and

the sobs which she had been holding back since the morning suddenly burst forth in a flood of bitter tears. She fell back on the bed again, weeping at the thought of the two children, and she went on weeping, without having the strength to take her shoes, completely overcome with weariness and fatigue. (Zola 2008, 119)

Denise's new uniform, her old boots, and her woollen dress come to symbolize her double, hybrid, life as a suffering working-class woman faking bourgeois "respectability" to appeal to her clients. Her heavy work boots and unruly hair carry the traces of her provincial origins and her working-class present. She brings into the department store the memory of manual labor, which the bourgeoisie seeks to forget. The boots are a constant reminder of the relationship between the provinces (the factories of Parisian taste and culture), and the theatrical "civilized" space of the metropolis. In other words, what hinders Denise's movement is the heavy burden of French social, economic and political history, which should be kept at the threshold of the department store.

As Denise learns bourgeois manners, she fulfills the Saint-Simonian desire of destabilizing the power of the dominant classes. When Mouret falls in love with Denise, Madame Deforges calls her to her apartment for the fitting of another coat. The bourgeois woman's household, filled as it is with classical Louis XV furniture, stands in stark contrast with the protean Oriental space of the department store. Denise moves from the highly theatrical space in which the distinction between workers and clients is blurred, to an apartment that embodies rigid class traditions. Madame Desforges seeks to humiliate Denise in front of Mouret, by stressing the social gap between them. Denise, however, has her revenge:



C'est une plaisanterie, mademoiselle [...] Regardez comme il me bride la poitrine. J'ai l'air d'une nourrice.  
Madame est un peu forte... Nous ne pouvons pourtant pas faire que madame soit moins forte (Zola 1998, 393)

'It's absurd, girl [...] look how tight it is. I look like a wet nurse.'  
'Madame is a little plump...And unfortunately we can't make madame any slimmer.' (Zola 2008, 318)

With the democratization of luxury, the rules of elegance and taste, a basic element of cultural capital, become a double-edged sword which can be used against the class that has created it. Denise's experience at the department store helps her to defeat Madame Desforges by means of the same rules that she has enforced earlier in the novel.

### **Restoring National Order**

Denise successfully emerges from the store's civilizing mission, her authenticity intact, and proves to be the right match for Mouret. Zola returns to the Orientalist motif to suggest a new national and social order. He stages another exhibition, the "White Sale" of Chapter Fourteen. This scene foreshadows Denise's marriage with Mouret. Unlike the previous salon, described as a harem, the White Sale is replete with references to matrimony and procreation: "On aurait dit un grand lit blanc, dont l'énormité virginale attendait, comme dans les légendes, la princesse blanche, celle qui devait devenir un jour, toute-puissante, avec le voile blanc des épousées" (Zola 1998, 475) [It looked like a great white bed, vast and virginal, awaiting as in legends, for the white princess, for she would one day come, all powerful, in her white bridal. (Zola 2008, 398)]. The White Sale is described in terms

of brilliant light and white, which starkly contrasts with the colorful palette of the Oriental salon. References to the Orient are minimized in favor of a fairy-tale setting of marriage. Sexual desire is finally contained, policed and placed in the service of the nation through matrimony. The White Sale, then, marks the beginning of a modern phase modeled on the Saint-Simonian ideal. It represents the victory of European reason over an irrational Orient, carefully contained within the larger system.

Zola's text suggests that this new phase would not have been possible without Denise's moral mission, which sought to improve the industrial machine. Zola's description is almost a summary of the Saint-Simonian ideal of an egalitarian society based on industry (See Chapter 2). "Parfois, elle s'animait. Elle voyait l'immense bazar idéal [...] où chacun aurait sa part des bénéfices, selon ses mérites [...]. Mourait l'accusait de socialisme" (Zola 1998, 430) [Sometimes, she would become quite excited, imagining a huge, ideal emporium...in which everyone would have a fair share of the profits according to merit [...] [Mouret] would accuse her of socialism" (Zola 2008, 354). As a *première*, Denise restores balance in the store; she introduces innovative social reforms resembling the principles of the civilizing mission. She hosts concerts, creates a library, and offers classes in English, German, geography and mathematics to the workers (Zola 1998, 431). The Orientalized store turns into a school for French culture emulating the centralized system of universal education established during the Third Republic.

With the final union of Denise and Mouret, the emporium becomes the idealized image of the nation. As in Saint-Simonian ideology, the utopia is presided over by a sacerdotal couple: a male and female priest. Both ideas are reflected in the

new relationship between Mouret and Denise. The Saint-Simonian notion of a model society run by a couple was not foreign to the legacy of department stores in France. For instance, both the owners of *La Samaritaine* and *le Bon Marché* promoted their stores as a household managed by a husband and wife; Monsieur and Madame Cognacq advertised their social commitment to their enterprise.



Figure 39: “Two Creators: One Work.” Advertisement for La Samaritaine. Source: Paul Jarry, *Les Magasins de Nouveautés*, pl 5. From Paul Jarry, *Les Magasins de Nouveautés*, pl 5.

The above advertisement for the *Samaritaine* embodies the celebratory image provided by Zola’s text (fig.39). The poster reads: “Two creators, one work.”

Underneath: “In Constant Progress.” In a smaller font “La Samaritaine divides all its revenues between its staff and its social work: Maternity care; Day Nursery; Summer Camps, Nursing Houses; Training Centers; Low-Cost Housing; Retirement Housing; Sanatorium.” Indeed these are among the same social programs which, in the novel, Denise institutes for the workers.

The love story of Denise and Mouret, which takes place in the department store between two sales events, the Oriental sale (set as a harem) and the White Sale (the

wedding trousseau), rewrites a progressive history of the modern transformation of France. Inherent in this idea is a rewriting of gender and social roles, where Denise the worker and Mouret the manager are reconciled to create a utopian vision of the ideal capitalist workplace, each character influencing the other in a moderating way. While Zola does not speak of the Mediterranean per se, his focus on an Oriental trade and material culture made possible by the Suez Canal reveals the strong effect of Saint-Simon's Mediterranean project in shaping the institution of the department store. He also presents two protagonists, Mouret and Denise, whose characters are informed by Saint-Simon's Mediterranean vision of uniting East and West and the stereotypical characteristics associated with these categories, such as desire and reason. They replace a set of "incoherent" factors (the uncontrollable harem, the unsuccessful traditional boutiques), with a systematic "design of forces" (La Blache 1956, 26). On the other hand, this process is not without ambiguity: for Denise's espousal of industrial progress is presented as a submission to "necessity," as making the best of the "inevitable" by infusing it with humanity. Moreover the happy ending of the novel has the "fairy-tale" character of the White Sale's commercial illusionism, concealing a history of violence and calculated manipulations. This new situation is best described in the words of a commercial catalogue from the *Bon Marché*: "La tyrannie des objets est plus grande que nous ne l'imaginons sur nos habitudes, sur l'ordre et le cours de nos pensées intimes." [The tyranny of objects on our habits, on the order and course of our intimate thoughts, is stronger than what we imagine it is] (Détaille 20). Zola's Oriental bazaar which takes over the French metropolis may unwittingly raise the question of whether it is actually the Orient that is consuming France or the opposite.

Also, the reader is left wondering to what extent this new industrialist social ethos ever truly transforms the fantasy or, worse, the exploitation on which, as the Orientalist theme brought out, its success depends.

## Chapter 4

### Shaarawi: Performing the Ideological Work of Gender

قد أعجبتني في بارربيس كل شيء حتى شراسة الأخلاق الرعاعع فييهها... وو مع ذلك فقد تألمت من نتائج  
التطرف في تلك الحرية في بدء عهدي بزيارتها، إذ كنت أظن أن الصغير والكبير من كل طبقة في  
تلك الأمة على جانب عظيم من الرقة و حسن المعاملة.. وو أذكر بهذه المناسبة أنني عندما أرددت لاوول  
مرة زيارته أحد حوانيت بارربيس الكبرى في بيوم حدد لتخفيض الأمان البضائع، ووجدت على أبواب  
الحانوت زحاماً شديداً، فوقفت عند الباب لأمكن بعض الداخلين من المرور مجاملة كما سى عانتنا في  
بلاد الشرق، ظانة أنه سيأتى دورى وو أجد من بين الداخلين من يردد لى تلك المجاملة، وو لكنى لاحظت  
للأسف أنه لم يشعر بوجودى أحد، وو رأيتى مدفوعة بشدة بين تلك الأواج المتلاطمة من الأجسام  
البشرية، تتدفني موجة وو تلاقني أخرى باللحم ووالسير على قدمي فكاددت تنهمر دموعي [...] لما  
وجدت نفسى أمام منضدة محاطة بالمتفرجين [...] وو قد مددت يدي بلطف إلى قطعة من القماش  
أعجبتى، وو لكن سرعان ما الخطفها من يدي الحدى المتفرجات بغلظة حتى كاددت الدموع تفر من  
عيني مرة أخرى [...] مثل هذه الأشياء لم ترقنى الأول الأمر وو لكنى أنتهبت منها إلى أن أفهم أن  
التزام في الحياة سبب نهضة تلك الأمم وو تفوقها، وو أن تسامح الشرق وو رقة شعوره سبب  
تأخره وواضعه (Shaarawi 129).

I liked everything about Paris, even the ferocious manners of the mob.  
However, despite this fact, I was pained by the outcome of extreme liberty at  
the beginning of my visit there. I used to think that the young and the old from  
every class of this nation have a great deal of kindness and good manners... I  
remember that when I wanted to visit one Parisian *grand magasin* during a  
sales event, I found a large crowd at the entrance. So I stood next to the door  
to give way to others, as it is our custom in the East, thinking that my turn  
would come when one of the shoppers would return the courtesy to me.  
Unfortunately, I noticed that no one realized my presence and I found myself  
pushed violently among these stormy waves of human bodies, tossed by a  
wave and received by another with punches and stepping on my feet. I almost  
started to burst in tears. When I found myself before a table surrounded by  
shoppers... and when I extended my arm gently to reach a piece of fabric that I  
liked, one of the shoppers snatched it so aggressively from my hands that I  
almost cried again... In the beginning, I did not like this kind of thing, but I  
ended up understanding that competition in life is the reason for the progress  
and success of nations, and that the tolerance and sensitivity of the East is the  
reason for its decline.<sup>37</sup> (Shaarawi 129)

When Huda Shaarawi stepped into a Parisian department store on a sale day, during the summer of 1909, her experience did not differ from that of the many clients in Émile Zola's novel *Au Bonheur des dames* (Chapter 3). The store swarmed with customers, who conducted their shopping in an aggressive self-absorbed manner. Shaarawi was shocked by the unexpected rude behavior of the Parisian crowd. The store revealed an unfamiliar facet of French culture that she had not learned from her education or her French acquaintances. This, however, was not Shaarawi's first experience in a department store. Eight years earlier, in 1901, she had challenged the social norms for aristocratic Muslim women by shopping for the first time in an Alexandrian department store. Although Egyptian *grands magasins* modeled themselves on their Parisian counterparts, Shaarawi's shopping experience in both cities differed radically from each other. For an aristocratic woman who lived in a traditional Ottoman-Egyptian house and had limited access to public spaces, shopping in Paris was a Darwinian experience, asserting the survival of the fittest. Faced with this intimidating behavior, Shaarawi fled the *grand magasin* and returned to her hotel, acknowledging her inadequacy to confront the French mob. Much like Denise in *Au Bonheur des dames*, she concluded that the store expressed the spirit of the age. She proclaimed her visit a valuable lesson for herself and other Egyptians on the crucial importance of competition for survival. Nevertheless, whereas Zola likened the chaotic space of the department store to an Oriental bazaar and a harem, for Shaarawi, the *magasin* did not recall anything of these places. The store embodied a modern European ethos which, in its aggression, stood at the opposite end of the spectrum from the "kind" temperament of the East. For Zola and Shaarawi, the department store

symbolized progress, but strangely recalled, in each case, the other side of the Mediterranean. And in each case, it was an object of both fascination and repulsion for the heroine, the representation of modernity's excesses and its promise.

In the following chapter, using the epigraph as a guide, I examine the significance of department stores in the writings of Huda Shaarawi, including her Francophone newspaper *L'Egyptienne*. Most studies on Egyptian feminist history and consumerist culture only highlight Shaarawi's early experience in the Alexandrian *grand magasin* Chalon, as the example of a pioneering gesture by a Muslim feminist seeking to assert her presence in public spaces.<sup>38</sup> Shaarawi, however, refers to the department stores more than once in her published Arabic memoirs. Each anecdote crystalizes an important aspect of what she believed to be the role of the modern Egyptian woman during this critical era of Egyptian and European history prior to the Second World War. In addition, Parisian and Egyptian department stores, such as *Bon Marché*, *Galleries Lafayette*, *Printemps*, *Magasin du Louvre*, *Cicurel* and *Chemla*, sponsored her newspaper *L'Egyptienne* and her charity projects<sup>39</sup>. I seek to examine the interconnectedness of Shaarawi's experience in French and Egyptian department stores. By looking at the *grands magasins* across the Mediterranean as spaces enmeshed in a broader social and national discourse informed by British colonialism, French and Ottoman imperialism, and Egyptian nationalism, I seek to shed light on how they informed Shaarawi's world view and her career.

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<sup>38</sup> See Russell, Abaza, Lagrange, and Badran

<sup>39</sup> See *L'Egyptienne*, April 1923, October 126, January 1927



Throughout Shaarawi's life, the *magasin* and the magazine acquired many symbolic meanings and served different functions in the process of crafting a public image and a space for women of her class. Tracking Shaarawi's experiences through her writings, in the department stores on both sides of the Mediterranean, I argue that the department store and the newspaper were spaces in which Shaarawi performed a much needed "ideological work of gender" during the emergence of Egyptian nationalism. According to Mary Poovey, "the ideological work of gender," is the act of embodying for the public an idealized gender role that promotes a specific ideology. She argues that the representation of gender constituted one of the sites on which "ideological systems were simultaneously constructed and contested" (2). Similarly, Shaarawi simultaneously established and redefined modern Egyptian gender roles, especially in relation to spatial practices, while navigating between an emerging Egyptian nationalism, an Ottoman heritage, a French culture and the British occupation.

Returning to the epigraph we can distinguish many elements that will constitute landmarks to guide our understanding of Shaarawi's writings and her experience in the department stores. Shaarawi uses her traumatic incident in the Parisian department store to crystalize for the reader her philosophy of life. In the passage, she reveals a particular geography of her world divided between East and West. This concept resembles the Saint-Simonian Mediterranean confrontation between a masculine Occident and feminine Orient. In her description, Shaarawi becomes an embodiment of that feminine Orient while the aggressive crowd stands for a belligerent Europe. Similarly, she realizes the necessity of competition for crafting

her place as a woman and that of the Egyptian nation both on the national and international levels. Yet, as I will show, in her actual surrounding, Shaarawi encounters multiple versions of East and West that defy this reductive, binary, Saint-Simonian view. On the national level, Shaarawi reorders the city space to counter an economically gendered nineteenth-century model divided into a feminine private sphere and masculine public one. She does this precisely by eliminating the different competitors over national and public space, such as the male patriarch, the eunuch, door-to-door sellers, and prostitutes.

In the following sections, I will first give a brief history of Huda Shaarawi's life. I will then examine the symbolic significance of her visit to the department store and how it shaped her worldview. Finally, I will show how she reclaimed circulation in the city as a normative activity for upper and middle-class Egyptian women by eliminating her competitors for the public space.

### **Life and Career**

Huda Shaarawi (1879-1947), one of the pioneering Egyptian feminists, belonged to an aristocratic Ottoman-Egyptian family. From a young age, she received the typical education for girls belonging to her social stratum. She was tutored in Arabic, Ottoman, Persian, and French. Her father, Omar Pasha Sultan was from the landed gentry, and participated actively in Egypt's political life and the resistance against British colonization (Shaarawi 21). Married to her forty-year-old cousin, Shaarawi Pasha, at the age of thirteen, she discovered the injustice of traditional customs, which sanction the marriage of minor girls. At fourteen, she separated from

her husband for a period of seven years (1893-1900), during which she cultivated her knowledge of the arts, music, and French and Arabic literature. After resuming her marital life, Shaarawi became an active feminist and politician. She strategically began her political career by organizing philanthropic projects and, through her writings and association with the leading Al-Wafd party, she built a strong presence on the political stage. Having founded the Egyptian Feminist Union, she reached the height of her career when she was elected vice-president of the International Alliance of Women (Badran 135). In 1923, she led the Egyptian delegation to the international feminist summit in Rome, the only Muslim and Near Eastern group to join this event. Upon their arrival in Cairo, Shaarawi and her colleagues greeted the waiting crowds unveiled to mark a new phase and project a new image of the Egyptian woman (Lanfranchi 98).

Shaarawi's memoirs were published posthumously, in 1981, from a manuscript provided by her secretary, Abd-al Hamid Fahmi Mursi. The work appeared under the title *Mudhakkarat ra'idat al-Mar'ah al-Hadithah: Huda Shaarawi*, or *Memoirs of the pioneer modern woman: Huda Shaarawi*. The book recounts her personal experience and her political journey. It starts with the first major demonstration against the Egyptian Khedive in 1882 and the death of her father two years later. The work includes anecdotes, diary entries, articles from newspapers and magazines, briefings from her political party meetings, and speeches conducted in several locations in Egypt and abroad. The memoirs conclude abruptly in 1935, twelve years prior to her death, with a banal announcement of her cousin's wedding. Among the many events that are documented in the memoirs are her impressions of department stores in both Paris and Egypt and her conferences around the globe.

## **The World According to the Space of the Department Store**

### **The Department Store and the Universal Plight of Women**

Throughout her life, Shaarawi grounded the negotiation of gender and civic roles within spatial practices. As a young girl, she crafted her own freedom by reclaiming the predominantly male spaces inside her household. After her father's death, she frequently stole the keys to her father's library from her younger brother, asking the two girls of her age who lived in the house to keep watch by the door for Said Agha, the house eunuch (46). The garden of the house constituted another site over which she competed with her brother. While it served as a barrier, the garden also marked the encounter with the rest of the world. She designated it as a space of adventure where gender roles were temporarily suspended. She was constantly criticized for staying for long hours in the garden, in contrast to her brother who remained inside. Through the fence, she stealthily bought Arabic books from ambulant booksellers and fashioned a different connection to knowledge from that created and monitored by her family and her tutors (Shaarawi 50). When she was married, at the age of thirteen, the garden was leveled to make space for the wedding venue. The morning after her wedding night, Huda lamented the destruction of the garden: "I wept over my trees and I wept over my childhood"(Shaarawi 77).<sup>40</sup> The destroyed garden reflected her traumatic experience, a realization of a lost childhood and her condition as an aristocratic Egyptian woman of that era.

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<sup>40</sup> My translation

It was indeed her first impression of department stores that encouraged her to resituate her condition as a woman within a larger context. The first account of department stores did not involve her personal experience of shopping. She recalls the story of her neighbor and friend, Louissette, the daughter of a high-ranking French officer, who fell in love with a salesclerk and eloped to France. After discovering her fiancé's infidelity, Louissette returned to Egypt, but did not receive her father's forgiveness. She worked as a governess and finally died miserably from fever. This early vicarious experience represented a significant development in Shaarawi's personal and political life. Lanfranchi, Shaarawi's granddaughter, writes:

The death of Louissette [...] brought home to her [Huda] the fact that her predicament was not entirely due to the oriental environment of Egypt in which she lived. The plight of women, she saw, was the same all over the world. But this meant that it was susceptible to improvement, in Egypt as elsewhere. She began to think, at first inarticulately, in terms of what would later come to be called a feminist approach to women's problems and rights. (Lanfranchi 26)

Through this experience, Shaarawi recognized the elements of a universal feminist cause which she would pursue throughout her career. She considered Louissette's tragic situation, her fall into the temptation of the department store, an indictment for a patriarchal system that sought to protect its social and material status by imposing extreme restrictions on daughters (Shaarawi 89). This recognition of a universal struggle for women would become one of the initial objectives of *L'Égyptienne*, established in 1925, which sought to create a specific place and image for the Egyptian woman within that broader context. It sought to express a universal solidarity and engage with feminists in France and around the world.

### **The Department Store and a Saint-Simonian Mediterranean Geography**

If Shaarawi's dyadic vision of the world recalls Zola's representation of the store according a feminine East and a masculine West, it is probably due to the Saint-Simonian influence in Shaarawi's upbringing. Some of her family's friends, such as the Richards, who took care of her as a child, were Saint-Simonians. In her speech at the American University in Cairo in 1929, Shaarawi acknowledges the impact of Saint-Simonism by praising its role in changing women's social roles and by thanking her Saint-Simonian friends (Lanfranchi 180). In her description, quoted earlier, of herself in the store, which emphasizes her docility and gentleness, Shaarawi's body becomes a metonymy of the East while the aggressive "stormy waves of humans" embody the West. Interestingly, the image she uses to describe the crowd is that of a "sea".

In many incidents Shaarawi uses the same categorical definitions of East and West distinguishable from each other by the Saint-Simonian criteria of technological advancement and order. Crossing the Mediterranean on her route to France for a vacation, Shaarawi stops at Naples, Marseilles, and Lyons. For her, the Orient reached as far as Marseilles. In Naples and Marseilles, she "did not feel at a distance from the East" (Shaarawi 124). In Naples, she recognizes ambulant sellers, naked children, beggars, women sitting by their house entrance combing their hair, and clotheslines stretching between houses, and sometimes between streets (Shaarawi 124). For her, Marseilles was a commercial city, buzzing with activity; its people's customs were also very similar to those who lived in Eastern ports. On the other hand, Lyons figures as "a strictly European city, which recalled nothing from the East" (Shaarawi 126). For

Shaarawi, Lyons is a city of commerce, industry, science, and well-organized stores (Shaarawi 126.) The borders of the West begin with the first signs of industrialization, technological advancement and modern trade.

The symbolic Saint-Simonian perspective of the Suez Canal as a connection between East and West represented a significant value which Shaarawi upheld throughout her life. For her, *L'Égyptienne* symbolized the same connection as the Canal, a “‘trait-d’union entre l’Orient et l’Occident’ [a link between East and West]” (Lanfranchi 165). The iconography of the magazine cover, which presented a woman in a traditional dress, aimed to be a rendition of Mahmoud Mukhtar’s famous statue *Le Réveil de l’Égypte, Nahdet Misr* (fig15 and 6). In this context, the image of the native Egyptian woman on the cover of a Francophone magazine, symbolizing the nation’s renaissance and connecting East and West also resonates with Bartholdi’s original project “Egypt Carrying Light to Asia” (fig 5).

In a similar Saint-Simonian gesture anchored in material culture, Shaarawi decides to redecorate her house to express the connection between the East and West. She hires the Italian architect Antonio Lasciac to take charge of the design. The new house was to be called “Bayt al-Masriyah” [the Household of the Egyptian Woman]. The new setting was inspired by her visit to the entrepreneur and Arabist Charles Crane’s house in the United States. Crane, who was fond of the East, decorated his house with Eastern artifacts collected during his travels (Lanfranchi 135). It was his oriental décor that inspired Shaarawi to create a distinctively Orientalist one, unusual for a modern Egyptian house. Lasciac was asked to create a reception area with interconnected “French” and “Oriental” salons symbolizing the magazine. Describing

the new house, Sania Shaarawi Lanfranchi writes: “[Syrian painted] carved wood was chosen for the ceiling, doors and shutters [...] doors inset with ivory, as well as huge brass chandeliers, marble columns, marble floors and fountains, and Turkish ceramics” (Lanfranchi 165). “This famous Oriental Salon, as it became to be known,” communicated with another salon in the “purest Western style with sofas and gilded armchairs of the Louis XV period, [and] a beautiful piano” (Lanfranchi 165-167). The connecting hallway was also decorated in Oriental style with “boxed-in painted planks for the ceiling, endless carpets and huge brass chests, with sofas nonchalantly covered with tapestries and cushions that smacked of the *Thousand and One Nights*” (Lanfranchi 167).

By remodeling her house, Shaarawi reenacted *L’Egyptienne* which in its turn mirrored the connection between East and West promoted by Saint-Simonian topology and its universal values, and realized in the Suez Canal. Lanfranchi adds “The houses needed to become a symbol of freedom of speech and justice, not only in Egypt, but also in the whole world. She would use it to reinforce relations between people of good will” (165). The connected salons “demonstrated how differences could be reconciled, and generated a sense of harmony between the two worlds” (Lanfranchi 167). The setting became complete with a gift exchange that strangely echoed Saint-Simonian ideology. During a trip to Cairo, Charles Crane receives a *hawdaj*, a camel saddle,” from Shaarawi. In return, he offers her an elevator for the new residence, introducing as such modern technology to the Oriental house.

From another perspective, Shaarawi’s theatrical setting echoes the Orientalist settings of both fictional and real department stores. We have seen in Chapter 3 how



Gustave Mouret incorporates the Oriental salon into the modern, technologically advanced Parisian department store in Zola's *Au bonheur des dames*. Likewise, this contrast between East and West in material culture and décor is manifest in many commercial catalogues distributed by the Parisian *grands magasins*. For instance, in 1913, *Au Bon Marché* published its yearly furniture catalogue entitled "The Orient offered by les *grands Magasins, Bon Marché*."



Figure 40. Rug collection. Illustration of Gerôme's trip to Egypt. Catalogue *Bon Marché*, "L'Orient offert par le Bon Marché," 1913. Source: Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Fol. 4- WZ- 13721



Figure 41. Second section of the catalogue displaying French furniture. Catalogue *Bon Marché*, "L'Orient offert par le Bon Marché," 1913. Source: Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Fol. 4- WZ- 13721

The layout of the catalogues hinges on a geographical and aesthetic dichotomy between East and West expressed through furniture items, which should be brought together in the French household. Typically the catalogue creates a metonymic relation between the marketed product, the rugs, and the referred space. The theme for 1913 was the painter Gérôme's trip to Egypt. Capitalizing on Orientalist imagery, the writer's description of the rugs "that crossed the sea" refer directly to the *Arabian Nights*. In contrast, the second part of the same catalogue shifts the focus from the Orient to France. It exhibits a set of distinctively French-style furniture – Louis XV, Louis XVI, and Empire — that should adorn the bourgeois household. Going through the catalogue from one end to the other resembles a visitor's experience to Shaarawi's house moving from the Oriental salon to the European one.

### **Many Easts and Many Wests**

Despite this Oriental-Occidental dyad, Shaarawi's background and society exhibited much more complex connections beyond these two categories. Living among three empires and an emerging Egyptian nationalism Shaarawi occupied a world comprised of many Easts and many Wests. Although she identified as an Egyptian woman, her memoirs reveal a multilayered view of national and cultural belonging, which starkly contradicts the Saint-Simonian worldview. Born to an affluent Egyptian father and a Circassian mother, she had ties to Egyptian, Ottoman and Circassian cultures. Although Egypt was under British occupation, it remained a semi-autonomous state, with the Egyptian Khedive pledging his allegiance to the Porte

until the dissolution of the empire.<sup>41</sup> Many of the Egyptian-Ottoman families affirmed their ties to the Ottoman Empire. Shaarawi's education resembled that of the Turkish-Ottoman elite in the capital –classical Arabic, Turkish, Farsi and French—which reinforced the symbolic bond between the two groups. Her memoirs show the vitality of this connection, when the author explains that her maternal relatives insisted on living in Anatolia “to keep the family's name alive” (Shaarawi 36). Lanfranchi suggests that in her writings Shaarawi lamented the fall of the Ottoman Empire which divided the Orient among the French, the British and the Spanish. In an article of 1925 published in *L'Egyptienne*, entitled “Appel à l'Occident” [Appeal to the Occident], Shaarawi writes:

[L]'Orient [...] souffre, l'Orient qui saigne [...] seul attire en ce moment toute ma sympathie et toute mon attention. C'est le Rif mis à feu et à sang par les troupes espagnoles et française; c'est la Syrie en révolte par les massacres de Damas: C'est la Palestine et l'Irak où depuis le mandat anglais sur ces pays ne cessent de régner la discorde et la haine entre populations de différentes cultes. C'est l'Arabie divisée. (Shaarawi 1925, 328)

The East is suffering, the Orient is bleeding, and it alone draws all my sympathy and all my attention. It is the Rif set on fire and bathed in blood by the Spanish and French troops; it is Syria in revolt by the massacres in Damascus; it is Palestine and Iraq where, ever since the British mandate was established, there has been no end to the discord and hatred between populations that follow different creeds. It is Arabia divided. (Trans. qtd. in Lanfranchi 140)

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<sup>41</sup> Khedive is the Farsi word for Prince, which was given to Mehmet Ali and his descendants, the last Egyptian ruling dynasty. This title was given by the Porte to the Ottoman Albanian commander Mehmet Ali to denote his hereditary rights over Egypt. While Egypt was part of the Ottoman Empire, Mehmet Ali had defeated the sultan and taken control of the Levant at the Battle of Nezib in 1839. In 1840 the British prevented any further advance. The negotiations involved limiting the Egyptian army in exchange for Egyptian autonomy, under the rule Mehmet Ali's family. From 1801 to 1915, Egypt was semi-autonomous, but still had to pledge allegiance to the Ottoman Porte. In 1882, Britain declared Egypt a protectorate and, after World War I, a colony. Between 1882 and 1919, Egypt fell, in practice, under the rule of both the British and the Ottomans (Roberts 7).

The article does not clearly refer only to the Ottoman Empire, but alludes to its tragic end as the background for the current colonial situation. Shaarawi, however, directly refers to “Arabia” as a totalizing category. In the process of denouncing European imperialism, she simultaneously constructs a pan-Arab geography made of the dismembered regions of the Ottoman Empire and North Africa.

This identification with the Ottoman Empire and allusion to a pan-Arab identity was not by any means seamless. Shaarawi’s maternal grandfather was a Circassian military leader who died defending his region against the Russian army (Shaarawi 35:38). Many Circassians, like Shaarawi’s grandmother, only became Ottoman subjects after seeking shelter in Anatolia. The situation of Circassians in Egypt was equally complex and vital for the ruling class. The exchange of Circassian slaves, such as Shaarawi’s mother, Iqbal Hanum, served to consolidate the ties between the Ottoman and Egyptian elites (Badran 11). The tension between her Circassian background, the Ottoman Empire, and Egyptian nationalism comes to light when she mentions the Orabi uprising of 1882 against the Khedive. Shaarawi supported Orabi, who aimed, in her words, to rebel against “a handful of Circassians” who monopolized the upper ranks of the Egyptian army (Shaarawi 18).

To make the situation even more complex, Shaarawi admired the new Turkish state with its modernization project and defended it in her French magazine. In 1935, she met Kemal Atatürk during a feminist convention in Istanbul. She prided herself on being the only one who did not need an interpreter and praised him as “the father of the East” (Shaarawi 454). Ironically, this particular feminist convention was held in the famous Topkapi seraglio overlooking the Bosphorus. Obviously, this symbolic act

was meant to redress, if not erase, the gender history of the Ottoman Empire, by highlighting the modern condition of Turkish women (Shaarawi 453-454).

Shaarawi's connection to Arabic culture was equally divided between a classical tradition and a modern one. Whereas the author was encouraged to read and recite the Koran, she was not allowed as a child to learn proper Arabic grammar. When she asked her tutor to be treated on equal footing with her brother, and to be taught grammar, her caregiver, Said Agha, confiscated the grammar book and announced to the tutor: "Miss Huda will never be a lawyer one day" (Shaarawi 43). Although memorizing the Koran projected an image of purity for the female aristocrat, a secular Arabic language presented a threat to patriarchy. For Said Agha, no proper lady would have to learn Arabic grammar, since she does not need to participate in the public sphere. He specifically associates this education with the preparation for becoming a lawyer. As a "proper lady" Shaarawi should be able to converse and read in three languages, but her linguistic skills in Arabic should remain divided between the Egyptian dialect and the Koranic register. Restricting the teaching of Arabic grammar is in itself an act of gender segregation, since it creates an obstacle between the Ottoman-Egyptian aristocratic woman and the public which hinders her from negotiating her legal rights.

In the same manner, the West was not a single category in Shaarawi's life and it is particularly that fact that fueled her anticolonial resistance. The rivalry between the French and British empires was a key factor in her campaigns. A large number of her political articles were written in French for that purpose. In 1919, the first revolution against the occupation in which women participated, Shaarawi held picket

signs in Arabic and French to communicate her message to the different communities in Egypt and to foreign journalists (Shaarawi 188). The duality between the Empires and languages as a platform for communication comes out when, during the demonstrations, Shaarawi sends a telegram to Lady Brunette, Field Marshall Allenby's wife, to decry the violence committed by British soldiers. Lady Brunette ignored the message and intimated to her friends that she could not make sense of what Shaarawi said (Shaarawi 187). Lady Brunette's remarks silenced Shaarawi by transforming her into an inarticulate colonized subject whose language was devoid of any rationality and meaning.

With the channels of communication with the colonizer blocked, French became a strategic language used to create a platform and recruit supporters for the Egyptian cause. This was one of the main reasons why Shaarawi chose to found *l'Égyptienne* as an alternative connection to Europe beyond the grasp of the English occupier. It aimed to establish a distinct image of Egypt by introducing the French readers to Egyptian cultural and political life (Lanfranchi 149).<sup>42</sup> In the first issue of the magazine, the editors define their mission:

En fondant cette revue dans une langue qui n'est pas la nôtre, mais qui est en Egypte comme ailleurs est parlée par toute l'Élite notre but est double: faire connaître à l'étranger la Femme Egyptienne, telle qu'elle est de nos jours—quitte à lui enlever tout le mystère et le charme que sa réclusion passée lui prêtait aux yeux des occidentaux—et éclairer l'opinion publique européenne sur le véritable état politique et social de l'Égypte. (2)

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<sup>42</sup> The magazine was originally the idea of Valentine de Saint Point, the great grand-niece of the renowned French poet Lamartine. Valentine was a rebellious, eccentric character. She was a writer, a dancer and a model. She was a friend of Marinetti and supported enthusiastically the Futurist movement. Shaarawi, however, gave the editorship to her friend and colleague Céza Nabaraoui while de Saint Point established her own magazine, *Le Phénix* (Lanfranchi 127).

By founding this magazine in a language that is not ours, but it that is spoken in Egypt as elsewhere by the Elite, we have a double purpose: to introduce the foreigner to the Egyptian Woman, like she is nowadays—risking to lift all the mystery and charm that her past reclusion endowed her in the eyes of Westerners, and enlighten the European public on the real political and social situation in Egypt. (2)<sup>43</sup>

*L'Egyptienne* remained in operation for fifteen years and attracted many key French feminist activists, such as Juliette Adam, Maria Vérone President of the French League for Women's Rights, Avrile de Saint Croix, President of the National Council of French Women. In their participation in *l'Egyptienne*, the writers denounced the British occupation, the annexation of Sudan, and supported the boycott of British commodities (Lanfranchi 129).

During the period of her anticolonial resistance, Shaarawi used the network of department stores, in addition to her magazine, to support her nationalist cause. Hoping to participate in developing local industries, she founded a workshop for ceramics and carpets. The products were displayed in *Bon Marché* in both Cairo and Paris, and were also sold in Constantinople, Washington and New York (Lanfranchi 150). An advertisement from *Bon Marché* referred to Shaarawi's workshop as well as their own atelier located in Cairo (*L'Egyptienne* 2.14, March 1926)

This attachment to the French language, however, waned as Shaarawi realized that the French colonization of Greater Syria did not differ greatly from the oppressive hands of British occupation (Lanfranchi 182). Gradually, she directed her focus to the Egyptian and Arab speaking audience, for whom she established an Arabic Magazine, *Al-Masriyah* (1940), *The Egyptian Woman*, and Finally *Al-Mar'a al-Arabiyah* (1947),

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<sup>43</sup> My Translation. From *L'Egyptienne*, January 1925, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Microfilm

*The Arab Woman* (Lanfranchi 274). This new direction also synchronized with the growth of Egyptian nationalism and Pan-Arabism, which would reach a peak in the 1950's after Egyptian independence. Shaarawi, however, did not witness the end of British occupation and Nasser's Egypt since she died in 1947.

### Competing with the Crowd: Reordering the Social Body

One of the most revealing examples of Shaarawi's fascination with urban space in shaping the social body is her description of Paris during the same trip of 1909.

وو باررييس سى الصفحة المنشورة من سجل تاريخ الفرنسيين، حيث يشب الفرنسي في ألية بيئة ملماً منذ  
نعومة أظافره بتاريخ بلده، قبل أن يدخل المدارس وو يتعلم سدا التاريخ في الكتب. وو لذلك تراا  
فخوراً بتاريخها المجيد حريصاً على خلوند سدا المجد وو ليس سدا فحسب بل ترى الشعب الفرنسي  
ييطونف بكل القصور التاريخية وودوور الأثار ووالعلم ووالمتاحف الفنية ووالكنائس وو المعابد التي تفتح له  
أبوابها في أيام  
العطلات. (Shaarawi 129)

Paris is the wide-open page of French history books. A French citizen would grow up in any environment and would be familiar from an early age with his country's history, before going to school or reading in history books. For this reason, you find the French proud of their glorious history and keen to perpetuate this glory. Not only this but also you could observe the French people circulate by all the historic palaces, the archeological sites and centers of learning, art museums, churches, synagogues which open their doors to the public during vacations.<sup>44</sup>(Shaarawi 129)

Shaarawi cannot hide her fascination with Haussmann's capital. Paris figures as a readable text, an official history book crucial to civic education, a school covering a wide range of topics, including the arts, history, religion, and the sciences. Her reference to young children growing up learning their history from their surrounding spaces and being shaped by that emphasizes the central role she gave to urban planning as an instrument of "biopower" in the Foucaultian sense, that is as the

<sup>44</sup>

My translation



establishment of national sovereignty through the control of the population via the diverse educational and disciplinary institutions (Foucault 140). In her description, circulation in the capital constitutes a permanent pedagogical act that translates the cityscape into a progressive national narrative accessible for everyone regardless of background. Visiting the different cultural institutions becomes a ritual for national integration and a self-motivated learning mission overseen by the citizens themselves. Her description, “الصفحة المنشورة” [“wide-open page,” meaning also “published page” of French history] highlights the controlled and censored aspect of that educational mission whose first priority is to ensure the perpetuation of the nation-state.

This new civic education provided by the city is paralleled by a similar process in the department store. Shaarawi describes her first experience of watching employees modeling the latest trends for the clientele

وو كم عجت عندما رأيت محلات الأزياء الكبرى تعرض الملابس على فتيات جميلات أنيقات و لم يكن سداا العرض لمجرد الترغيب في شراء الملابس، بل فيه دروس للمشتريه تمكنها من تمييز ما يلائم هذه الملابس من باقى اللوازم التى تحتاجها لتكملة أناقة الملابس. (Shaarawi 127)

I was surprised when I saw some of the established *grands magasins* employ beautiful and elegant girls to model their clothes. This show was not simply to promote the sales of the merchandise, but was a lesson for the buyer who could then recognize the necessary accessories to complete her outfit<sup>45</sup>. (Shaarawi 127)

Shaarawi admires the pedagogical aspect of modeling which she considers part of a mission that surpasses the promotional strategies of the store. Through this early version of a fashion show, she witnesses the democratization of consumerist culture and its consolidation into a homogenous system that promotes the image of the

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<sup>45</sup> My translation

bourgeoisie. By “educating the shopper” through fashion, the department store becomes another regulatory measure that corrects and shapes the subject. In Shaarawi’s words it makes “beautiful and elegant girls.” Whereas, in Zola’s account, the educative lesson provided by the department store posed a challenge for the French ruling class, who saw the employees emulating the taste and customs of the elites (see Chapter 3), Shaarawi, as an outsider, does not question the difference between her status as a *bourgeoise* and the workers, since she is part of a different social system. Instead, the significance of the experience for her stems from the fact that it performed the “ideological work of gender” central to shaping a homogenous society by “modeling” a specific image of the French woman which was possible for the public emulate.

That the city and the department stores become sites of education and key factors in civic education is of crucial importance to Shaarawi’s generation of women on whose shoulders was suddenly placed the future of the nation. During the same era, criticism of the harem became a leading debate central to Egypt’s anticolonial struggle. In his book *Modern Egypt*, Evelyn Baring, Earl of Cromer, justifies British occupation as a necessary resort to bring Egyptians into modernity. He associates women’s seclusion—namely the harem, and the veil—with the deterioration of their influence. He sees this as a major cause of the decline of Eastern societies:

Inasmuch as women, in their capacities as wives and mothers, exercise a great influence over the characters of their husbands and sons, it is obvious that the seclusion of women must produce a deteriorating effect on the male population, in whose interests the custom was originally established, and is still maintained...Moslem women in Egypt are secluded, and ... their influence, partly by reason of their seclusion, is, in all political and administrative matters, generally bad. (Baring 155: 157)

In the typical British view of the time, Baring defines women's role as that of wife and mother. However, he also attributes to them, as wives and mothers, a crucial influence on their husbands and sons, an influence which their seclusion in the harem prevents from being positive. Cut off from the world, they have no way of arriving at informed views on politics, society, and administration, of hearing both sides of a debate.

Baring presents the Ottoman tradition of the harem as a cause of Egyptian degeneracy and backwardness. He predicates the rise of a modern Egyptian nation on women's mobility, and civic and cultural education. The same idea was integrated within the early views of Egyptian feminism. Qassim Amin, a leading proponent of women's rights whom Shaarawi admired greatly, published his famous, at the time controversial, book, *The Liberation of Women*, in 1900. Amin places "the liberation of women" at the center of national responsibility, by tracing a direct relationship between women's status and national progress: "This evidence of history confirms and demonstrates that the status of women is inseparably tied to the status of a nation.

When the status of the nation is low, reflecting an uncivilized condition for that nation, the status of women is also low" (Amin 1992, 6). Amin's words create a teleology that collapses the distinction between "nation" and "women," in the sense that, shaping Egyptian women becomes equivalent to shaping the nation. It is not surprising that, after Shaarawi's experience in the French department store, she saw herself as an embodiment of the Orient and the nation, one whose own behavior would directly affect national progress.

In the same vein as Baring, Amin's argument reconstructs the role of women in Egyptian society on the nineteenth-century European model. He argues for the reform of the traditional Egyptian family and relocates the key role for women as mothers and managers of the household. This position, as he explained, did not conform to the contemporary domestic role of women, which he saw as limited to serving the husband and children instead having actual control over the house and the children's education (Shaarawi 471). The emphasis on developing social skills and civic knowledge necessary for raising a strong new generation of men and participating in the political future of the nation, especially in the absence an educational program, makes social space a crucial element for ensuring progress for women. Circulating in the city and watching the crowd become two of the few resources available to bourgeois Egyptian women to learn about their world. For this reason, Shaarawi transforms shopping trips, like her travels, into lessons that enable her to create a view of the world based on actual observation and experience.

In this context, this new duty for women required the concretization of a public image of the modern bourgeois Egyptian woman, who was hidden by the harem, and which would function as a reference and role model for the rest of the society. Throughout her life, Shaarawi herself struggled to find in her immediate surroundings a female role model that could embody a less restricted lifestyle. In her memoirs, she mentions only two non- Egyptian symbolic figures: first, a distant Circassian cousin, a warrior who fought alongside Shaarawi's grandfather during the Crimean war (Shaarawi 38). This cousin represented a remote heritage in which women lived in a more egalitarian society. Second, Jeanne d'Arc, after visiting the village where Jeanne

was buried (Shaarawi 139). These two female warrior figures provide insight into Shaarawi's feminine imaginary and her ideal of female militancy. Perhaps the absence of a significant symbolic figure is what made her center *L'Egyptienne* on pictures and articles on Egyptian women, past and present (see Chapter 2). Also perhaps this motivated her to fill that void by becoming a public model herself, performing in this way "the ideological work of gender." A large part of Shaarawi's work and her activism was the product of collaboration among many individuals. Her social reform program was inspired by the work of the late Malak Hefni Nassef, who wrote under the pen-name bahithat al badiya and refused to appear on the public stage (Lanfranchi 46-47). The iconic moment of unveiling before the crowds was initially instigated by her friend and colleague Céza Nabarawi who accompanied her to the convention and edited *l'Egyptienne* (Lanfranchi 97). This is not to undermine her significant contribution, but to emphasize that, in addition to her leadership, Shaarawi symbolically became the recognizable, unveiled face of the Egyptian Muslim *bourgeoise* necessary for setting a modern role model, including shopping in the department store and participating in national politics.

### **Wresting the Social Body from British Women's Control**

Setting a role model for Egyptian women, Shaarawi called for social reforms that involved the reordering and the regulation of the entire social body, such as establishing schools and hospitals. She founded a workshop, a clinic (dar el islah [reform house]) and a museum for hygiene as a pedagogical site for the poor. In doing so, Shaarawi's projects integrated the strategies of biopower as a part of the modern

Egyptian “ideological work of gender,” justifying and consolidating simultaneously the presence of the bourgeois in public spaces. Having founded the first Egyptian charity organization “mabarrat Mohamed Ali,” Shaarawi wrested public charity work from the hand of British women (Lanfranchi 42). The new social organization transferred this type of control over social space and the poor to Egyptian bourgeois women. Shaarawi, for instance, established a legion of young upper-class girls, “les cadettes,”[the younger sisters] who participated in charity work across the city. The cadettes were a new generation of Egyptian women who embodied the new model of Egyptian bourgeois women, traveling across the city “dispensing soap, detergents, and medicines for the most deprived districts of Cairo,” serving and domesticating rest of the city (Lanfranchi 109).

The progressive philosophy of the department store as a civic institution and the centrality of material culture in the education of Egyptian women and in the shaping of their modern image would be even more patent with the next generation of feminists, like Doria Shafik, who began under the tutelage of Shaarawi. While Shaarawi used the magazine and the *magasin* simultaneously for her campaigns, in Shafik’s project the two institutions merge into one. In her magazine, *La Femme nouvelle*, the borders collapse between the material culture of the *magasin* and the magazine as platforms of representation and an educational mission. She writes:

La revue *La Femme nouvelle* n’est pas une entité isolée. Elle n’existe pas uniquement par elle-même ou pour elle-même. Elle fait partie d’un grand Tout qui lui fait dépasser ses propres limites. Elle est et demeure essentiellement le porte-parole de l’*Oeuvre* “La Femme Nouvelle”; oeuvre dont les activités multiples prennent de jour en jour de plus vastes proportions. (Shafik 13)

The magazine *La Femme nouvelle* is not an isolated entity. It does not exist solely by itself and for itself. It is part of a larger whole that makes it surpass its own limits. It is and will remain essentially the spokesperson for the *project* “La Femme Nouvelle,” a project whose numerous activities every day take on vaster proportions. (Shafik 13)<sup>46</sup>

In addition to the French magazine as an international platform for the Egyptian woman and an educational resource, Shafik’s magazine is part of a larger philanthropic foundation aiming to revolutionize the society. Using the distinctive progressive language of the department store, Shafik describes her magazine as a mission that seeks to educate Egyptian women, leading to a full renaissance. The description of the ever-expanding magazine’s operations, reaching new proportions, strikingly resembles the many messages advertised by the *Bon Marché* and the *Samaritaine* (see Chapter 3 fig 7). The magazine’s work is similarly anchored in consumerism and the transmission of European material culture to Egyptian society. The larger organization of *La Femme nouvelle* includes a school which brings experts in fashion and hairdressing to prepare their students for a profession as seamstresses and hair stylists. Shafik affirms that this mission will expand across Egypt and will add many other institutions: a nursing school, a workshop, a daycare center and a retirement house.

While Shaarawi’s other experiences may have allowed her to perceive and negotiate with a particular social and national order, her experience in the Alexandrian department store aimed specifically to reconstruct the city space into a modern European socio-economic model where women take charge of the private sphere.

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<sup>46</sup> My emphasis and translation

.. وو فى الألكندرية وو فى سدا الصيف بالذات...كانت لى أوولل تجربة من نوعها..فقد قررت  
أذن أشتري لوازى بنفسى من المحلات الكبيرة.. بالرغم من تذمر «سعيد أغا» ررغم  
المتعاض أسل المنزل من سده الخطوة وودسشتهم من سده الخطوة وو تحدثهم عنها وو كأنى قد  
خالفت قوانين الشريعة..وكان على أذن أصحاب ووصيفاتي وو سعيد أغا لأنه لا يلبق التوجهه  
بمفردىي. وو كان على أذن أسدل أزرارى على حاجى وو أذن ألتف بحيب لا يظهه من شعري وو  
ملايسى أى شىء. وو عندما دخلنا المحل، ندسش الموظفون والمشترون من سده المطاسر الغير  
مألوفة، وو خاصة عندما رأوا الأغا يحمل بنظراته الحادة فى رجوه الناس و كأنه يحذرهم من  
النظر اليه. ثم اندفع نحو أحدى مديري الأقسام يسأله فى لهفة وحادثة : ألا بيوجد عندكم محل  
للحريم؟ فأشار له إالى قسم السيدات. وواددوا على الفتيات البائعات لبيوليين خدمتي بعد أذن  
ووضعن حاجزين يحولل بيىي وو بيىي الموجودين. (Shaarawi 88)

In Alexandria, in this particular summer, I had the first experience of its kind when I decided to buy things by myself from the *grands magasins* despite Said Agha's objections and my family's aversion to, and surprise at, this step. They talked about it as though I had transgressed Islamic (shari'a) laws [...]. And I was asked to bring along my maidens and Said Agha because it was inappropriate to go alone. I had to drop my veil (izar) over my face and cover myself so nothing from my hair or my clothes would show. When we stepped inside the store, this unusual sight startled the workers and customers, especially when they saw the eunuch giving them sharp looks as if he was threatening them against looking at us. Then he dashed toward a department manager asking him in one breath: 'do you have a store [place] for women?' So he pointed toward the women's department. They called the female vendors to assist me after they have placed two screens between the others and me. (Shaarawi 88)

Shaarawi's visit was a series of embarrassing incidents ending with an argument between Said Agha and a female vendor who dared to ask him about Shaarawi's family's name and origins. Shaarawi's visit to the Alexandrian department store bears no relation to her experience in France. In Paris she shopped unveiled, as many aristocratic women did during their travels in Europe (Lagrange 2009, 236). She did not have a designated place for her and could not capture the attention of the other customers. In contrast, in Alexandria, she had to uphold all signs of her refined status as an Ottoman-Egyptian aristocrat. She was at the center of attention, totally covered, accompanied by an entourage, led by a eunuch and assisted by employees. Said Agha almost recreated a harem for her inside the store by asking the managers to surround



her with screens. Reflecting on the Parisian experience, Shaarawi highlights the importance of competition for survival. Her trip to the Alexandrian store was actually the first step in engaging in that competition with other people who controlled the women of her class or competed with them for the public space. Her account of her experience in Alexandria highlights the fact that it convinces her mother of the economic value of shopping without an intermediate sales agent, which motivated her mother and other relatives to accompany her on later trips. This decision also eliminated the need to be chaperoned by the eunuch.

Most importantly, Shaarawi's decision to shop in the Alexandrian department store coincides with her husband's and family's pressure to return to her husband after seven years of separation. Shaarawi's husband, who controlled the family's wealth, refused to provide her with any money unless she reconciled with him. Some family members tried to persuade her by claiming that her husband might resort to legal action to force her to return to him, as Egyptian law dictates (Shaarawi 86). Shaarawi, however, procured a sum of money from her mother and traveled to Alexandria. At the beginning of the paragraph, she emphasizes that her shopping trip was "in that particular summer " which suggests that it was a response to her husband's attempt to limit her mobility.

Going to public spaces was not necessarily uncommon for Shaarawi. As early as 1886, she frequently attended events at the Opera House with her friends (Lanfranchi 22). The department store as a marketplace represented a transgression not only of the public space but also of the male's economic control. Out-al-Kouloub's novel, *Ramza* (1958), sheds light on the situation of Shaarawi and other members of

her social class. Out-al-kouloub was also an aristocratic Egyptian Francophone woman who published her books in France. The novel begins in the late nineteenth-century, precisely around 1877, the date of the Ottoman abolition of slavery, and takes the reader across several decades. The eponymous protagonist tells her story to a female writer belonging to a new generation of Muslim women, who now reap the fruit of the previous generation's struggle against oppression:

C'était à l'époque où de grands magasins venaient de s'ouvrir au Caire, et je me souviens encore de la joie que j'eus en recevant une robe de soie rouge de chez Pascal, une jaquette sport du Dé Rouge et une ombrelle...chez Omar Effendi. Je ne connaissais ces magasins que pour être passée devant eux, en voiture, aux rares occasions où l'on me conduisit dans ces quartiers du Mousky, de L'ezbekieh ou de Wagh el Birka...je n'y étais jamais entrée, non plus qu'aucune dame ou jeune fille de la société d'alors. Les vendeuses venaient à domicile... Pour une faveur particulière et contraire aux coutumes, mon père me consulta pour ces achats. Oh ! Ce n'était jamais directement, mais je trouvais, comme par hasard, des catalogues, et d'un trait de crayon, je marquais ce qui me plaisait (Out-el-Kouloub 118).

It was the time when the department stores had just begun to open in Cairo, and I still remember my happiness when I received a red silk dress from chez Pascal, a sport jacket from Dé Rouge, and a parasol...from Omar Effendi. I only knew these department stores from having passed in front of them on those rare occasions when I was driven by car around the districts of Mousky, el Ezbekieh or Wagh el Birka. I had never been inside, nor had any woman or young girl of status. The salesgirls used to come to the house. As a special favor, against custom, my father consulted me on these purchases. Oh! It was never in a direct manner! It was by some sort of coincidence that I would find some catalogues, and I would mark with a pencil what I liked. (Out-el-Kouloub 118)

Ramza specifically ties her freedom to the control of her mobility in the city. In the passage, the department stores figure as forbidden and desired spaces, which she only knows through the products that her father buys. Like Shaarawi, Ramza only sets foot in the *grand magasin* when she travels to Alexandria. Before eloping with her lover, she buys a white dress, in contrast to the large trousseau which her father selected

(Out-al-Kouloub 174). By going to the department store, Shaarawi and Ramza wrested the act of shopping from the control of the male patriarch. They created new gendered economic relations similar to the modern European model that “positions women as consumers,” or at least, in this case, puts them in charge of making their own purchases (Domosh 148).

From a broader perspective, Shaarawi’s action might constitute a personal reaction to the larger legal situation of the Egyptian woman. Bayt el Ta’a law, or literally “obedience house,” was a legal procedure which gave the husband the right to limit his wife’s mobility by forcing her to abide within a household selected by him. The law, which Shaarawi and other feminists denounced in their writings, became in her words a form of “blackmail,” “more dangerous than prison” (Shaarawi 362). Husbands might leave their wives in the direst conditions until she either submitted to his will, or negotiated her divorce (Shaarawi 362).

On the other hand, the scene also suggests a social shift where the traditional role of the eunuch as a chaperone starts to lose ground. The position of eunuch sheds light on the hierarchy of sexuality that existed in Ottoman culture. The eunuch, despite his asexual position, played a significant role in the patriarchal system, one that rests not on his seclusion or classification as an abnormal subject. The eunuch, rather, occupies a key spot within the patriarchy. Eugénie Lebrun, a writer and a friend of Shaarawi, describes the role of the eunuch in her book *Harems et Musulmanes d’Egypte* (1900): “Chez un nombre de riche musulmans, un ou plusieurs eunuques servent d’intermédiaire entre le harem et tout ce qui vient dehors” [In many rich Muslim households, one or more eunuchs serve as intermediaries between the harem

and everything outside] (Le Brun 4). The eunuch mediates between the outer world and the private space of the Harem. He is also the mediator between the aristocratic woman and her male employees (Le Brun 4). One of the eunuch's tasks is to lift female visitors over the threshold, leading them as such from the public sphere to the private one (Le Brun 19). The eunuch is a marker of boundaries. He is the agent between the household and the public space. As a chaperon, the eunuch becomes a representative of the patriarch and enforces an image of prestige and honor by highlighting the chastity of the female members of the house. His physical presence marks the distinction between the aristocratic woman and the rest of the society, specially the working class and prostitutes.

As a "household manager," Said Agha controls the budget, monitors the children's education and supervises the servants and slaves. He plays a crucial, uncontested role in the household, a role which the nineteenth-century European view would attribute to the mother. The eunuch's presence obstructs the shift from a traditional Ottoman lifestyle to a European one operating on the distinction between "two separate but complementary," a public sphere managed by men and a private one controlled by women (Domosh 148).

In the passage quoted above, Said Agha exercises an unusual control over Shaarawi's body and space. Shaarawi is completely covered, including her eyes. Said Agha separates her from the rest of the clients and creates, as I suggested earlier, a miniature harem by screening her from the public view. This climatic moment that shows the eunuch's iron grip over the female aristocrat significantly presages his

displacement by the female members of the family who would accompany Shaarawi on later shopping trips and eliminate the need for his presence.

### **Ambulant Sellers and Streetwalkers**

In her depiction of the household, Shaarawi mentions a third group of people who contributed to the fall of the patriarchal house: door-to-door saleswomen who moved from one house to another in order to sell overpriced items while exposing every family's secret as a way to promote their merchandise. Shaarawi's description of the ambulant female sellers reverberates with other discourses on the same issue at that time. Her critique aligns with that of Qassim Amin regarding the relationship between aristocratic women and the sellers. In their writings Amin and Shaarawi sought to debunk the myth of security associated with women's staying at home (Amin 1992, 391). According to Shaarawi, ambulant sellers spoil the peace of the patriarchal house. Not only do they dictate bourgeois women's choices, but they also exploit their situation for their economic advantage. The sellers are presented as parasites which infiltrate the domestic space and threaten the disintegration of the family (Shaarawi 61-64). The female sellers are part of the middle or working class who compete with the female bourgeois over the control of city space and the household. Inherent in this idea is the view of the household as a sealed space distinct from the marketplace, a distinction which the ambulant sellers blur.

In this context, the department store features as a site that protects patriarchal honor and privacy. Since with Shaarawi's pioneering act the economic exchange should take place inside the department store, the function of the female ambulant

seller as a storyteller feeding on gossip ceases to be a central activity within the patriarchal house. The female bourgeois shopper takes over one of the advantages monopolized by the ambulant seller, namely movement, and separates the public and private spheres. As a controller of the domestic purchases, she can move freely between the two: the marketplace and the now-closed household of the family.

Most importantly, by claiming control over the household management and emphasizing, in her memoirs the economic advantage of making one's own purchases. Shaarawi redefines Egyptian women's role around a modern, capitalist definition of money and value. Such an idea contrasts with earlier references to money in her memoirs. Earlier in the book, Shaarawi gives an account of her paternal grandfather who was a wealthy landlord and farmer renowned for his kindness and generosity. Traders and employees would ask him to pay them their fees more than once, but he would pretend that he forgot and repay them, ignoring what his assistant had already in ledgers. He saw these extra payments as a discreet form of charity that would not offend his employees' dignity. After her grandfather's death, Shaarawi's father is unable to buy a piece of land because he cannot meet the required price. He meets a poor old employee of his father's. Noticing his concern, the poor man inquires about the reason for his anxiousness. The poor old man then tells him "don't think much and follow me." Shaarawi's father follows the old employee across the house, moving from one room to another until they reach a distant closed room. The man then brings out a number of earthen jars and pours from them silver coins until they make a large pile. He explains that this was the grandfather's money, which he kept for him, and that it is now the time to return it (Shaarawi 15-16).

Despite its *Arabian Nights* character, the story reveals a view of wealth and status that differs from and defies the “rational” and calculated view of capitalism. While British values praise thrift, precision of record keeping, and hard labor as a predicate to financial prosperity, Shaarawi presents charity as a form of blessing, both an economic and spiritual investment outside the capitalist view of economic transactions. Money-saving and land-ownership do not figure as forms of economic capital to be invested toward the accumulation of wealth. The story of the poor man giving money to a rich landlord defies the basic rationale of economics, and justifies the stereotype of the irrational, sentimental Oriental subject. Shaarawi’s indication that shopping in the department store saves money ties modern views of economics to morality. She foregrounds thrift and calculation as important social values which the modern Egyptian woman should uphold. Wealth is no longer a haphazard blessing. Instead, money acquires a concrete calculable value that should be controlled and recorded.

Despite their marginality, streetwalkers are among the most important individuals competing with bourgeois women over public space. Prostitution was a key subject in Shaarawi’s writings and speeches. Unlike other publications, *L’Egyptienne* decried prostitution openly and blatantly (Fenoglio-Abdel AAl 62). This surfaces in her public campaign in both Egypt and Europe, in which Shaarawi criticizes the British government for legalizing prostitution in Egypt and urges that pressure be put on the government to put an end to the large number of brothels in the city (Shaarawi 305). In 1934, based on Shaarawi’s campaign, the government assigned a commission on health to close down the brothels (Fenoglio-Abdel All 62).

Prostitution was of central importance to Shaarawi. In Egypt, as in Europe, nineteenth-century public spaces were associated with promiscuity and sexual transgression. Deborah Epstein remarks that: “any woman stroller [in nineteenth-century Paris] was seen as a prostitute; the divide between respectable and unrespectable was sometimes less clear for women themselves” (qtd. in Wolff 23). With the disappearance of the eunuch, who affirms the bourgeois woman’s status and chastity in public, the distinction is blurred between upper and middle-class women on the one hand and female workers and prostitutes on the other.

The association of department stores with new gender and consumerist patterns became part of the popular culture related to the image of department stores as shows the following *Taqtouqa*<sup>47</sup> by Saleh Abdel Hayy from 1929 shows:

لسهه ططالعهه من البيضة وو عاملهه العشرة وو ذمتهه/ حاقولل أليهه بياختي قريضةه والله بانث لبتيهه/ ع  
 البهلي ماشيهه من غير بيضة تتغمز لي شمالل ووييمين/ تقولش على رراسهه رريضة وو لا ماشيهه على  
 عجين/ تتدلع وتتخلع وولسة ططالعهه من البيضة/ الكابب مد زوق على جسمهه وو الشعر مقصوص  
 “ألا جرسون”/ البدع ددا من ططبعهه وواللي عشقهه صبح مجنون/ من الصبح بدرري علي شمل وو  
 من بعدسا ع “البوزن مارشيهه”/ للهني تعمل لك كل عملهه خلتي أقولل يا نارس بوزيهه/ الأانس لله  
 حتما ليلا تي ترقص لي تانجو وو شارلستون/ مههه أقولل وو الأأساتي ددا الرقص من ضمن  
 الفنون/ تتدلع.<sup>48</sup>

She is just out of the shell/ and already raising hell. / What could I say: what a youngster! / What was hidden is now revealed. /She’s prancing about without a face veil, winking left and right. /She thinks she’s better than the rest of us/ She walks as if on eggshells. A tight cape molds her body, and her hair cut “à la garçonne.”/ Seduction is part of her character/ whoever loves her will lose his mind. /Daily from an early hour, she heads to *Chemla* and then the *Bon*

<sup>47</sup> A *taqtouqa* is a nineteenth-century “light” genre of song, which hinged on describing the everyday (Lagrange 229). It was part of Egyptian urban culture and had either comic or tragic themes. It addressed many social issues that were at the center of attention of the Egyptian urban community, such as marriage, polygamy, divorce, and the “reconstitution of the family around the nuclear model” (Lagrange 2009, 229).

<sup>48</sup> Qtd. in Lagrange, 2004



*Marché*. Ahh! / Dancing has to be every night, Tango and Charleston /  
Whatever I say or repeat!

Saleh Abdel Hayy's *taqtouqa* depicts a different representation of the Egyptian woman who has managed to create a new relation to the city and to her body. The modern flapper girl walks freely in the streets, face unveiled, dances, flirts, wears tight clothes and a short masculine hairstyle "à la garçonne."<sup>49</sup> This new flirtatious woman manages to invert gender roles and challenges the narrator's masculinity and control of space. He finds himself incapable of courting her, or following her lifestyle.

Lagrange argues that the clear reference to *Bon Marché* and *Chemla* in the songs indicates that by the 1920's the *grands magasins* became part of the popular culture marking the shift in lifestyle and consumption patterns. He adds that one of the comic aspects of the song is that it does not describe an élite woman but someone who tries to emulate the upper classes. She in all likelihood belongs to the working class, hence the reference to her style of dress "the besa" (236). As a genre, the song also conflates the image of the *flâneuse* and the prostitute, especially as this type of song was specifically played in cabarets and brothels. By shopping in department stores and being in a public space, the aristocratic or bourgeois woman risks endangering her reputation and ruining her image. In her speech at the American University in Cairo of 1941, entitled "The Problem of the Egyptian Family," Shaarawi refers to the anxiety and shame associated with this new situation. She specifically critiques bourgeois men who avoid being seen in public with their unveiled women while doing their shopping

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<sup>49</sup> In French in the original

(Mushkilat 10). While this suggests a new freedom for women, it also highlights the masculine crisis accompanying it.

In this context, the prostitute is of central importance to Shaarawi's campaigns. By denouncing prostitution, she becomes the spokesperson and protector of morality. Ironically, the the control of marginal social groups serves as a way to consolidate a modern image for the middle and upper classes. The idea of the bourgeois as a keeper of propriety matches the nineteenth-century European view of gender roles, while it asserts locally the chastity of bourgeois women and directly justifies their presence in public. On the international level, denouncing prostitution, which was legalized by the British Empire, becomes a key strategy to denounce imperialism and its moral decadence. In doing so, Shaarawi presents a modern image of the bourgeois Egyptian woman that conforms to European feminist views of the era, and also establishes the central image of Egyptian women as protectors of the nation. Interestingly, taking charge of morality also allows women to compete not only for the control of the private sphere but also for space on the political stage both nationally and internationally.

Shaarawi's lesson in the Parisian *grands magasins* crystalizes a central aspect of her national and social views. By learning to compete over public space with the other city dwellers, Shaarawi manages to reconfigure Egyptian space in the image of a European model in which the modern bourgeois Egyptian woman can lead the nation toward independence. In this respect, the ambiguities of her situation and approach are similar to Denise's in Zola's *Au Bonheur des dames*: using the institutions of modernity to lead beyond the social repression from which they derive. For Shaarawi

the department store expressed a Saint-Simonian, dichotomized view of East and West, a perspective which she also expressed during her travels across the Mediterranean in which she saw the Orient reach as far as Marseilles. Shaarawi enthusiastically upheld the symbolic significance of the Suez Canal, the highlight of the Saint-Simon Mediterranean utopia, to the extent that she transformed her own house to emulate the project., Her own experience and practice of space, however, shows that this commercial Mediterranean world, divided between East and West, broke down into many different ones which she manipulated adeptly in favor of reconstructing the role of the bourgeois Egyptian woman throughout her political and literary career.

## Chapter 5

### Jacqueline Kahanoff's *Jacob's Ladder*: Becoming Levantine or "Kol-Bo" Cosmpolitan



Figure 42. Advertisement for the House of Chemla. Source: *L’Egyptienne*, January 1927. Microfilm Collection, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, France. The advertisement reads: Chemla Brothers. Paris-Cairo. Currently. End of Season Sale. Real bargains in every department (comptoir). Continuous arrival of the latest Parisian creations with every shipment (courrier)

In my youth, I considered it natural that the residents of Cairo understood each other, although they spoke different languages and used different appellations: Muslim, Arab, Christian, Jewish, Syrian, Greek, Armenian, Italian. The names of cities like Baghdad, Tunis, Aleppo, Beirut, Damascus, Istanbul, Thessaloniki, Casablanca, and Jerusalem, were all too familiar because people traveled to them to visit relatives, and walked in the company of each other as if they were walking through the many rooms of one big house. Only “Paris” was different -- a distant name shining in gilded letters on the labels in Nono

and Uncle David's department store [Kol-Bo]. (Kahanoff 2005, 49)<sup>50</sup>  
In her description of cosmopolitan Cairo, Jacqueline-Shohet Kahanoff

reconstructs the city via a listing of national and religious epithets constituting the different populations of the Eastern Mediterranean. After giving an account of the city's human geography, she pauses at the French labels in her grandparents' department store. Like the aisles and walkways of the *grand magasin* Chemla, the streets of Cairo brought together a diverse world. Despite their difference, they understood tacitly that they were the members of one family, strolling in the different rooms of one big *house*. In her description, Kahanoff conflates the image of the street, the store, and the house, to highlight the unique position of Francophone culture in relation to Egyptian cosmopolitanism. By means of contrasting the store's French labels and the actual life in the street, she adeptly marks the gap between the representation of culture and its practice. Beyond the promising name of "Paris," a different lifestyle takes shape through the daily interaction among Cairene residents over the store's counters, and likewise in the streets of Cairo, where French was the social language of a diverse elite. Years later, Kahanoff would name this unique culture, irreducible to the word "Paris," "Levantinism."

In the following chapter, I revisit Jacqueline Kahanoff's concept of Levantinism expressed in *Jacob's Ladder* and other of her writings, developed in

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בצעירותי היה טבעי בעיני שתושבי קהיר מבינים זה את זה אף-על-פי שהם מדברים בשפות שונות ונקראים בשמות ממקורות שונים – מוסלמי, ערבי, נוצרי, יהודי, סורי, יווני, ארמני, איטלקי. שמות הערים בגדאד, תוניס, חלב, ביירות, דמשק, איסטנבול, סלוניקי, קזבלנקה, ירושלים, היו נהירים מפני שבני אדם, שביקרו קרובי משפחה, היו מתהלכים זה עם זה כמו בחדריו של בית אחד גדול. רק פריז היתה אחרת, שם רחוק המבריק באותיות של זהב על תוויות חנות הקול-בו של נונו והדוד דוד. (הצעיף הכחול של הקדמה 49)

accordance with her childhood experience in Cairo where she takes her grandfather's department store as a model for that lifestyle. I would like to examine Levantine culture, its aesthetics and the romanticized portrait of it, as an inseparable part of the history of the social group that documented it. By looking at Kahanoff's depiction of the department store as a symbolic site that melds together the marketplace, the household, and the modern city, I highlight the underpinning social and political dynamics in colonial Egypt, which led to the construction of Levantine culture. Department stores, often employing the image of a household in their advertisements to occupy a middle space within the popular imaginary between the private and the public, comprise my point of departure to deconstruct the relationship between the representation of Levantine culture and its production, between the store's façade, catalogue and its architectural design on the one hand and the actual relations born and developed via social interaction on the other.

It is precisely Kahanoff's narrative strategy that, shifting the lens between the household and the department store, enables her to capture the implicit and unrecorded tensions inherent in Levantine culture. The novel reflects Deborah Starr's and Sasson Somekh's description of Kahanoff as never being "at home" in Hebrew, Arabic, French, or English<sup>51</sup>. (xiv-xv). This not being at home in language or nation-states makes most of her writing revolve around the image of the household, with the desire to anchor it within the history and geography of the surrounding milieu. In her novel,

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<sup>51</sup> Kahanoff spoke French at home and in school in Egypt. She mastered English by communicating with her British governess. She only studied elementary Arabic when she lived in France. She was not fluent in Hebrew either since she did not foresee her later immigration to Israel. To publish in Israel, her writings were translated from the English to Hebrew (Starr and Somekh xv).

the department store becomes a household and vice versa, becoming an unsettling image that reveals the fragility of both spaces.

Central to my reading is the Hebrew term “Kol-Bo” used to mean department store but which literally translates as “everything in it.” Kahanoff’s Levantinism, which reflects the culture of her grandparents’ *grand magasin*, is a “Kol-Bo” cosmopolitanism that brings together elements from East and West. Having their unique order and structure, both the Kol-Bo and Levantinism, possess despite their seeming accessibility, their own mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion. Just like the department store, Levantinism hinges on the interplay between the visible and the invisible, between the mimesis of a European image displayed at the forefront and the actual hidden relations that constitute it. Most importantly, similar to the Kol-Bo, Levantinism expands its role from a site of consumption of European culture to a site of cultural production that fashions its particular lifestyle.

Jacqueline Shohet-Kahanoff, born in Cairo in 1917 to a Jewish Iraqi father and a Jewish Tunisian mother. Her family’s life depends on the unique interlacing of Ottoman, British and French Empires in Egypt. Her Tunisian family, who possessed French passports, moved to Egypt to be part of the prosperous trade network created by the Suez Canal. Her maternal grandfather began as a street vendor in Tunisia and moved to Cairo where he established the famous department store Chemla Brothers in 1907, the basis for Smadja Brothers in her novel (Reynolds 2003, 129). As French subjects, they benefited from the mixed court system established by the Ottoman and kept by the British to protect foreign minorities in Egypt. Kahanoff attended a French *lycée* founded by l’Alliance Israelite Universelle (“A Culture Stillborn” 123).

Kahanoff herself attended a French law school to prepare her for a career in the mixed courts, but this legal system was abolished (Starr and Somekh xv). The Chemla department store featured in the advertisement above from *l'Egyptienne*, was sold to an investor in 1946, as she mentions in the novel. Following Egyptian independence in 1952, the store was nationalized, but it still operates under the same name to the present day.

Kahanoff's semi-autobiographical novel, *Jacob's Ladder*, narrates the coming of age of Rachel Gaon, a young Jewish girl "from Egypt," the granddaughter of two families who founded department stores in Cairo, the Gaons and the Smadjas. Rachel's Jewish Iraqi paternal grandfather, Jacob Gaon features as both a business patriarch and a prophetic figure similar to the Biblical Jacob, as I will elaborate later. Rachel's Jewish maternal grandfather, Nathan Smadja, migrates to Cairo from Tunisia to establish his own chain of department stores, Smadja Brothers. Growing up in colonial Cairo, Rachel struggles to reconcile her Near Eastern Jewish heritages and her European education. In her eyes, like the refracted light of the prism, both European and Arab cultures in Egypt break down into many subcategories, French, English, Italian, Greek, Muslim, Arab, Jewish, Christian. Rachel questions her national belonging to Egypt and her cultural affiliation with France and Britain: she identifies neither as Egyptian nor as European, since she does not speak Arabic fluently, and her grandparents come from a traditional Iraqi and Francophone Tunisian background respectively. On the other hand, she attempts to understand the place of both her Jewish Tunisian and Iraqi families in modern Egypt and the meaning of celebrating



Passover in Cairo, a situation that she deems paradoxical to the Biblical narrative of Exodus.

Throughout the novel, Rachel's family strives to ascend the social ladder by emulating a European lifestyle. In order to do so, the family depends primarily on the working class. They hire Egyptian servants who served in British households, and English nannies who give Rachel and her brother access to parts of the city restricted to British citizens. They also fashion their new European image by dressing from the atelier of the grandfather's store, which employs Syrian, Greek, and Italian seamstresses, who constitute the workforce of the Levantine community.

In her attempt to rewrite her experience through the story of Rachel, Kahanoff uses the department store as a key space to document the history of Levantine Egypt. Via a technique of doubling, the reader can discern various foil characters as the many sides of the protagonist. This stems from Kahanoff's belief that "the role of an artist [is] to reflect the multiplicity of a lived and living truth, through the prism of an individual experience" (qtd. in Starr and Somekh xvii). The same pattern applies to the central spaces in the novel. For instance, Kahanoff plays on the multiple meanings of "The House of Gaons" and "the House of Smadja," as the department store, the household and the family lineage. She invents a protagonist whose paternal and maternal grandparents are each building a chain of stores. This allows her to write a multilayered history of Jews in Egypt where each *house* presents a different perspective, mythological on the one hand and materialist on the other. Whereas the House of Gaon stands for a mythological space that creates a continuum between Biblical history and the situation of modern Jews in Egypt, the House of Smadja, based on the Chemla

store, represents an actual urban site through which she traces the quotidian life of cosmopolitan Cairo.

Central to Levantine culture is the tension created by the polarized Eurocentric perspective in which Levantinism represents a threatening backward lifestyle. Its mixture of European and Near Eastern traits gives no clear indication of national or cultural belonging to either Europe or the Orient. This makes Levantine culture a site of division between an idealized modern European image and a marginalized Near Eastern double. Writing in 1946, Albert Hourani shed light on this divide existing in the perception of Levantine culture:

To be a Levantine [is] to live in two or more worlds at once without belonging to either, to go through the external forms...of a certain national identity, religion or culture, without actually possessing it. Not to be able to create, but only to imitate; and so not even to imitate correctly, since that also necessitates originality. It reveals itself in lostness, pretentiousness, cynicism and despair. (Hourani 70:71).

For Hourani Levantine culture symbolizes “the crisis” of Arab society, a form of alienation brought about by the political and social changes in the Eastern Mediterranean during the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Hourani 71). He associates Levantine life with commercial culture developed from the trade networks connecting Eastern Mediterranean ports with Europe. The Levantine way of life constitutes an impasse, a desperate gesture of mimicry seeking to reconcile old Arab and modern European customs, but produces sterile clichés. Hourani’s definition, however, presupposes the presence of an authentic Arab and European identity—each belonging to a different temporality—which Levantine culture fails to capture—only managing to create what Bruno Latour might call a “hybrid monster,” an ambiguous representation that does

not conform to a strict form of modernity that seeks to sever all connections with the past (Latour 12-13). In other words, one can either be a traditional atemporal Arab or a modern European.

Reading Kahanoff in 2004, Gil Hochberg reviews Hourani's words in a light of the contemporary situation in Israel in which Levantinism has been thought of as a means of the reintegration of Mizrahi culture in Israeli society and a way of reclaiming a marginalized Arab heritage, as suggested by the writings of Ammiel Alacaly, Ronit Matalon, Anton Shammas, and Nessim Rejouan. Hochberg's reading is part of a body of literature that sheds light on the dynamics of Levantinism as a cultural notion that challenges the reductive aspects of national, religious and social affiliations.<sup>52</sup>

Hochberg contends that Levantinism is not a geographical concept but rather a complex "performance of culture" ("Permanent Immigration" 220). In doing so, she shifts the focus onto Levantinism as a cultural category. Yet, this lens overlooks that what we come to dub Levantinism is not a homogenous single category; it rather expresses a wide range of cultural and economic exchanges between various social and ethnic groups in different social, historical and political contexts. Nevertheless, most of its representation comes from middle and upper social strata who possess the agency to document their experience, and whose image, including that of the Francophone "rootless Levantine," has come to be associated with Levantinism in general. Although Levantinism offers a sense of mobility by means of allegiance to many groups at once, it is itself contingent on a set of colonial, legal and economic

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<sup>52</sup> See Gil Hochberg, *Despite the Partition*; Ammiel Alacaly, *After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture*; Ronit Matalon, *The One Facing us*; Anton Shammas, *Arabesques*.

circumstances particular to the social classes that contributed to its emergence and historization. For this reason, the department store with its manicured organization, its class relations and promise of social mobility becomes a key site to analyze Levantinism and Levantine society.

In order to rethink the relationship between Levantinism and social class dynamics in *Jacob's Ladder*, I turn to Pierre Bourdieu's works, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* and *Distinction*, where he traces the intricate relationship between cultural production and class formation. To distinguish between the consolidated image of a group and the actual history of its construction, Bourdieu defines the *habitus*: "the subjective but not individual system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class and constituting the precondition for all objectification and apperception" (*Outline* 86). Habitus constitutes the standards, ethos, expertise and material culture that shape a group and inform its views and representation. It is constructed, and enforced, by means of control and exchange of both "economic" and "cultural" capital and serves to create the markers of distinction characteristic of each social group. Whereas economic capital refers to financial resources and assets, cultural capital stands for the overall knowledge, manners, and taste (education, aesthetics, fashion, music, art,) that a group adopts, or internalizes, for self-representation and social interaction. Bourdieu warns against treating the histories of culture and social class separately, since the image of a class rests on the culture it produces and performs to maintain its dominance. He draws our attention to "genesis amnesia," a common process in the representation of class where the focus is directed toward the "opus operatum" or the

final picture created by the different social groups in contrast to the “modus operandi” which charts the process and the artifice of its formation. For instance, what we recognize as bourgeois culture depends primarily on a successfully erased history of material acquisitions, learning and interclass relations. How could we consider bourgeois culture without the army of workers that participated in producing it: the governess, the domestic help, or the private tutor? How could we give an account of the unrecorded hours spent during childhood to learn table manners, practice a musical instrument, attend a painting workshop, or study a foreign language? These marginal elements often expunged from the final portrait of a bourgeois family are central to the affirmation of its status. They are part of a carefully planned investment to maintain social superiority and economic power. Similarly, could we think of Levantinism as part of a cultural capital that contributed to the construction of social classes in Egypt and vice versa? If I may borrow Beauvoir’s famous sentence, “One is not born *Levantine*, but rather becomes one,” through a long process of learning and social interaction.

What stands out in *Jacob’s Ladder* is the fact that the author does not present Rachel’s cosmopolitan background as a seamless natural condition. She considers it the complex outcome of a long struggle and continuous work to consolidate the family’s social status via economic and cultural capital. In that sense, the family’s situation evokes the mimetic gesture of the department store where the French façade hides the invisible, or undocumented, effort involved in putting that image together. In *Uneven Developments*, Mary Poovey distinguishes between ideology and its practice. This difference could be observed by examining the practices of the different

“institutions that govern people’s social relations” and representation (Poovey 3). Following this framework, I return to the department store and the household in *Jacob’s Ladder* as two complementary sites for the production and performance of Levantine culture. In doing so, I seek to reinscribe an erased history related to the process, agents and spaces of the construction of that culture. Among those agents are servants, nannies, salesclerks and other colonial subjects, whose faces are later blurred while painting the portrait of an elite Levantine society.

### **Return to the Grand Magasin: in Search of Lost Time, but which One?**

In terms of theme, language, structure and the history of its reception, *Jacob’s Ladder* documents many losses at once. As a literary work, it embodies Levantine aesthetics with many of its complexities. Kahanoff writes in British English in America, but emulates Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu*, where a nostalgic narrator reconstructs the past via the entwinement of both personal and social history. Kahanoff entitles her chapters: “The World of Rachel Gaon,” “The Stranger,” “The Invader” and “a World Regained,” recalling the final volume of Proust’s *Recherche, Le Temps retrouvé*. She frequently refers to Proust in the novel and compares Rachel’s experience in Alexandria to Marcel’s summer at Balbec (Kahanoff 1951, 201)<sup>53</sup>. Just as Rachel sits on the ruins of an old city giving way to the modern Levantine one, Marcel, Proust’s narrator, the witness and historian of a bygone belle époque. He

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<sup>53</sup> Alice watched them go, a rowdy band of girls, dashing and sport-loving. They made her think of the *Jeunes Filles en Fleurs* Proust had collectively loved on the mysterious and brilliant beach of Balbec” (*Jacob’s Ladder* 201).

decides to impersonate both, the famous French memoirist, duke de Saint-Simon<sup>54</sup> (1608-1693), and Scheherazade, to write the story of a nation which has turned Levantine (Proust 2398). Proust evokes the urban changes after World War One by describing the image of the crescent dominating the Parisian sky as he imagines the Seine becoming the Bosphorus<sup>55</sup> (Proust 2218). Similarly, Rachel documents her family's heritage before it is swept away by Levantinism by weaving together oral stories transmitted from one generation to another and Egyptian colonial and social history. Both Proust and Kahanoff highlight the effect of material culture in the life of their respective societies and on class and national representation.

*Jacob's Ladder* recreates the modern history of the Chemla family in Egypt while giving an insight into the process of creation of their unique cosmopolitan lifestyle that mixes Eastern and Western traditions. Near the end of the novel, Kahanoff resorts to the technique described above to paint the Smadja department store in a new light, signaling as such the coming of age of Rachel Gaon. In the following image, the cosmopolitan department store becomes Oriental.

Back in Cairo, if ever she went to Smadja Brothers, a run-down store with the air of a bazaar, she wondered how, in the old days, marching down the creaking aisles with her grandfather, she had believed this was the grandest

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<sup>54</sup> Duc de Saint-Simon was a mémorialiste, not to be confused with Henri de Saint-Simon, the philosopher and utopian who initiated Saint-Simonism.

<sup>55</sup> Il faisait une nuit transparente et sans souffle ; j'imaginai que la Seine coule entre ses ponts circulaires, faits de leur plateau et de son reflet, devait ressembler au Bosphore. Et, symbole soit de cette invasion que prédisait le défaitisme de M. de Charlus, soit de la coopération de nos frères musulmans avec les armées de la France, la lune étroite et recourbée comme un sequin semblait mettre le ciel parisien sous le signe oriental du croissant (2218) [It was a transparent and a breathless night; I imagined that the Seine, flowing between the twin semicircles of the span and the reflection of its bridges, must look like the Bosphorus. And—a symbol perhaps of the invasion foretold by the defeatism of M. de Charlus, or else of the co-operation of our Muslim brothers with the armies of France—the moon, narrow and curved like a sequin, seemed to have placed the sky of Paris beneath the oriental sign of the crescent. (386)]

place on earth. Well she thought disdainfully, she had grown up now, and lost all her silly illusions. (Kahanoff 1951, 394)

At first glance, after reading the description of the European department store condemned to deteriorate to the status of a , the novel might be classified as a lament for a bygone Levantine culture, but the Orientalized picture of the store, as I elaborate later, comes to serve another purpose in the narrative. The customary nostalgic trope for Levantinism associated with the novel, however, is more likely to be a product of the recent reading of *Jacob's Ladder* seen retrospectively through the lens of contemporary Egyptian and Israeli cultures, in which Egyptian intellectuals mourn the disappearance of cosmopolitanism in Egypt, while Israeli intellectuals critique the marginal position of Mizrahi culture in Israel<sup>56</sup>. In fact, in contrast to this idea, the novel primarily laments the birth of a modern Levantine culture at the expense of a lost Eastern heritage. For instance in a later passage, Rachel sits on the stairs of her Iraqi grandparents' house, located in a traditional Egyptian neighborhood, and ruminates on the past:

She sat down on the crumbling steps, and closed her eyes to savour and remember its silence, so that it should not be engulfed in the clamour of the Levantine city...All this was gone, but perhaps, she told herself passionately nothing, no one, could ever wholly die as long as the living remembered, and she must keep alive in her heart's memory all that had been of this world, lest it perish through her neglect. (Kahanoff 1951, 407)

Following a long tradition of French writers, such as Victor Hugo and Emile Zola, Kahanoff uses a spatial metaphor, the image of a building in ruins devoured by the

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<sup>56</sup> See Ella Shohat, *Taboo Memories: Diasporic Voices; Israel Cinema, East/West and the Politics of Representation*; Ammiel Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs*. See also Deborah Starr, *Remembering Cosmopolitan Egypt*; Samir Raafat, *Cairo the Glory Years*; Robert Ilbert, *Alexandria 1860-1960: The Brief Life of a Cosmopolitan Community*.



modern cityscape, to register the end of an era. In this novel, the modern Levantine city takes over what the narrator dubs old Cairo, while the utopian *grand magasin* metamorphoses into an Oriental space. The passages align with the common European depiction of the Mediterranean city as a decaying archeological site to be reconstructed by the European writer or painter. This account of Levantinism is imbued with nostalgia for a way of life that the protagonist could never recover, due to—as she explains in the text—a colonial system that taught her to internalize an Orientalist view of Near Eastern culture. In this ambivalent context, Rachel accepts Levantine culture as an embodiment of change while acknowledging loss of and rupture from her grandparents' heritage. Yet perceiving the bazaar in the department store stands for understanding the double aspect of Levantinism as both European and Oriental.

In addition to this disconnection from a Near Eastern heritage, the novel comes to register several ruptures and losses, such as the writer's disappointment in Francophone culture, or more accurately the recognition of its failure to create a coherent Egyptian urban class. Kahanoff who went to a French *lycée* in Cairo and learned English through her British nannies, wrote first in French, in Francophone newspapers in Egypt. After a few attempts, she found it futile to write in French, since her Levantine audience was made up of many cultures: "Many people in this milieu were well-read in all three languages. Italian, English and French. This complexity gave this minority a subtlety, diversity, and refinement rarely matched elsewhere, but no ethnic element or language was actually strong enough to weld these disparate groups into some kind of unity" (A Culture Stillborn 114-115). For Kahanoff, Egyptian Francophone culture broke down into many subcategories and represented

many communities with diverse backgrounds at once. She questioned the effectiveness of French in uniting the many communities, a situation that led her to write in English. She says: “ The Jews were so intoxicated by French culture that they did not pay attention to the advice of the Alliance for the Jews to learn the language of the land in which they lived. In the eyes of the middle-class Egyptian Jews of my generation, speaking Arabic was considered out-dated and old-fashioned. Only the lower classes, that is to say Jews from the ghetto, spoke Arabic (A “Culture Stillborn” 123-124).

In 1940, Kahanoff moved to the United States where she studied Journalism at Columbia University. There, she published several short stories in English. Her story “Such is Rachel,” the kernel of her novel *Jacob’s Ladder*, received a prize from the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1947. Although she grew up familiar with British culture, she wrote for an American audience whose views on race and class stemmed from a different sociopolitical context.. Views toward class relations, work ethics and social integration differed from those of the Jewish Egyptian elites living in colonial Egypt whose population reflected the human geography of the Ottoman Empire. Kahanoff began writing her novel in the United States and finished it during a brief stay in England in 1951 (Starr and Somekh xvi). The novel was caught in a liminal space between imperialism and nationalism, between the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the failure of Francophone culture, the dusk of British Imperialism and the rise of American hegemony. After Egyptian independence in 1952, the novel gained an additional value as it recorded the history of Jews from Egypt, the dispersion of the Levantine society and the dismissal of Levantine culture in Israel at the height of Zionism and Panarabism.

## **Reconstructing Kahanoff's Levantinisms: Maps, Dolls and Summer Flings**

Before analyzing the image of the department store in Kahanoff's work as a model for Levantinism, I would like to give a brief survey of her concept. In assessing Levantine culture, I argue that it is not a single category but a multiplicity of perspectives and experiences enmeshed in a social, political and economic system subject to different variables, such as class, gender, ethnicity, and colonial relations. Likewise, tracing the history of Kahanoff's concept of Levantinism through her writings, starting from *Jacob's Ladder*, shows the progress of this idea largely informed by the author's experiences. Just as there are many Levantine communities, there exist also many phases of Kahanoff's Levantinisms, mostly connected to her memories of Egypt and her goal of anchoring this lifestyle in the Mediterranean. In 1940, Kahanoff moved from the United States to Paris, where her younger sister was and, finally, settled in Israel in 1954. Her parents remained in Cairo until 1954 when they too joined her in Israel (Starr and Somekh xi).

In Israel, Kahanoff encounters a new political and social dynamics between the Mizrahi and Ashkenazi communities. At the height of Zionism, Levantinism, seen strictly from a Eurocentric view, posed a social and political threat, a sign of regression that did not match a Zionist utopian vision of a homogenous modern state modeled after Europe. As Gil Hochberg pinpoints, after the influx of Moroccan Jewish immigrants to Israel, the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* quoted a French diplomat warning the new state that "the immigration of certain human material is liable to bring the Jewish nation down and make it into a Levantine nightmare" (qtd. in Hochberg 219).

In another incident, the British newspaper *The Manchester Guardian* claimed that David Ben-Gurion, the Israeli Prime minister, is “plunging the new nation into Levantinism.” Ben-Gurion, for his part, once vowed that he would “prevent Levantinism from creeping into [Israel’s] national life” (qtd. in Hochberg 219).

It is in this very politically charged climate where Mizrahi culture was disparaged and repressed, that Kahanoff turns to her childhood memories in Egypt in order to reclaim Levantinism as a critical term to question the Eurocentric vision of the Levant and the social and political relations between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi communities in Israel. The author’s memories of the cultural and urban geography of Cairo and Alexandria as well as her early struggles to define her national and cultural belonging in Egypt becomes a useful experience for questioning citizenship in Israel. Living in colonial Egypt, Kahanoff witnessed the coexistence of many groups coming from various Near Eastern and European cultures. In contrast to the dominant aversion to Levantinism, Kahanoff suggests it as a solution for the impasse of Zionism that anxiously sought to distance Israel from its milieu by creating a double standard in the treatment of European and Near Eastern immigrants. In her article, “From the East the Sun,” Kahanoff claims that Israel’s “best chance for peace and survival may be to transform the Zionist revolution into a Levantine one” (Kahanoff Afterword, 251). Kahanoff’s idea, however, precedes her immigration to Israel, where she encountered the sharp schism between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi societies. In *Jacob’s Ladder*, for instance, Kahanoff already experiments with this idea while rethinking the position of Jews in modern Egypt and in Palestine. In the novel, set before the establishment of

the Israeli state, Rachel, the protagonist, receives four dolls as a gift from her uncle who just has returned from Palestine:

Uncle Moses came to see her, and brought her little dolls from Palestine, two Jewish Kibboutzniks, a man and a woman, with little Russian blouses embroidered at the collar, and two Arab ones. Rachel played with them, while the family chatted. She married the Arab man, thinking perhaps of her beggar, to the Jewish woman, and the Jewish man to the Arab woman. Uncle Moses noticed her game, and said, half-laughingly, half-cross, that she was an incorrigible dreamer like her father. (Kahanoff 1951, 349)

The image of uncle Moses returning to Cairo cannot but strike a comic chord by recalling the Biblical story of Exodus in which the actual prophet leads the Hebrews out of Egypt. In this case modern Moses makes his way back from Palestine with a set of dolls of Ashkenazi Jews and Arabs, reflecting—and questioning—the situation in the 1950's. Rachel's game provides insight into Kahanoff's early perception of Levantine culture in the Near East, right after the founding of the Israeli state. Kahanoff writes these lines from the United States, before Egyptian independence, while still not having planned her migration to Israel. The scene, then, is an early attempt to present her cosmopolitan experience in Egypt, but without necessarily anticipating the later development of the Israeli-Arab crisis.

Looking at the Arab dolls, Rachel recalls a young Egyptian beggar, whom she has seen in the streets of Cairo while walking with her nanny. Rachel immediately identifies with the homeless child and realizes that she is “brown” in contrast to the Irish governess. The identification with the beggar becomes the first moment of recognition a of divide within Egyptian colonial culture, between Rachel's European education and her Near Eastern heritage. This struggle continues throughout the novel until in another incident Rachel shouts “Egypt for Egyptians” in support of a public

demonstration, to spite her English governess (364). This identification shows ambivalence toward Near Eastern and Egyptian heritage, or an inability to perceive Egyptian and Arabic cultures otherwise than as antithetical to its European counterpart. Despite Rachel's Orientalist association of "Arabs" with beggars, she perceives a society where both Arabs and Europeans, vaguely defined, create "a hybrid" culture. Her likening of the Arab doll to a native Egyptian "beggar" —whom she considered a reflection of herself—suggests an even broader outlook, in which she imagines a utopian space that overcomes race and class differences. The author is already conscious of the daring aspect of this ideal, since she follows that example with Rachel's uncle's comment about being an "incorrigible dreamer" (349). This sentence leads the contemporary reader to wonder whether Kahanoff here subtly questions the dominant political views in Israel in 1950's and their effect on the state's assimilation to the Near East.

In a later work from 1968, published in 1976, fourteen years after her migration to Israel, Kahanoff revisits her vision of the Levant. In this frequently cited paragraph, she stresses the obsolescence of nationalism in comparison to the multilayered aspect of Levantine culture. Kahanoff's central message revolves around challenging nationalism and colonialism by bridging cultural divides:

[while] the Levant cannot be sharply differentiated from the Mediterranean world, it is not synonymous [with it]. The Levant has a character and a history of its own. It is called "Near" or "Middle" East in relationship to Europe, not to itself. Seen from Asia, it could just as well be called the "Middle West." Here, indeed, Europe and Asia have encroached on one another, giving rise to world civilizations, fracturing into stubborn local subcultures and multi-layered identities . . . [The Levant] is not exclusively eastern or western, Christian, Jewish, or Moslem. [...] Because of its diversity, the Levant has been compared to a mosaic—bits of stones of different colors assembled into a flat

picture. To me it is more like a prism whose various facets are joined by a sharp edge of differences, but each of which according to its position a time-space continuum, reflects or refracts light. [...] and perhaps the time has come for the Levant to reevaluate itself according to its own light, rather than see itself through Europe's sights, as something quaintly exotic, tired, sick, and almost lifeless. (Kahanoff Afterword, 247)

In this passage, Kahanoff critiques the Eurocentric construction of the "Near East" as a reductive geographic label for a rich and complex culture. She locates the Levant culturally at the intersection of Europe and Asia. Most importantly, by defining Levantinism as part of Mediterranean cultural geography, Kahanoff reinscribes the modern history of Sephardic and Mizrahi communities in the Mediterranean. For Kahanoff who, like many other Levantine elites, had relatives residing across the Mediterranean and whose family had offices in Paris (Reynolds 2012, 59), the Mediterranean represented a space of movement and exchange. The Levant stands as a culture "on its own," one that does not belong to a single Empire or people and can be claimed by many. The ambiguous metaphor of the Levant as a prism "whose various facets are joined by a sharp edge of differences" suggests a social contract that respects the other and takes account of differences rather than erasing them. It describes a mechanism that projects individual subcultures as a refracted light.

To illustrate her concept, Kahanoff frequently refers to the urban map of Egypt and Alexandria. A later short story *To Remember Alexandria* (1976), set between the years of 1967 and 1973, depicts a romantic encounter in Tel Aviv between Antonia Ferrar and Josh. Antonia is a middle-aged Jewish Italian from Egypt who has settled in Rome and is struggling with cancer. Josh, on the other hand, is a young Israeli pilot, a "healthy, cocky...never doubting" Sabra (220). The depiction of Josh matches the

stereotypical nationalist description of the modern Israeli, or Sabra. In Zionist discourse, a Sabra was imagined as “young and robust, daring and resourceful, down to earth, honest and loyal, ideologically committed and ready to defend his people to the bitter end” (Zerubavel 116). Correspondingly, Antonia’s physical representation conforms to a stereotypical nationalist description of the sickly, frail wandering Jew. In contrast to Josh’s seemingly solid world rooted in the new culture of his nation state, Antonia, an interpreter for international organizations, lives in a bygone ghostly Mediterranean world, between nations and languages, between her memories of Alexandria, her new life in Italy and her trip to Tel Aviv (Kahanoff 1976, 218). Josh invites her to visit Jerusalem, the inland city, as a way of forgetting the Mediterranean. The text aligns nationalism with the act of turning away from the sea toward the sealed culture of the inlands. Trapped in her memories, Antonia foresees Tel Aviv as the continuum of where she came from:

To remember. For we were all here before. Here and in Egypt. And so I wished, crazily wished to plant a seed of Alexandria in the soil of Israel, for Alexandria was once almost a Jewish city as much as it was Greek. Where else in the world does the street of the Ptolemics bisect Nebi Daniel Street in the heart of the city? Probably their names have been erased. Those streets are probably called Liberation Street and Arab Brotherhood Street. (Kahanoff 1976, 224)

Kahanoff chooses a fatalist conclusion to the story, in which both characters remain victims of their separate worlds and fulfill their respective stereotypical destiny. Antonia dies in exile from cancer. Josh, the modern nationalist, dies during the Yom Kippur war, leaving behind a wife and a daughter who feels at home in Tel Aviv. In contrast to *Jacob’s Ladder* where Kahanoff announces the birth of modern Levantine culture of the expense of the Near Eastern heritage, in this story, she mourns the end of



Levantine culture ruined by nationalism. *Jacob's Ladder*, however, was written while she was trying to situate herself versus a national culture, while this story stood for a rewriting of her experience within Israel. Yet, the decision to kill off both characters, the frail Levantine and the resilient Sabra, still points toward the condemnation of nationalism. Josh's daughter who feels "at home" in Tel Aviv is part of a new generation who has neither memories nor connection to that cosmopolitan past. Her belonging to the land comes at the price of the erasure of history. The only traces of that bygone culture that could unsettle this illusion are Antonia's letters from Italy locked in Josh's desk.

In an unfinished novel *Tamra*, depicting another impossible love story, this time between a Muslim boy and a Jewish girl, Kahanoff draws the same map as above:

Cairo is an Arab city, Alexandria in many ways Greek, a Mediterranean one. *Where else in the world would the street of the Ptolemys intersect with Nebi Daniel, the Prophet Daniel?* And there stands the great synagogue. From the center of town, all along the Corniche, a string of Greek casinos and cafés... Alexandria is the most European of Egypt's cities, but a Europe that was always part of the Mediterranean world. It has its Greeks living here since antiquity, its Italian colony and its Italian Jewish community. It is really a city of the Levant... In high society, Greek men are supposed to have Jewish mistresses, and Jewish men have Greek mistresses. It is whispered that the mothers themselves do not always know who fathered what child. They are almost a race apart, Greco-Jewish. We are so ignorant of the past, but Alexandria is so much older than the Arab Moslem conquest. It is still a Greco-Jewish city. (Kahanoff 1976, 79) <sup>57</sup>

Kahanoff turns to the Egyptian map as an artifact, or an archeological site, to highlight her paradigm of Levantinism structured on Greco-Jewish culture. Taking a Braudelian stance, she distinguishes between the shores of the Mediterranean and the inlands by

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<sup>57</sup> My emphasis

polarizing the differences between Cairo and Alexandria. Braudel saw the Mediterranean as a totalizing unit made of multilayered histories and separate but interchangeable sectors (Braudel 280). Likewise, Kahanoff claims “that the great historical lesson of the Levant [is that]... each entity has had to renounce part of its claim to an all-embracing universality” (After 250). Whereas Levantinism existed relatively in both Cairo and Alexandria, she reconfigures Egyptian cultural geography to stress Alexandria’s character as a Mediterranean port facing the sea and looking toward Europe, detached from the Egyptian territory and beyond the claims of nationalism and Panarabism. By dislocating Alexandria, Kahanoff creates both a historical and geographical continuum for Levantine culture, whose paradigm is the Mediterranean coast at large, regardless of the inland. Situating Alexandria within a Braudelian paradigm allows a simultaneous implicit reconfiguration of the Israeli cultural map. By stressing the differences between Cairo and Alexandria, she suggests a parallel division between Jerusalem and the Mediterranean city Tel Aviv. Just as Alexandria should turn toward the Mediterranean so should Tel Aviv, since they belong to a different space.

After this process of rezoning, the narrator grounds her idea by marking the hub of Jewish and Greek culture on the map of Alexandria. But a quick consultation of the actual map of the city reveals that the two main roads “Nebi Daniel and Ptolemeys” do not actually intersect as she enthusiastically claimed (Fig.43). They are actually parallel roads. Although both streets highlight Alexandria’s Greco-Jewish heritage, this example shows how Kahanoff reconstructs Alexandria’s urban plan via

selective memory or imaginatively to recreate Levantinism. In doing so, Kahanoff forces Arab culture into the background<sup>58</sup>, making it an outsider colonial power, and emphasizes a Greco-Jewish cultural *métissage*. Levantinism lies at the crossroads of two central streams that make the fabric of a European modernity specific to the Mediterranean: Greek and Jewish. Both survive resiliently and assimilate to the main culture regardless of the ruling powers, transforming it from within. The text is not clear about whether she suggests that a *mélange* of Mizrahi and Ashkenazi culture in Israel should be the substructure for Levantinism, equivalent of the Greco-Jewish “*métissage*.”

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<sup>58</sup> See, for instance, Phillip Mansel’s definition of Levantinism, which in contrast to Kahanoff’s, places the Muslim-Christian cultural exchange and dialogue as a central aspect of the history of Levantinism.

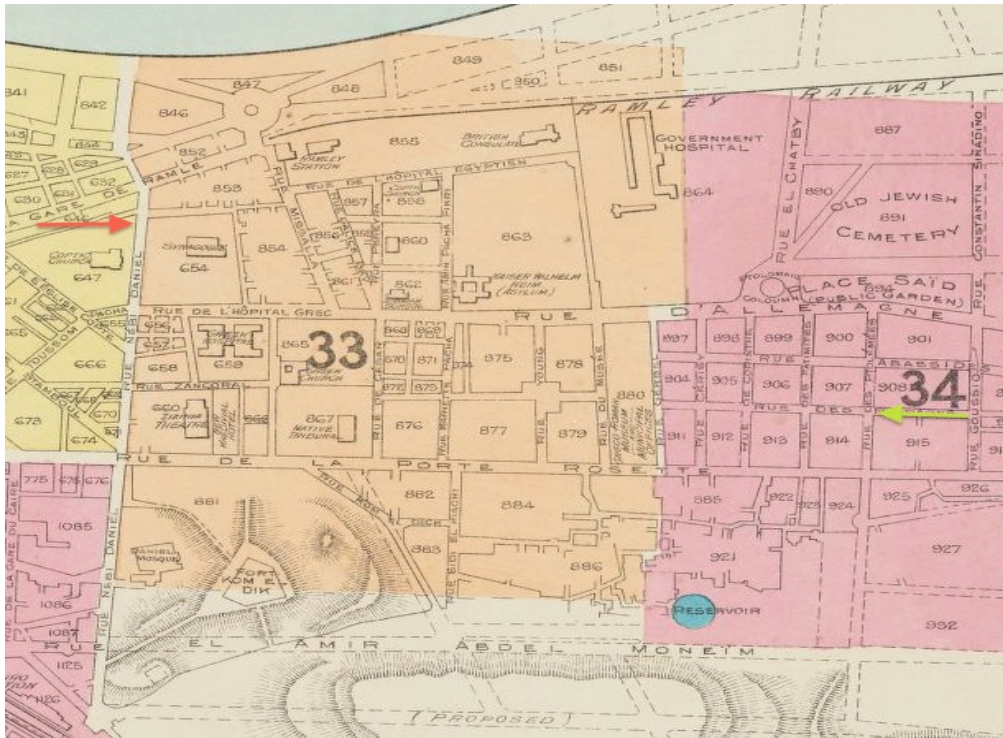


Figure 43. Map of Alexandria: Orange Arrow Rue Nebi Daniel, Green Arrow Rue des Ptolémées;  
 Source: Harvard Collection, Harvard University, Charles E. Goad, Insurance plan of Alexandria Egypt,  
 London 1898-1905, v.1, Web, April 2013, Web.

Kahanoff proceeds to reconfigure the city’s human geography in correspondence with her new map. In the guise of Mediterranean tableaux of classical civilizations, she connects the contemporary Greek and Italian residents to the Hellenic and Roman Empires: “Alexandria is the most European of Egypt’s cities, but a Europe that was always part of the Mediterranean world. It has its Greeks living here since antiquity, its Italian colony and its Italian Jewish community.” In this key sentence, Kahanoff establishes a historical and geographical continuum between Egypt and Europe. Not only does she reinscribe Alexandria in the Mediterranean, but also she subtly reverses the relationship between land and sea. In doing so, she modifies the modern cartographic representation of the region. The Mediterranean returns to the center stage; the sea does not simply constitute the southern edge of Europe, or a water

frontier between first and third worlds. It is rather the opposite, where the European continent, like Alexandria, becomes annexed to the sea. This is a reminder of Braudel's historical project, which Palmira Brummet summarizes as follows: "In a move calculated to illustrate the demise of event history, Braudel moved the event of Philip II's death to the concluding pages of *The Mediterranean*; the history of kings was here displaced by the history of the sea" (37). Both writers, then, subordinate history to geography and inadvertently displace the central political position of Europe.

Recalling Lawrence Durrell's *Quartet*, Kahanoff brings forth another ethnographic tableau of interracial lovers: "In high society, Greek men are supposed to have Jewish mistresses, and Jewish men have Greek mistresses<sup>59</sup>." Just like Kahanoff's early example of the intermarrying Arab and Ashkenazi dolls, the romantic metaphor of Greek and Jewish lovers transforms Egyptian Levantinism into what Mary Louise Pratt calls "a "transracial love story" in which "the love relationships unfold in some marginal or privileged space where relations of labor and property are suspended" (Pratt 100). The display of Levantinism, as an Alexandrian summer "fling," a fleeting love affair between Greeks and Jews, where cultural and social lines are transgressed secretly and delightfully but still kept intact on the surface, overshadows both the economic and colonial network underpinning Levantinism. Ironically, in her attempt to consolidate the role of Greek and Jewish heritage in the

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<sup>59</sup> Durrell's famous *Alexandria Quartet*, set in Alexandria before WWII, gives a glimpse of the city's Levantine society through a series of love stories and romantic affairs, but centering on that of Darley, a school teacher, and Justine, a Jewish Egyptian woman married to Nessim, an Egyptian Copt.

Mediterranean basin, she adopts a Eurocentric view of both cultures, which constructs them as unchanging and permanent, almost like archeological sites.

In the same article where she attempts to redefine the ties between Israel and the surrounding Arab nations, she proposes Levantinism as a framework for equality and an alternative to imperialism and neocolonialism. Nevertheless, she reproduces the discourse of the colonial civilizing mission, giving Israel a role previously reserved to colonial powers. In describing the role of Israel in promoting Levantinism, she says: “The Six-Day War has catapulted Israel as a force in the Levant; whatever arrangements are finally made about our as yet unrecognized borders, the imbalance between our different societies remains, leaving us little choice except to modernize the Levant while remaining respectful of its diversity” (“Afterward” 254).

Although Kahanoff’s Levantinism paved the way for the reappropriation of Near Eastern culture as a valuable component of cosmopolitanism in the Mediterranean, it still bears the traces and pressures of colonialism and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Her Levantinism is mostly ambivalent toward Arab cultures. Her vision of Jews, Greeks and Arabs is still informed by colonial ideas and commits what Michael Herzfeld dubs “Mediterraneanism,” a clichéd, tableau-like representation of the Mediterranean and its people. Nevertheless, her novel reveals that Levantine culture exceeds these reductive paradigms.

### **The Original Portrait of *Grand Magasin* Chemla: A Mimesis of French Culture**

Most of Kahanoff’s examples of Levantinism, then, revolve around the construction and reconstruction of maps and urban spaces, through which she

introduces her concept and subtly negotiates questions of national, social and cultural belonging. This pattern appears in *Jacob's Ladder*, where the department store and its double, the household, are two sites for analyzing Levantine society.

Like many Cairene *grands magasins*, the actual store, Chemla Brothers, stressed its French aspect. The advertisement, which appeared in Huda Charawi's Francophone magazine *L'Egyptienne*, borrows its design and iconography from Parisian posters, which manipulate the picture's scale by foregrounding the department store and dwarfing the surrounding urban monuments, to give the impression of a colossal building dominating the horizon. The picture evokes Zola's description of an advertisement campaign for his fictional department store (discussed in Chapter 2), *Au Bonheur des dames*: "Vu à vol d'oiseau...Paris s'étendait, mais un Paris rapetissé, mangé par le monstre... L'horizon tombait en poudre..." (Zola 1998, 468) [Then came a bird's eye view of the buildings themselves, of an exaggerated immensity...Beyond, stretched forth Paris, but Paris diminished, eaten by the monster... The horizon crumbled into powder... (Zola 2008, 383). This advertising technique elides the specificity of the urban map and its human geography, where the store comes to displace the entire city. The hyphenated words "Paris-Cairo," positioned at top center, as well as the script affirming the regular connection with Paris, emphasizes the store's role as mediator of French culture in Egypt, almost reducing its commercial activities to a bilateral exchange between the two nations.

The store positions itself as a metonymy for France in Egypt, an idea also expressed through its architectural design and setting. This is how Jacqueline

Kahanoff's mother, Yvone Chemla, remembers *Chemla Frères*, built in 1907 in a French fin de siècle style:

All the halls [were built] in marble, the columns in the Louis XVI style, with acanthus leaves, for that period it was unheard-of luxury, the display windows...[T]he store had the ground floor [of the building]...On the first floor there was a notions [department], which was very, very important in bringing in customers [mercerie très très bien achalandée][well stocked merchandise], the cloth department on the right and on the left there was the hosiery/haberdashery department [rayon de bonneterie] for men and women...on the inside was the lingerie. The back of the store was occupied by furniture on the left and the shoe department on the right, and all that with the counters in polished mahogany wood, and with ravishing display cases [vitrines]...There were very large ateliers for haute couture. There were important women designers/cutters [premières] from Paris...and they had one of the very best milliners from Paris, a corset maker from Paris, and all this made an extraordinary impression. (qtd. in English in Reynolds 2003, 137:138)

The interview, conducted in 1964 in Israel, documents the history of the *grand magasin* Chemla tailored after a Parisian space. As Nancy Reynolds indicates, like many of its competitors located on the same street, the store's design and layout was part of the mimetic gesture to emphasize its connection to France (Reynolds 2012, 77). Perhaps Yvone Chemla highlights the French aspect of the store as she reconstructs this account in Israel at a time when Near Eastern and Levantine culture was equated with backwardness. The language of the interview itself, French, is central to the recreation of the store's image. The store was a French space memorialized in the language of that culture that it represented. In the same way, the department store's activities and commercial culture sought to reconcile a modern European tradition with a local one. Reynolds explains: "multilingualism and ethnic intermixing dominated the store floors and the store shelves of much urban commerce" (Reynolds 2003, 224). In other words, neither the products sold nor the employees or clientele



were exclusively Francophone, despite the emphasis on the French aspect of the store. The everyday reality in the store was different from the romanticized French image presented by Chemla. Many of the employees spoke many languages, including Arabic, and used them according to a specific context, such the cultural background of their clients or their colleagues (Reynolds 2012, 224).

### **The *Grand Magasin* as a Mirror to Levantinism**

The motif of the department store as a reflection of Egyptian society already existed in the Egyptian cultural repertoire. In using the department store to mirror Egyptian cosmopolitanism, Kahanoff draws from the popular Kish Kish Bey plays starring the famous actor Najib Al-Rihani and directed by Togo Mizrahi, which she describes in other writings:

In Cairo, Kish-Kish Bey's popular theater provided the one setting where people of various backgrounds met and laughed together and at themselves and one another. These unpretentious, lively, funny, partly improvised playlets were produced by a young Jew called Mizrahi. Vivid recognizable types were portrayed on the stage: the Greek grocer, with his funny lisp in Arabic, having a passionate argument with his customers, the Jew from harat-al-yahud [the Jewish quarter], with a rose or twig of jasmine behind his ear, which he passed under his nose whenever he felt embarrassed or told a fib; and the middle-aged, veiled Moslem lady, venturing into a department store, entranced by Western goods, asking the cheeky little Italian salesgirls whether one puts a girdle over or under a petticoat, and at what moment one puts on or takes off a bed jacket in bed. Kish-Kish Bey reflected our simple origins, stripped of pretense. (A Culture Stillborn 116)

Ironically, the *Renaissance* theatre where Rihani performed his vaudeville plays was later replaced by the *grand magasin* Chemla owned by Kahanoff's grandparents (Al-Rihani 68). Najib al-Rihani who played the character of Kish Kish Bey was an Egyptian Francophone actor of an Iraqi father and Egyptian mother. He adapted many

plays from French, and starred in many theatrical works and movies representing the Egyptian Levantine community, such as “Hassan, Morcos, and Cohen,” and “Kish Kish Bey in Paris.” The playlets center on the naïve but cunning Kish Kish Bey, a provincial landowner who travels to Cairo to squander his profits from the cotton harvest.<sup>60</sup> Togo Mizrahi’s and Al-Rihani’s portrayal of the department stores on the theatre stage showcased the different Levantine “types” who made up modern Egyptian cosmopolitan society in order to critique the cultural transformation of this community, which had suddenly prospered in the early twentieth century and found itself before an unprecedented economic and cultural capital due to the commercial activity revived by the Suez Canal and the cotton trade boom. In the scene described above, the play ridicules not only the Muslim woman unable to understand the purpose of a girdle, but also a modern Egyptian society trying to force itself into a new form<sup>61</sup>.

Building on the above repertoire, Kahanoff presents a similar idea from the perspective of a Jewish woman from Egypt and the daughter of the owners of a department store. Just as Najib al-Rihani mocks the unfamiliarity of the Muslim client with a girdle, Kahanoff narrates a Jewish middle-class family’s comic struggle to master European material culture imported and marketed by their own department stores, and necessary for the acquisition of social status in a colonial context. In the novel, Rachel describes the ways in which the Smadjas attempt to understand and

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<sup>60</sup> For more on Najib al-Rihani’s Kish Kish Bey, see “Najib al-Rihani from Baffoonery to Social Comedy,” *Journal of Arab Literature* (1973) pp. 1-17.

<sup>61</sup> The image of unfitting ready-made clothes is a common trope in the department store to highlight this disconnection between culture and its performance. As discussed in Chapter 2, Emile Zola’s main protagonist in *Au Bonheur des dames*, Denise, faces the derision of bourgeois clients when she fails to model a coat properly, a gesture that betrays her working-class roots that she could not erase.

adopt French, and later English, cultural capital. In one of the passages, Nathan Smadja asks: “What’s that Proust, Alice, benti [my daughter]? I don’t remember eating it” (211). I will elaborate on this idea in further passages. By weaving her family history as owners of *grands magasins*, and that of Egyptian Jews, Kahanoff expands Al-Rihani’s narrative to shed light on another side of the prism that makes the Levantine community.

### **Mapping Levantinism Through the Department Store A Biblical Teleology**

While narrating the social ascension of the Gaons and the Smadjas in Egypt, *Jacob’s Ladder* switches between three sites of Levantine culture: the house, the department store and the city at large. For Kahanoff, both the domestic and public spaces record the tensions between the sought-after European lifestyle and the actual culture created during that process of mimicry. The novel does not begin in the department store. Instead it offers a detailed description of the House of Gaon, located in the Abbassiyeh quarter, a “traditional” neighborhood. Via a cinematic scene, the narrator introduces the Gaons and their patriarch, the traditional man from Iraq:

Horses’ hooves clattered through the silence of the narrow lanes, and Jacob Gaon made ready to receive his sons. He pictured them in their European suits, coming from their modern homes to the timelessness of this lane, with its houses withdrawn behind high walls, flowering with Jasmin [sic] and Honeysuckle, its echoes of grave voices exchanging the Arab greeting: “Peace be upon you”; in it no women walked unless she were draped in habbara<sup>62</sup>. The old man heard the carriage pull to a stop, heard steps on the path, and the hushed whispers of his sons while they waited for the servant to answer their knock. He detected the urgent note in their tone...But Jacob soon drove worry

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<sup>62</sup> A traditional fabric used by women to wrap around their bodies (see fig. 15)

from his fine old face, and composed it into lines of majestic serenity. Whatever his doubts, his sons must always see him stern and detached, the Patriarch. (Kahanoff 1951, 3)

Jacob Gaon resides in a reclusive, idyllic traditional house that exists in harmony with its geographical and cultural location. The house blends perfectly with the surroundings. The neighborhood dwellers speak Arabic; men and women live according to age-old religious customs. The clattering of the horses' hooves, at the beginning paragraph, announces the advent of guests who are, in this case, Jacob's sons. The sons here are both insiders and outsiders. Their European attire and their homes located in the English-style suburb Garden City mark another spatial and temporal rupture created by a European lifestyle. The image of the sons carries an ambiguous connotation of both continuity and rupture; while it suggests the projection of Jacob's family line into the future and their success in developing the father's enterprise, it also bears a nostalgic tone that laments the separation from an earlier state of things, or a "fall" into a European way of life that distances the sons from this old, serene, paradisiacal quarter. The House of Jacob suffers from a divide between two generations and traditions.

The spatial description and the linguistic register bring out another aspect of the Patriarch's image. Jacob sits in a room where the texts of the Ten Commandments and the Balfour declaration hang on the wall.<sup>63</sup> The documents anchor the family within a specific socio-political context, by bringing to the forefront the British imperial presence, the recent memory of world wars and the emergence of the newly

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<sup>63</sup> Rachel's detailed household description, including the Ten Commandments and the Balfour declaration, are based on Kahanoff's early memories of her grandfather's house.

founded Israeli nation. When Jacob's sons ask him for advice, Jacob replies in a cryptic language, using Biblical metaphors: "We must think of lean years, and prepare for them in the prosperous one" (6). The allusion to the Biblical story of Jacob's ladder aligned with the British promise to create a modern nation for Israel entwines modern and Biblical history<sup>64</sup>. The reference to the story of Joseph creates an imaginary continuum between the ancient House of Israel (Jacob) and the modern House of Jacob Gaon in Egypt.

Soon enough the readers realize that, despite the religious tone recalling the Biblical Near East, the conversation between the modern Jacob and his sons revolves around their commercial enterprise, more specifically around the operation of their new stores. In contrast to the biblical Jacob, the modern Jacob is a merchant and should be the future owner of a department store. *The House of Gaons* evokes both a household and a modern *grand magasin*.<sup>65</sup> The depiction of the Gaons as merchants in modern Egypt, which simultaneously refers to scriptures, reconstructs the family's

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<sup>64</sup> Jacob left Beersheba, and went toward Haran. He came to the place and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! And behold, the Lord stood above it [or "beside him"] and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your descendants; and your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and by you and your descendants shall all the families of the earth bless themselves. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done that of which I have spoken to you. (Genesis 28 11-19)

<sup>65</sup> Kahanoff could be emulating Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Lost Time*, in which the writer depicted the narrator's father at the beginning of the novel as both a modern, slightly comic, image of Abraham wearing a silk robe and a headscarf.

profession as a divine predestination. Jacob's sons attempt to anchor themselves in Egypt by building many houses, or rather department stores. The debate between father and sons regarding their dream of commercial expansion recreates an overall map of Egypt outlined by the sons' future project of building a store in every town. This plan triggers Jacob's refusal since this does not conform to traditional commercial conventions. The father, who knows every town and hamlet and speaks the different Egyptian dialects, operates in tandem with local merchants (11). The sons' commercial aspirations, however, consist of acquiring a large market share by disrupting this custom and building their own retail centers, placing competition before social collaboration.

The scene then follows Emile Zola's pattern in staging the department store as a rupture in the social fabric of the community. The text emphasizes this fact by shifting the focus from Jacob Gaon to his servant: "Ahmed the servant, a tall and severe man, came in with Turkish coffee. He had been with Jacob since the day of his arrival in Egypt, and had come to look like him, except that he was younger, and wore finer galabiehs" (14). Standing silently in the shadow of Jacob Gaon, Ahmed, the Muslim servant, appears to be Jacob's alter ego, a reminder of Jacob's humble beginnings. Both share an Arab background, but are separated by social class and religion. Ahmed more closely resembles Jacob than his own sons do.

Despite Ahmed's position as a servant, he has a central role that even Jacob Gaon could not perform:

In this part of Cairo, where Moslem and Jew sent servants bearing gifts to his neighbor on religious holidays, where everyone lived by the peace handed down to him by his forbears, obeyed an ancient order and accepted the fortunes

and the misfortunes of life as the will of God, women still lived in the seclusion of their own quarter. (Kahanoff 1951, 4)

The text suggests that the serenity of the neighborhood rests on another world, on the presence of domestic help who act as a liaison between Muslim and Jewish neighbors. The servants' mobility contrasts with the age-old quarter's stability. In contrast to their patrons, servants can cross social, spatial and cultural boundaries and bridge the distances between the separate groups. Servants move among houses but also within the gender-segregated quarters of the household. Unlike the department store's recorded economic transactions, the circulation of gifts between neighbors for an unregistered economic exchange beyond the marketplace. The stability of the Gaons depends on these invisible connections maintained and established by the servants who represent, or replace, their masters in these moments. By introducing the servants, the sentence inverts the capitalist economic paradigm, where now the Gaon's wealth and prosperity appear to be a surplus value to this unrecorded economic transaction. Despite their presence in the shadow, domestic help is crucial to the family's existence. Via this game of doubling and the creation of foil characters, Kahanoff initiates a central theme that runs throughout the text to highlight the tension between the visible and invisible, between what is officially acknowledged and recorded and what is only implicitly understood and erased from memory.

As the conversation between father and sons progresses on the possible location of the future stores, the passage switches from evoking an overall map of the country to that of Cairo divided between modern and traditional neighborhoods:

Couldn't we go half-way to meet him by starting one new branch...perhaps at the intersection of Sharia Boulac and Sharia Emad el-Din, the heart of new

Cairo? (9)... Our business is in old Cairo,” David said, “but people are moving to the modern part of town, and it’s precisely because a new city is growing that you brought us here. Our new branch would be the parent house what the child is to the father.<sup>66</sup> (Kahanoff 1951, 11)

In her focus on the divide between the two sides of the city, Kahanoff creates her novel over a stereotypically colonial map that structures the city into two sites antagonistic to each other, a modern European side and an antiquated Oriental one. The Abbassiyeh quarter, which Kahanoff describes as traditional, was a quarter built during the Khedive Abbas’s life (1848-1852) and whose plan does not necessarily conform to an old antiquated Cairene quarter.<sup>67</sup> In the context of Kahanoff’s novel, the intergenerational argument between Jacob Gaon and his sons is reflected in the cityscape, as an urban schism where Cairo itself is divided between a new culture taking shape and a traditional one that functions according to different rules. The location of the future store stands for the sons’ desire to prosper and acquire social status by being part of modern Cairo. Yet, the son’s choice to “meet half-way” and locate the store at a site where both cities intersect suggests that the department store would be a blend of both lifestyles, projecting as such the traits of a Levantine culture situated at the intersection of old and new, “Oriental” and European.

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<sup>66</sup> Shari’ Boulac (Bulaq) and Emad el Din, currently Sherif and 26 July streets, where the Chemla store is actually located (see fig. 33).

<sup>67</sup> Nancy Reynolds, for instance, refers to Jeremyah Lynch’s memoirs of Abbassiyeh which also divide the city into two sections, but considers Abbasiyeh, occupied by Greek, Italian and French residents, as New Cairo (Reynolds 2012, 27).



## A Material History of Levantinism: Kol-Bo Culture

In Chapter Two of *Jacob's Ladder*, the text takes the readers to Smadja Brothers, the store owned by Rachel's maternal grandparents. As mentioned earlier, this is based on the writer's memory of *Chemla Frères*, which was located on the same Emad el Din Street mentioned by the Gaons as the mid point between the two sides of Cairo. The narrator describes the department store as a place of openness and calm, in contrast to the bustle and din of the street.

Nathan Smadja stood at the entrance of his store, smiling at the life of the sunny street flowing by him, "A bargain, a good bargain, my lady!" the pedlars [sic] cried, and the fat, handsome women shouted back, "Go on, away with you, you rascals! Thieves!" His thick thumb crooked over the gold chain of his watch taut across his big paunch, he smiled guilelessly at all the people who came in, as if to tell them "Don't worry, we have everything you need, and at a good price too," and people smiled back at him. (Kahanoff 1951, 22)

In contrast to the sacred halo surrounding Jacob Gaon, Nathan Smadja is described in comic, banal terms. He neither sits on a throne-like chair in a reclusive paradisiacal house, nor speaks in a refined cryptic language with Biblical metaphors. The readers encounter Nathan Smadja for the first time as he stands here at the doorway of the store. He is dwarfed by the large entrance and embodies a very stereotypical racialized Mizrahi look: a large paunch, a gold watch, and a crooked thumb, talking to customers, and in other passages shouting at peddlers (Kahanoff 1951, 25). Unlike Jacob Gaon, he does not have servants to open the big gates of his secluded, sheltered house to lead the guests to his room. Nathan's speech is a mix of languages: French, Arabic, and perhaps some words of Italian (while talking to Mrs. Biagiotti), to communicate with clients and peddlers. His linguistic register is that of the everyday, a colloquial idiom delivered in a theatrical manner marked by short sentences and

interjections, a reminder of the souk, the traditional marketplace, or of advertisements: “Don’t worry, we have everything you need, and at a good price too” (Kahanoff 1951, 22); “Come I’ll show you the new lace we’re unpacking—a dream! Extraordinary! The finest! Just arrived from France for your trousseau!” (Kahanoff 1951, 22).

The Smadja Brothers store does not resemble a modern business enterprise with a clearly marked hierarchy between employees. Instead, it is a family-oriented venture, mixing traditional and modern management. Nathan Smadja occupies an awkward position between a manager of a “Parisian” department store and a peddler promoting his merchandise on the street, serving as doorman, vendor and store manager. He even feels more comfortable in the streets shouting and competing with street vendors than enacting the role of a typical department store manager:

Nathan forgot his troubles as soon as he was in the streets. He shouted at the small beggars, glued to the display windows by their running [sic] noses and sticky fingers, “What! Soiling our windows! Let me catch you at it again, and I’ll beat you to death!” They laughed, because he was good-natured, but ran out of his reach...A young pedlar came up boldly, the basket strapped around his neck full of threads, needles, elastics, buttons. “For your daughters, sir?” He asked impudently. Nathan laughed. “You can try to undersell me, you rogue, but don’t expect me to undersell myself. Off with you!” Then he called, “You there, with the balloons! That’s something I don’t sell. Give me a red one for my grandchild. (Kahanoff 1951, 25)

As foil characters, the young street peddlers reflect Nathan’s childhood. In fact, the narrator stresses that the Smadja brothers themselves had earlier been “two small ragged pedlars in the streets of Tunis” (Kahanoff 1951, 23). The finger marks made by the beggars on Nathan’s modern vitrine evoke the traces of his past as a young street vendor, his beginnings and the history of his family’s social ascension. The scene reveals the fragile class distinction that separates him from the young street vendors

surrounding his store, especially since he does not act like a refined Francophone from the middle class.<sup>68</sup> Most importantly the finger marks soiling the windows destroy the illusion of the seemingly invisible glass pane, which connects the store to streets. The fingermarks compose an implicit stop sign through which the window materializes as a solid barrier that keeps the unwanted outside.

Leaving the description of the store's semi-closed barriers, which separates between the city and the store, the narrator swiftly moves inside the store:

The pair [Rachel and her grandfather, Nathan Smadja] marched down the central aisle of the store in stately procession, and the employees dropped the merchandise they were showing to customers, crossed their hands on their hearts and exclaimed, "Isn't she a darling! Even the customers participated in the ritual as Nathan, his face beaming, picked on an enormously fat Moslem woman, knowing their love for children and the generosity of their praise... The woman laughed, her face half visible under the veil, and said... May Allah protect her from the Evil Eye!"... "You can have ten per cent off that handbag you're buying! We just received this lot from Paris, first quality, my lady, the latest fashion, the finest in Cairo." (Kahanoff 1951, 56)

Nathan Smadja uses traditional ways to market his store, hinging on developing a personal connection with the clientele, greeting them and exchanging news. Whereas French department stores have built their image by stressing fixed prices and eliminating bargaining, Nathan promotes his French merchandise by offering an instant discount to the clients he likes. French department stores appealed to families by creating play spaces for children, selling toys and giving away balloons and trinkets. Nathan's strategy is reminiscent of such an idea. However, he translates this mechanism into the local context. Talking about Rachel in the department store and

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<sup>68</sup> In her dissertation "Commodity Communities," Nancy Reynolds elaborates in detail on the significance of the window as a barrier between the outside, native and inside, cosmopolitan space of the department store. She emphasizes that large store windows, specially imported from Europe, were a central symbol of modernity at the turn of the twentieth century (151).

exchanging compliments with the clients is itself a marketing technique that revolves around the theme of family and children, which appeals to a middle-class clientele.

For Rachel, however, the department store represents a private kingdom where she receives exceptional attention from both clients and employees. Unlike the clearly marked spaces in the city divided by class, ethnicity and citizenship, between old and new, here Rachel can wander with few restrictions. “Rachel was free to dash through the aisles on a scooter, to touch everything” in that miniature world which mimicked the larger social and economic structure of the nation: “lead soldiers...bright firemen...trumpets...tea sets...[a] train winding its way through green board pastures” (Kahanoff 1951, 57). In contrast to this childish utopia in the eyes of Rachel, the narrator reveals another dimension of the store that reflects a more realistic image of Egyptian society, when Nathan Smadja takes his granddaughter to the workshop, or atelier:

He marched her off to the workroom, where new pleasures awaited Rachel, as her grandfather entrusted her to the care of young seamstresses. The big sunny room exploded with laughter, the gay whirr and purr of the sewing machines, of scissors crissing through bright wools, velvets, laces, and silks, the quick movements of pulling threaded needles, of feet busy on the treadle machines. That the girls were pale, smelling of sweat, cheap perfume and bad breath, was something Rachel did not notice when Nathan opened the door and a great shout greeted her...“Here’s Mascotte, to bring us luck!”

The girls cleared a space on the long table, and hoisted up the child, to sit enthroned among the fabrics, the ribbons, the flowers, the cushions bristling with pins and needles, and the light spools of thread. Even Madame Marthe, the stern première, who had been with the Smadjas since Tunis days, relented in her discipline, and let the girls drape Rachel in rolls of fabric, which trailed regally behind her as she paraded up and down the table, stumbling over obstacles, dragging her doll after her. They laughed and clapped their hands, exclaiming, “Will we be bridesmaids at your wedding, Mascotte?” (Kahanoff 1951, 57)

Just as the actual store serves a cosmopolitan Levantine crowd, the atelier depends on a large group of Levantine employees who are the workforce that recreate Parisian fashion for their clientele. For Rachel, the atelier appears as a fairytale space, full of laughter and conviviality. The house of Smadja materializes as both a department store and a household where the employees are part of one family. The scene, however, despite its happy tone still retains the grim traces of manual labor and class distinction: “the pale” workers, the “stern” look of the première Madame Marthe, “the smell of sweat,” the “cheap perfume,” the busy feet on the treadle. The image of the atelier workers contrasts with the playful aspect of the scene and most importantly with that of the socialite Levantines, which the narrator describes below.

### **Objects and Subjects of Display**

The description of young Rachel draped in fabric and pretending to be a bride foreshadows another moment in the novel in which the family celebrates the wedding of Rachel’s aunt. The workers of the atelier were in charge of making the family’s outfits for this significant social event. The narrator gives the following critique of the elite Levantine society attending the wedding:

Something had happened in this society, which made money the yardstick of all values. This was a liberated society, acquisitive, competitive, but also fluid, and doubtful of itself. Old values were breaking down, and there was a lack of new ones to fill the empty space. Money was there, as a common language between the once segregated communities, money was the symbol of power, esteem, love given and received, money was the measure of things. Yet people who made such remarks felt a vague shame in doing so, while longing to feel again what they had felt in the synagogue. (Kahanoff 1951, 135)

In her description, the narrator stresses the transformation of an ambitious and self-doubting class that needs the affirmation of material wealth to consolidate their newly found status. In this highly fragmented elite Levantine world that has lost contact with its respective roots, money becomes a common denominator that replaces cultural capital. Unlike the traditional household of Jacob Gaon that seems anchored in space, fixed and unchanging, the new Levantine community is as dynamic and fluid as the image of money it represents. Whereas the crowded atelier smells of sweat, bad breath, and cheap perfume, a space crammed with fabrics and sewing machines, the elegant wedding represents the final visible product put together in the store's atelier whose workers do not attend the ceremony.

Rachel's family, however, occupies a middle position between these social groups. They are neither working-class, nor established colonial elites. They are both consumers and suppliers of European goods. The family's command of cultural capital is crucial to their social and financial status, since they have to promote European material culture. The narrator emphasizes the role of the store in transforming Egyptian society, through their imports: "Smadja Brothers were the first in Cairo to import American sheer silk stockings, lastex (sic) girdles, polo shirts, plastic cigarette cases" (Kahanoff, 1951 402). As a member of the Smadja and Gaon families, Rachel embodies this double position that shapes her social representation but also her situation as a woman. For instance, she obtains the permission to wear lipstick because of "the part [that] the sales of lipstick had played in promoting the Gaons' prosperity" (Kahanoff 1951, 421). Being the daughter of a department store owner marks both her social and gender representation. Unlike any other family, the Smadjas turn into

objects of display. Because of their connection to commerce, they are forced, in a sense, to spearhead the social transformation in the city regardless of its impact on their life.

This middle position of women, as producers and consumers, of material culture reflects the author's family's actual experience. Yvone Chemla described the connection between the house of the Chemla Brothers and the department store:

Women from the Chemla family, married to or children of department heads as well as owners, were dressed elegantly from the store's merchandise, so that they could act as living [réclame]<sup>69</sup> for the store: people would ask, "where is that dress from? Oh naturally, it is a Chemla daughter, and her pretty dress must be from their couture workshop. The dress of Chemla employees was also considered to reflect directly on the status of the store, and the firm frequently provided employees with clothing and other goods. (Reynolds 2003, 268)

Following the tradition of family-owned shops, women from the Chemla family married the head salesclerks to keep the business in the household. Dressing from the atelier promoted the store's merchandise and highlighted the family status. By wearing the stores' merchandise, the public would also know that the wearer is a "Chemla daughter." In this case, family lineage and social position become entwined with the image of merchandise. Rachel's situation does not differ from the previous description. She is the product of the store and the household. She represents a unique embodiment of cultural and economic capital; an intersection between the two faces of "The House of Smadja," the household and the marketplace. As a child, she is a marketing device that allows the grandfather to chat and bond with his clients and sell his merchandise. In addition, she reveals herself as an example of a new elite

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<sup>69</sup> Advertisement.

Levantine class, who is actually another “product” of the atelier. As the seamstresses describe her, Rachel is truly a “mascotte” of the Levantine community in the double sense that, as a bourgeois Levantine, she is being transformed into the visible and marketable emblem of Levantinism.

### **Beyond the Vitrine: Mastering European Material Culture**

Despite the strategic social position of the narrator’s family, Kahanoff reveals the artificiality and fragility of their new social image, which is a product of a continuous conscious effort, and separation from their heritage. In her description of Hattouna, her Iraqi grandmother, Rachel stresses the grandmother’s belonging to a distant “dead” “world” that had its proper customs, manners, and aesthetics, but lost their significance in this new society:

He [Rachel’s father] bowed before the aged woman, who sat in the attitude of a Persian miniature, her back upright, never leaning against the cushions of the low divan, her legs folded beneath her with dainty slippers peeping out from the sides of her dove-grey silk habbara.... Tiny violet flowers trimmed the mauve kerchief Hattouna wore over the wig of an orthodox Jewish matron, and her graceful, stylized movements set them dancing on her forehead [...]. Smaller silk rugs of delicate shades hung on the walls, and ebony tables inlaid with ivory and mother-of-pearl were strewn among the divans. Near the latticed window, precocious apricot blossoms shot out from an enameled Persian vase...She returned carrying a brocade of pale almond green and white gold wrapped in russet silk.

“How beautiful! But really, you shouldn’t do this! It’ll look handsome draped over my piano!” Alice exclaimed enthusiastically.

Hattouna’s fingertips caressed the sumptuous material. “In Baghdad, it would have made a bride’s dress.” (Kahanoff 1951, 20)

Dressed in a traditional Iraqi Jewish manner, Hattouna sits in a secluded quarter, which resembles an Oriental tableau that highlights a luxurious but different materiality. The delicate lady, who moves gracefully in that familiar elegant place,



belongs to another social space that has a different relation to material culture.

Hattouna offers a sumptuous piece of fabric to Alice, Rachel's mother. Whereas the grandmother sees that fabric as the material for an luxurious "bride's dress," Alice, the Francophone Tunisian daughter-in-law, assigns a different that reflects the family's wealth. For her, the brocade will make an elegant cover for the piano. In Hattouna's description her own "world is dead" not only because it belongs to a remote life in Baghdad, but also because it has lost its cultural and economic value in this new society. Outside her house, despite her elite status, Hattouna seems out of place. Even during her daughter's wedding, she is treated condescendingly by the Levantine Jewish community. Sitting in her quarter, a harem-like space, Hattouna appears to be "a Persian miniature," an object in a museum. Whereas the Gaon's life belongs to a distant, extinct and comfortable world, the Smadja's House represents comic and gauche attempts to adopt a French lifestyle. The narrator describes Nathan Smadja's "Grand Salon" (Kahanoff 1951, 30):

[Nathan] looked with pleasure at his table, opened at full length to seat nearly twenty people, adorned with the best tablecloth with two big soup tureens...overflowing with couscous...He walked around the table, and bumped into a sculptured bronze corner of the sideboard, but its style, which Nathan proudly though inexactly called "Louis XV" was worth all the bruises it inflicted on the family...Sandra, a chubby girl of twelve, with blue eyes and black hair...saw him throw the stone into one of the Chinese vases on the sideboard. Everything went into those vases except flowers, she thought. When she married and had her own house, she would not allow people to do such things, nor to yell from one room to another. Throwing herself on her bed, she began to read a French novel, longing for the elegant world it described. (Kahanoff 1951, 28-30)

The paragraph highlights the often-undocumented efforts and pains involved in becoming bourgeois. Just as the family members have to use their own body as a

living advertisement and wear Chemla's merchandise, the narrator describes the same corporeality in relation to other European objects. The bruises made by the new furniture on the Smadjas' bodies mark an invisible struggle and a muted pain as they force themselves into this new lifestyle. The mistakenly identified "Louis XV" sideboard and the Chinese vase that has been assigned different functions from its original purpose (in contrast to Hattouna's Persian vase), reveals the gap between the family's social aspirations and their actual failure to master cultural capital. In her rejection of her family's old habits and gauche manners, Sandra, Rachel's aunt, escapes her immediate surroundings to sink into a French novel; she creates her distant imaginary European world based on fictional literature, hoping that one day her future family will have more French manners. The shiny golden furniture, the large table laden with couscous, the misused Chinese vase, as well as the entire Smadja family, are as close to French culture as the shiny golden word "Paris" featured on the department store façade.

The Gaons and the Smadjas, then, despite their ambitious aspirations, only manage to live in a culture that is neither European nor Near Eastern. As Homi Bhabha indicates, the civilizing mission always functions with a deferral, an engrained failure that prevents it from reaching its claimed goal, justifying as such the continuous presence of the colonizer. It turns the colonized subject into a "subject of difference that is almost the same but not quite" (Bhabha 89). Finding themselves midway on the social ladder, the Gaons attempt to overcome the disparity of the civilizing mission, to guarantee their transformation to colonial elite, by seeking the expertise of domestic help. During her trip to London, Alice, Rachel's mother, decides

to hire a nanny for her daughter. The following debate takes place between Rachel's parents:

"I'll need someone then to help me with Rachel."

"But why not an Italian nursemaid?" David suggested. "It's an English woman, criticizing, looking down on us, drawing the child away. I don't care for..." he said lamely, and appealed to Moses, who shook his head.

Alice argued heatedly. "The children who have English nurses won't play with those who don't, and the English nurses won't even talk to Italian nursemaids. They aren't admitted to the same playgrounds either. It just isn't fair to the Child. We must think of her future and give her the best advantages..."

"Rather" Moses stopped his brother's protest. "Our Children must become European, civilized. It's their only way to defend themselves in the modern world. Look at Samuel's daughter. She is marrying into one of the best families in Cairo...Dinah has manners and that makes the difference. (Kahanoff 1951, 116)

Alice's words give insight into the fine lines of the colonial legal system hinging on the control of minorities. On first glance, in contrast to the "natives," the protégés of the British Empire seem to enjoy a distinct social and legal status within Egypt. Yet, these minorities are also subject to a minute hierarchy and classification, which regulates their privileges including their spatial and social movement. The mere presence of an English nurse has the potential of transforming Rachel's status, since she would give her access to certain public places designated for English citizens. Like the *grand magasin* whose glass barriers kept the "unwanted" native beggars and peddlers away, the city space is also subject to a more intricate colonial system that divided the elite Levantine community into even smaller subgroups and controlled their mobility according to both ethnicity and economic status. The Ezbekieh garden, where Rachel and her brother go to play, turns into a colonial grid divided along lines of race and ethnicity. The segregated children's playground becomes a microcosm, or rather an incubator, in which the colonizer shapes the habitus of the different

minorities and consolidates them into distinct groups and races. The *grand magasin*, however, despite its restrictions, forged a relatively fluid culture different from that of the colonizer's, since its main criterion of discrimination is wealth.

The Gaons' conversation reveals the key role that domestic help plays in the civilizing mission. Nursemaids can be part of "repressive and productive mechanisms" that propel the creation of the new colonial bourgeoisie (Anidjar xiii). Governesses embody the colonizer within the intimate space of the household. David's protests expose the colonial aspect of hiring an English nanny and its direct influence in instituting the rigid dichotomy between colonizer and colonized, Western and "Oriental." Positioned inside the house, the nursemaid becomes the colonial agent that places the colonized Orientals under her constant gaze and marks their "need" for "corrective study by the West," creating as such the traumatic "inferiority complex" or splitting of consciousness (Said 41) (Fanon 8). In other words, the nursemaid becomes a self-imposed panoptic state apparatus that operates by "distributing individuals, fixing them in space, classifying them...training their bodies, coding their behavior [and] maintaining them in perfect visibility" (Foucault 231).

From a sociological perspective, the nursemaid assists the schooling system and the household in the creation of the distinct reified image of the bourgeoisie. Pierre Bourdieu posits that "[t]he ideology of natural taste contrasts...two modes of acquisition of culture": one that is produced at an early stage of life and accompanied by a schooling system and a "belated" one that communicates the knowledge of manner and taste but does not allow its complete internalization by the subject. The former "confers the self certainty which accompanies the certainty of possessing

legitimacy, and the ease of which is the touchstone of excellence; it produces the paradoxical relationship to culture made up of self-confidence amid (relative) ignorance and of casualness amid familiarity, which bourgeois families hand down to their offspring as if it were an heirloom” (Bourdieu 66). Being a part of an ascending social class, Alice and David do not possess a strong enough knowledge of British culture to be able to transfer it comfortably to their daughter. The nursemaid then would substitute for the parent and transmit a ghostly, English bourgeois “heirloom” that could distinguish Rachel from the rest of her original society. By hiring a British nursemaid, Alice Gaon takes control of her children’s education, in order to ensure that the colonial civilizing mission reaches its presumed goal of transforming her children into Europeans. In the novel, Alice refers to Harat–el-Yahud, or the Jewish quarter, as a dreaded Oriental space: “Did we give our girls a good schooling for them to live like Hara Jews?” (Kahanoff 1951, 211). “Alice shuddered recalling those who have come to be interviewed, gaunt, haggard women, their eyes blurred by ophthalmia” (Kahanoff 1951, 78). Jews from the Hara mark a regression on the colonial social ladder, a situation that is closer to the faceless “natives.” Unlike the British style neighborhood of Garden City where Alice resides, or even the traditional affluent Arab Abassiyeh quarter where Jacob resides, Jews from el *Hara*, transliterated in Arabic in the text, embodies the fantasmatic threat of becoming Arabized (Abu-Lughod 142). To return to Harat el Yahud is a reminder of Nathan Smadja’s beginning as a poor peddler, a native, an Oriental expunged from the colonial social map, if not from history itself. The contrast between the two positions is startling, between the imaginary confines of Harat el Yahud rendered monolithic

and monolingual through its Arabic transliteration, and the rich cosmopolitan suburb of Garden City. In reality, unlike the image suggested by the novel, Harat el Yahud harbored a diverse community, with different social, cultural and religious backgrounds, including Egyptian Muslims and Mizrahi and Ashkenazi Jews<sup>70</sup>.

A rich colonial subject, Rachel's mother, crosses class boundaries and turns colonialism against itself. Alice consciously chooses a British nanny as her substitute. In doing so, she occupies a double position at once: one of ultimate powerlessness, since she decides to give her agency as a mother to the nursemaid, but also a position of control of the colonial civilizing mission as the employer of her colonizer. Growing up with the nursemaid corresponds to Ann McClintock's claim:

In a very real sense, these children grew up with two (or more) mothers, whom they learned to distinguish by learning the social scripts of class difference, the meaning of uniforms, curtseys and bows, the rituals of recognition and deference that separated the two most powerful figures in the child's life. The contradictions were sharp...On the one hand, the Nanny's power was absolute. On the other hand, she could be rebuked, demeaned or dismissed at a word from the mistress. (McClintock 86)

As Rachel internalizes colonial values and language through the help of her nursemaid, she can stand out as the modern European civilized subject amid both the "natives" and the rest of the Levantine community. However, for Rachel, the nursemaid's presence reveals a more complex connotation than the simple blurring of lines between authenticity and mimicry across race and class. Moses, Rachel's uncle, affirms that having a nanny is a significant investment, since it can help Rachel marry

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<sup>70</sup> As a young woman, Kahanoff and some of her friends volunteered in a clinic in Harat-Al-Yahud. She is aware of the neighborhood's human geography, which is different from Alice's and Miss Nutting's reductive classist and colonial perspectives (Starr and Somekh xv).

into the “best families.” The nanny then plays an essential role in instituting and internalizing colonial and gender performance, a combination that can turn Rachel herself into a profitable piece of economic capital for the family, and hence be of a great advantage to consolidate the family social and financial situation in Egypt. Behind this advantage stands David’s fear of the nanny “drawing the child away”—the splitting of familial and cultural integrity.

Ironically, the presence of a governess does not suffice to acquire British cultural capital. Alice’s ambition for social ascension pushes her to seek the help of a Sudanese servant who worked previously in British houses:

Hassan, now secure in his position, introduced into this most un-English household all he had previously learned, with an enthusiasm, which might have been his way of catching up with years of restraint. He washed fruit in permanganate-tinted water, and had Anna sew squares of fine net, trimmed with green wooden beads, to cover the children’s food and drink. They were copies of those bought by British officers at the supply centers in their camps, and came to replace Miss O’Brien’s more casual cheese-cloth. “He’s far more meticulous than nanny,” Alice remarked. (Kahanoff 1951, 209)

Hassan, who occupies an inferior position on the colonial ladder, possesses the expertise that can perfect the colonial simulacrum. The family’s contact with English society remains limited to social events, a situation that hinders the complete internalization of English etiquette. The Sudanese servant appears to be more English than the English; he executes English manners to the minutest details far better than the Irish nanny Miss O’Brien, herself a colonized subject, ever did.

## The Other Levantines

The presence of the British nanny heralds the end of Rachel's Levantine multicultural world. If the space of the *Hara* in the novel points toward a monolithic poor Arab culture, the British nanny's upbringing leads to another restricted monolingual culture.

She didn't go to see Nonino and the girls in his store, or to uncle Joseph's house on Saturday afternoons, or eat things good enough to give her indigestion. She didn't speak Arabic, Italian, or even French any more, but only English, even with Papa and Mamma. She never did things that made her feel happy, only sometimes on Nanny's day off, when she was left with her mother, she became again Caline, who spoke French. The other days were sad and ugly, like the old sewing basket in Nonina's house...(Kahamoff 1951, 161)

Rachel's world is reduced to becoming a copy of the British middle class as she gains access to more places in colonial Cairo designated for British citizens. Just as Ahmed, Jacob's servant, becomes his native alter ego, who moves swiftly in the popular neighborhood to maintain his employer's connection with his neighbors, Miss O'Brien, and later Miss Nutting, the British governesses, become Alice Gaon's European alter egos who replace Alice in navigating the colonial sites of Cairo. Walking in colonial Cairo with her nanny, wearing a white panama hat and a blue muslin veil, Rachel internalizes the British colonial consciousness, which constructs her as inferior and different. She suddenly identifies with a beggar:

She caught sight of a band of beggars hardly older than herself, their bodies showing through torn rags, besieging passers-by, fighting among themselves in their hunt for cigarette butts, scattering quickly when a shawish descended upon them with a stick...except for one who never ran away...he stopped to see her go by, and smiled at her just as she smiled at him, a little bit only, from the corner of the eye. But now, with the blue veil, she could not even do that...the little beggar was more handsome than her cousins Henry and Claud [sic], with his flashing white teeth and black eyes, and far braver...She loved him even more than Mamma, and she thought he loved her too...She didn't



want him to be locked up, because he was brown, as she was, and they were together against *shawishes* and pink people who spoke English... Nonino and Aunt Rene's skins were fairer than Nanny's, but it wasn't the same thing, they must be brown inside, and she loved brown people, not the pink and pale ones...(Kahanoff 1951, 167)

Strolling the streets of Cairo, Rachel begins to see the city and herself through a blue veil, which stands for the blue eyes of the colonizer. Rachel's realization recalls Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, explaining the psychological divide within the colonized subject who perceives himself through the European Other. It is also a reminder of W.E.B. Dubois's famous concept of "double consciousness": "Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like [them perhaps] in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil. I had thereafter no desire to tear down that veil, to creep through; I held all beyond it in common contempt, and lived above it in a region of blue sky and great wandering shadows" (Dubois 38). Rachel does not yet recognize that her Irish nanny is herself another subject of the British colonial mission, and whose representation in nineteenth-century British culture was constructed to resemble that of Africans from the colonies. The Irish were also subjected to colonial mechanisms of control (McClintock 52). Rachel, however, perceives being British as a single category, that is being white and Anglophone. This is another moment where Kahanoff subtly highlights the difference between the visible and invisible, between the performance, or the labeling of a culture and the hidden distinctions that actually exist within the group embodying that culture. Although Rachel internalizes British colonial racial categories, her previous experiences allow her to see a third perspective, invisible for the Eurocentric colonial Orientalizing lens that divides the population into natives and

Europeans. She could clearly read the fine distinctions that make the social web of Levantine colonial culture. On their way back home from the British section in the park, Miss O'Brien is startled by Rachel's ability to read the Cairene cityscape distinctively:

“How do you know he's Syrian [a shopkeeper],” Miss O'Brien asked puzzled. Except for the lower-class Arabs, she could not tell people apart, and it had intrigued her not only that Rachel knew these things, but that there were so many shades of familiarity, respect, condescension, in her manner of saluting people in the street; more than once, when in her own unavoidable dealings with natives, servants and such, Rachel had acted as interpreter, she had instinctively modelled her conduct upon the child's. (Kahanoff 1951, 168)

Rachel gives Miss O'Brien a lesson in human geography as she introduces Egypt's Levantine commercial class, the Syrian, Greek and Armenian shopkeepers whom Miss O'Brien could not differentiate. Miss O'Brien's consciousness thus awakens to discern the complex culture of Egypt beyond the distinction between, native/European, rich/poor, as she become the pupil and Rachel the teacher. She eventually helps Rachel reconnect to that world despite the disapproval of Rachel's mother:

“Where's Rachel?” “I sent her to the kitchen on an errand, Mrs. Gaon.” Alice frowned. “You could ring for Mahmoud to come.” “I know, but she so enjoys looking about in the kitchen. And it would be a pity if she forgot Arabic and Italian, it's so lovely that she can speak them! Those are the people she's always known and will always live with, and I think she misses them.” Alice's frown deepened, and she sounded displeased. “I want Rachel to speak English without a trace of an Egyptian accent, without Arabic words creeping in.” (Kahanoff 1951, 170)

Seeing Rachel's attachment to her Levantine world, Miss O'Brien starts to appreciate the value of that cosmopolitan milieu. She allows her more freedom in speaking other languages and communicating with the domestics. In her attempt to restrict Rachel's milieu, Alice Gaon tries to create a rigid spatial control of the

household, between the servant's Levantine kitchen and the masters' quarter, Alice Gaon seeks to sever the connection between her emerging bourgeois family and the working class, that other Levantine life that exists in the household reflects a threat to the family's social ascension since it is contaminated by Arabic culture.

By using a bell to communicate with her servants, Alice Gaon silences Levantine heteroglossia and reduces it to the monotone sound of the bell. The sound of the bell connecting the kitchen and the salon, however, alerts the reader to the fact that the Levantine culture, unlike its elitist reputation, actually exists in many contexts not necessarily related to the upper-classes. . The workers hidden in the kitchen, Maria and Donia the Italian and Lebanese maids, and Hassan the Sudanese servant also construct another version of Levantine culture beyond the grasp of their employers.

The novel stresses the competition between these two Levantine, socially divided, worlds. For instance, Rachel's family decides to hire a poor Syrian wet nurse for the newborn brother: "she is a Syrian Christian, a pearl of a woman, clean, strong, healthy, honest. Her milk is good...it would revive a corpse!" (180). Rachel is fascinated by this new mother, who stands in contrast to the British governess, and she grows attached to her:

Amina...reminded her of the pictures of the Madonna...it was while the baby greedily clung to Amina's big breast that arrangements were made.  
"What will you do with your own child?" Alice nervously asked her.  
"I'll leave him with my cousin. We gave birth at the same time," she spoke quietly, "But could I go home once a week to see my husband and my son?"  
(Kahanoff 1951, 181)

Amina, who dedicates herself to feeding Rachel's brother, loses her own child due to malnutrition. The text suggests that the interdependence of both Levantine

worlds is almost Darwinian, where the elite Levantine class feeds on its working class other.

The novel reveals the middle class anxiety of that other Levantine community. Alice Gaon grows more worried as she discovers that Donia, the Lebanese Christian maid, is in love with Hassan the Muslim, “black Sudanese servant” (383). Hassan and Donia elope and take Donia’s daughter, Angèle, with them. Rachel’s family experience a great shock:

Donia and Hassan said they were leaving and getting married, and that she had become Muslim. The little girl [Angèle] cried, and her mother slapped her face...Hassan tried to console the child, and promised she would still go to [her French] school and be a Frankish lady. Then Donia was angry and said, “No, she won’t go back to school. If I’m good enough to live with a Sudanese, so is Angèle”...Mother [Alice] cried, “if only I had listened when you said that I was all Angele had in the world! None of this would have happened” (Kahanoff 1951, 399).

Donia’s Francophone daughter Angèle, “who was practically brought up” with Rachel, serves as another cultural double for the protagonist. For Alice Gaon, Hassan’s and Donia’s marriage embodies many taboos at once; it is a relationship that transgresses the colonial hierarchy of religion and culture. Angèle follows the exact opposite trajectory of Rachel’s. While Angèle begins her life as a Levantine Francophone girl, she descends the social ladder as her mother marries a Sudanese Muslim. From a Eurocentric perspective, Levantinism stands for a temporary phase of the civilizing mission, a gradual erosion of foreign traces and Near Eastern heritage that should successfully lead to a homogenous European culture. Angèle, on the other hand, represents the dreaded outcome of Levantinism. While Angèle moves closer to a dismissed African, Arab and Muslim culture, Rachel follows the British colonial

trajectory, which seeks to conform to British middle class ethos. If, as mentioned in Chapter 1, according to the famous anecdote of Khedive Ismail, the ruler of Egypt, the building of Suez Canal has distanced Egypt from Africa and now made it part of Europe, Donia and Angèle, who quits her French school, stand for the reversal of the French Mediterranean project, a dreaded outcome in which Egypt has turned its back to the Mediterranean shore to anchor itself in African soil. Donia embraces a cultural, and racial, “hybridity” that rejects European values and adopts a cultural form that, from a Eurocentric point of view, cannot be considered cosmopolitan, since it detaches itself from the Eurocentric paradigm.

### **Recording what is Lost: Another Scheherazade, another Saint-Simon**

In her attempt to perfect her children’s British education and purge it of Arabic traces, Alice Gaon hires a new English nanny, as opposed to the Irish Miss O’Brien. Miss Nutting’s draconian measures and racist views sharpen Rachel’s double consciousness and ambivalence toward her heritage and toward colonialism: “Bound together by the violent emotions, they had awakened in each other, Miss Nutting and Rachel became the protagonists of a relentless, underhand struggle, where each symbolized to the other evil herself, which must be uprooted and destroyed” (324). As her resentment escalates, Rachel falls ill and for the first time, her father, sitting by her bed, narrates her grandfather Jacob Gaon’s journey through the desert in a caravan from Baghdad to Cairo. On the same occasion, she also reads her great grandmother’s letters from Tunisia, written in a hybrid of French and Arabic transliterated in the French alphabet. The letter could only be deciphered when read aloud. Both narratives,

the letters of Mama Zeiza, the crude Arab Jewish woman from el Hara,<sup>71</sup> and the story of Jacob Gaon exist within the margins of history and can only be transmitted as part of oral tradition, a lost heritage, threatened by the French and British colonial project:

In the evenings, the story cycle continued, with David telling his daughter stories about the Gaons and Baghdad. He passed abruptly from those about the family to those of the great days of Baghdad Jewry under the rule of the Great Caliphs. As he jumped from a historical event to a legend or love poem renowned throughout Islam, it was not easy to separate the real heroes from the mythical ones, or to know when they had occurred. Her father's learning, Rachel discovered, was not the kind she could acquire at the *Lycée Français*, for the little she knew of Eastern history had come to her in a back-handed way, only in so far as it concerned the Crusades. Through all her father narrated, an oral tradition was handed down to Rachel, as of old, and it did not matter if she confused the names and times of Caliphs, or was not sure when the Jews had lost the war against the Romans. She knew the name "Gaon" was handed down from those who had founded in Baghdad the university to which Jews from all over the Diaspora came to receive instruction; thus they, the Gaons, had helped to preserve the unity of Israel. At school, she had been taught to say, "*Nos ancêtres les Gaulois*," and had had doubts about her ancestors because they were not Gauls. Now she knew she would rather be a Gaon than a Gaul. (Kahanoff 1951, 349)

Shifting between history and myth, between poetry and storytelling,

Scheherazade-like, Rachel's father creates a semi-fantastic narrative of origin, by retelling the memoirs of his father and ancestors. This alternative imaginary allows her to anchor herself in an anticolonial history in which she could perceive herself as Jewish and Near Eastern. After she recovers from her illness, Rachel decides to force Miss Nutting to leave. Tension between the two escalates during their summer stay in Alexandria. Spotting a street demonstration, Rachel screams "Egypt for Egyptians!"

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<sup>71</sup> The letters refer also to Kahanoff's actual childhood memoirs. She writes about these letters in detail in her short story: "A Letter from Mama Camouna." See *Mongrels or Marvels the Levantine Writing of Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff*, ed. Deborah A. Starr and Sasson Somekh, p. 164.

and finally slaps her nanny on her face. Miss Nutting resigns and quits Egypt (Kahanoff 1951, 364).

### **The Department Store as a Mirror to the Self**

Expelling the British nanny parallels the Egyptian nationalist project, in the sense that it expresses the awakening of a colonial subject who seeks to reclaim her history and a space. It is only at that moment that Rachel views her grandparent's "French" department store as a bazaar (394). At this climactic moment of the novel, Rachel finally manages to resist her British nanny's orders and prejudices against Middle Eastern culture. As she learns to differentiate between the "Gaons" and the "Gauls," she begins to see Smadja's Brothers differently. The utopian store changes its appearance before her eyes and becomes an Oriental space onto which she projects her new self-perception (394). She finally accepts that, as a subject of the colonial "civilizing mission," she remains, despite her European cosmopolitan education, "Oriental." Unlike the cosmopolitan department store, the bazaar is endowed with a geographical and cultural origin and connects to a local imaginary and history. Similarly, Rachel realizes that she is an "oriental" woman who has a unique heritage. Most importantly, seeing the bazaar beneath the department store's façade highlights her recognition of the double nature of the Levantine world combining East and West. This realization, however, is not without ambivalence, since Rachel's account of "the rundown bazaar" is rather pejorative and negative and marks her disappointment in her recent self-discovery.

## Next Year Not in Jerusalem

The hidden nature of the department store comes with more disillusionment other than the disappointment in the European colonial promise. Synchronizing with the new realization, the novel also presents an ambivalent stand toward Zionism. The work begins with the framing of the Biblical and the British imperial commitment to the founding of a Jewish state in Palestine, by depicting Jacob Gaon, the patriarch, sitting in front of the Ten Commandments and the Balfour Declaration. Throughout the story, Rachel and her brother save money for the future nation. Finally, as Jacob grows old, he decides to move to Jerusalem in order to die and be buried in the Holy Land:

David [Jacob's son] too had reasons for gloom. He had returned from Jerusalem appalled by the squalor of the Jewish quarter in the old city...He [Jacob Gaon] wrote asking me to bring him back to Cairo, but of course, these people [Jacob's relatives in Jerusalem] did not send the letter...what will and courage he has! He clung to life, so that his death would not be sullied by such indignities. And those people dare call themselves religious, because they live in Jerusalem...How shameful! How revolting! [...] Your grandfather, old as Methuselah, dashing off to die in Jerusalem...I [Alice] was sure no good could come out of it. (Kahanoff 1951, 417)

But Jerusalem comes to represent another nightmare for the family. Unlike cosmopolitan Cairo and Alexandria, the city turns out to be a stereotypical Oriental town rather than a utopia. After traveling to Jerusalem Jacob feels betrayed by his religious relatives and decides to return to Egypt. Jacob's life takes a comic and anti-Zionist turn, contradictory to the Biblical Exodus. After his exodus, modern Jacob rejects Palestine and goes back to Cairo! In a sense, Jacob's decision also stands against the Biblical narrative of Exodus. Just as the Hebrews, wandering in the desert,



regretted leaving Egypt, and aspired to return to the comfort of their old life, Jacob actually turns back and settles in Egypt.

### **Rearranging the World in a Kol-Bo Order**

Kahanoff concludes her novel in Rachel's house with the Gaons and the Smadjas celebrating Passover. Alice, Rachel's mother, struggles to set the table in the proper way for that big event. Only Ahmed, Jacob's servant, knows the fine details of this ceremony. Rachel rebukes him for not cooperating with her mother and showing her the proper way to set the table for Passover. Ahmed finally agrees to help: "Rachel assisted Ahmed in preparing all the things necessary for the prayer, and setting them as they should be. Thus she learned from the old Moslem all that she as a Jewish woman needed to know" (424).

The word "seder," (סדר), which signifies: order, arrangement, regulation, annals and history, gives an insight into the broader meaning of that scene. Setting the table for the Seder stands for putting things in order. By concluding with that ceremony that unites the Gaons, the Smadjas, and the domestics, Kahanoff rewrites the history of Egyptian Jews in Egypt according to her own perspective and her own narrative temporal sequence. In the scene everything returns to a *new* order. The family is united. Rachel reconnects with her Jewish heritage and the Moslem servant, who teaches her the rites of her religion, vows to obey her and to send his own sons to serve in her house. If symbolically, the Gaons stood for a mythical history of Rachel's family and the Smadjas for quotidian history, the table which reunites both families resolves the tension between the Biblical narrative of Exodus and the quotidian

situation of modern Jews in Egypt. Rachel's family reconnects with their Jewish heritage while still being cosmopolitan. They accept their life as Jews living in Egypt after Exodus. In other words, they now live under a so to speak Levantine Kol-Bo order of things, a situation where all cultures are mixed: Rachel's English education was transmitted by a British nanny and the table for the Seder is set by a Moslem servant.

Similarly, Jacob Gaon who returned from Palestine to live in Egypt is not out of place. The empty seat left as a part of the ritual, symbolizing the wait for the unannounced visitor, Elijah the Prophet, reconstructs the family as both guests and hosts, in the double Derridian sense of hospitality (Derrida 17: 28). Hosting a guest stands for a performative act that claims one's ownership of a house. Ahmed says to Rachel: "When you marry...I shall send you for servant a son of our house" (Kahanoff 1951, 424). It might have not been unusual that servants have their own children hired by their employers' relatives. However, this classist problematic statement evokes two ideas. First, it turns the biblical story upside down; here the modern Egyptian works for the Jews in contrast to the story of Exodus. Second, it stresses the centrality of the working class, because it predicates the family's destiny in Egypt upon the servants' presence.

## **Conclusion**

In her attempt to narrate her childhood experience, Kahanoff's novel travels between two symbolic spaces making the Levantine habitus, the household and the department store. She creates a house of mirrors, in which each character finds foils in

a series of competing and complementing Others. As they follow the colonial promise of social ascension and financial progress, Jacob Gaon, Alice, Nathan Smadja, and Rachel catch their own reflections in many parts of the city and in the image of servants, nannies, and beggars. Each character, Ahmed, Miss O'Brien, Angèle, represents an erased history, a future aspiration, or a feared outcome. Using the department store/house as a model, the novel manages to register the hidden processes through which colonial culture is created and negotiated. In its turn the novel reveals the colonial mechanisms that seek to consolidate different minorities into distinct races: Arab and Jew, bourgeois and working class, European, cosmopolitan, and Levantine. For Kahanoff, Smadja Brothers represents the intersection of many histories and cultures, a Levantine world that exceeds a Eurocentric cosmopolitanism. But even Levantinism, that East-West amalgam, features as a game of doubles divided between the bourgeoisie and the working class. The atelier's workers and the domestic servants often relegated to the background have constructed their own Levantine life that does not necessarily conform to a bourgeois paradigm. The clear contribution of servants and governesses in reshaping the culture of the Egyptian middle class demonstrates the fragility of the aforementioned categories, since the very same markers of distinction adopted by the Levantine colonial bourgeoisie depend on the presence of servants who share their knowledge and navigate the spaces that their masters could not reach.

In her attempt to fathom her social and national belonging to Egypt and also to British and French cultures, Kahanoff reclaims Levantinism as a way to distinguish and separate an Egyptian urban lifestyle from a strictly Eurocentric vision of

cosmopolitanism. In the end, the novel brings out the distinction between a European promise of cosmopolitanism, similar to the golden letters displayed on the Kol-Bo labels, and the actual life of a community which has created a life distinct from their past but also different from a romanticized European utopian image. While Levantinism, like the Kol-Bo itself, remains enmeshed in a colonial system of race and class and bears some of its tensions. Kahanoff's novel reveals that Levantinism is not simply an Orientalist cliché or a form of "Mediterraneanism" in Herzfeld's definition of the word. It rather comes at the expense of alienation and the traumatic disconnection from one's origins and culture. However, this Levantinism, despite its classist and colonial influences which still exclude some groups, points toward a different social order outside the path traced by the colonizer: a lifestyle that could only be perpetuated by the crisscrossing of religions, classes and cultures and the acknowledgement of the parallel and interconnected histories of the many groups that make up the Levantine world. It is through this Levantine interdependence that the many coexisting groups could survive and reconnect with part of their lost heritage and history.

## Epilogue

### Postmodern-Postcolonial Crossings: Egyptian Department Stores as *Lieux de Mémoire*

The terms postcolonialism and postmodernism have been shown to designate both a rupture and a strong fixation with the condition which they replace. Such a rupture, which modifies the social fabric in material ways, necessitates a redefinition of collective identity and memory. Contemporary Egyptian society is a case in point. Long after Nasser's Egypt, revisiting colonial Cairene and Alexandrian cosmopolitan spaces has become a common medium for questioning history and recreating a connection with a modern, pre-socialist Egypt, which for many has become an idyllic, romantic era. These sites have become rich signifiers and they feature in narratives in both Egypt and the diaspora.

In the previous chapters, I examined the Saint-Simonian vision of a united Mediterranean, and narratives on Egyptian and French department stores in the context of the three main empires which divided the Mediterranean. In this concluding chapter, I focus on the significance of emporia as sites of memory after decolonization. Through a survey of recent writing, I hope to illuminate the use of Egyptian department stores as *lieux de mémoire* specifically in postcolonial contexts through the writings of the Jewish Egyptian diaspora, the Greek community and the postcolonial Egyptian bourgeoisie who seek to rewrite modern Egyptian history after

independence. As I argue, the fragmentary references to department stores in these texts function as a key signifier which allows the authors to question cultural and national belonging. The polyvalence of these references stems from the cultural and social history of the department stores which I discussed in the previous chapters. Most of the texts I examine are structured around the imaginary temporal caesura of postcolonialism and postmodernism and attempt to recuperate or reflect on a “lost” past. In their attempt to bridge a postcolonial-postmodern present and their colonial past, these works, despite their romanticized and nostalgic tone, simultaneously anchor their authors in their new societies across the Mediterranean.

In the *Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha states: “Our existence today is marked by a tenebrous sense of survival, living on the borderlines of “the present,” for which there seems no proper name other than the current and controversial shiftiness of the prefix ‘post’: postmodernism, postcolonialism, postfeminism [...]” (Bhabha 1). Postcolonialism and postmodernism having become the symbols of a paradigm shift that occurred after the rapid disintegration of different communities following World War II and decolonization, refer to a situation in which an imaginary temporal caesura promises a break from an earlier period that haunts the psyches and defines the subjectivity of those living “in between,” and who, paradoxically, have come to look at a nebulous future through the lens of a fantasmic past (Bhabha 10). Both terms bear the burden of an epistemological crisis and an obsession with memory or, as Pierre Nora puts it, a “historiographical anxiety” produced by the heightened tension between the homogenizing hand of history and the multifaceted disruptive memories which it seeks to control (Nora 10). For Nora, memory “remains in permanent evolution, open

to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived” (8). Memory, then, is a vivid, polymorphous category that changes continuously over time to serve different purposes and groups, whereas history is an impersonal narrative that tries to destroy it (9). This condition, according to Nora, necessitates *lieux de mémoire* or “material” sites which, because of their multifunctionality, could conserve the traces of the past while escaping the scrutiny of history. These sites, existing as they do between memory and history, provide a “mise en abyme” that allows for the reconstruction of collective memory and identity within a new socio-cultural context (Nora 19-20). The *lieux de mémoire* function as “glass closets” or “open secrets” that could blend seamlessly within the contemporary social structure but act as multivalent symbols which can host a multiplicity of narratives. While history, like the archive, gives the (false) impression of moving forward toward an “open future,” *lieux de mémoire* remain as sites of ambiguity and ambivalence embedded within the historical narrative, turning the reader’s gaze backward to a different past that does not fit the contemporary normative version of history (Crownshaw 215-222).

Egyptian department stores are an example of a space which different contemporary communities have transformed into competing *lieux de mémoire*. After independence, the stores still operated and were used by the new postcolonial bourgeoisie which rose to power. The stores thus became palimpsestic sites which silently narrated the story of another time. The fact that these spaces remained functioning until the current era creates a time-lag between the current use of the site

and its history. This temporal split, or temporal fragmentation, creates a number of disjunctions between the contemporary as a current practice and modernity; the colonial and the postcolonial; and the modern and postmodern. These disjunctions or “interstices,” as Bhabha calls them, become areas of displacement and alienation where “intersubjective and collective experiences...are negotiated” (Bhabha 3). The department store, then, turns into an “enunciatory site [that] opens up possibilities for other ‘times’ of cultural meaning...and other narrative spaces” (Bhabha 255). In this way, the department store functions as a *lieu de mémoire* from which collective memories can be constructed and become a site of intersection between different groups.

In *Voices of Collective Remembering*, James Wertsch states: “Remembering is a form of mediated action, which entails the involvement of active agents and cultural tools” (13). This corresponds to Maurice Halbwachs’s claim that individuals act and respond to the sociocultural and political “framework” imposed by their social milieu (Halbwachs 51). This framework can be “an instrument” for the recollection of memory and its reconstruction in a narrative according to the guidelines and cues provided by the society. “Society from time to time obligates people not just to reproduce in thought previous events of their lives, but also to touch them up, to shorten them, or to complete them so that...we give them a prestige that reality did not possess” (Halbwachs 51). The collective framework “would then be only the result, or sum, or combination of individual recollection of many members of the same society” (Halbwachs 39). At the same time, recalling past events moves individuals to refer to other frameworks which belong to the past and previously shaped their subjectivity.



Although the central priority is given to the milieu that exercises a direct influence on those who seek to remember, individuals as “active agents” of memory have to resolve an “irreducible tension” between the competing social frameworks, or the “cultural tools” that enter into the reconstruction of their memory (Wertsch 11). Finding a middle position or a narrative that can accommodate those different frameworks could be one way of resolving the tension between the different frameworks and the position of the individual with regards to them. “A recollection is the richer when it reappears at the junction of a greater number of these frameworks, which in effect intersect each other and overlap in part (Halbwachs 172).

Department stores occupy a special position in the process of recollection since they juxtapose in one site different histories, temporalities, and practices. Such a quality enables those who are reconstructing their memories to use the stores as a meeting-point between the competing social frameworks and a point of departure for developing a “dialogical” narrative that engages and critiques other narratives (Wertsch 58). From the postcolonial department store, then, springs a proliferation of collective narratives which have in common the experience of inhabiting or interacting with the site, but each account responds to a different sociocultural and political framework and recalls a different ideology. The practice of space here becomes a way to consolidate memory into a “usable past” that can help to root the collective to their current social milieu (Wertsch 31).

In different contemporary narratives, the reconstruction of a collective experience through the department stores does not entail a detailed account of the space. Sometimes the name, or the reference, stands out as a loaded signifier from

which the reader can unpack the role of the *grands magasin* as *lieux de mémoire* in the formation of the author's subjective position. As Michel de Certeau states: "to walk is to lack a site. It is the indeterminate process of being both absent and in search of the proper, of one's own" (1984, 139). One can say, then, that creating a discourse around the name of the department store is similar to the act of walking. It becomes an attempt to re-appropriate the "absent space," to take control of urban space through writing in order to locate oneself on the current social map. By absent space, I mean that the stores no longer exist in the same image that they previously had, or that, as migrants and expatriates the writers do not have physical access to these spaces. Although the narratives discussed below refer specifically to one department store, Cicurel (see Chapter 2), each one constructs a different meaning of that space in relation to the author's context.

### **All Memories Lead to Cicurel**

One of the most telling texts which announces the postcolonial moment and the key shift in the perception of the department stores is Latifa el Zayat *Al-Bab Maftuh*, *The Open Door* (1956). The novel centers on the memory of the Cairo fire of 1952, which targeted "foreign" business enterprises and resulted in the ruin of the majority of the department stores located in Cairo's city center (Reynolds 2012, 196). As Nancy Reynolds elaborates, in the novel Layla watches her cousin Gamila trying on her wedding dress, made of fabric from *grand magasin* Cicurel. The cousins witness the fire: "The people are burning the city," Layla asks. "Why are we burning our city?" (Reynolds 2012, 196). As Reynolds points out: "The sense of loss and self-destruction

wrought by the fire is magnified by the passage's dialogue, which Layla shifts rapidly from the general political level of the struggle, expressed in the neutral third person, to an immediate, emotional, and possessive first-person ..." (Reynolds 2012, 196).

Layla's shift to the personal pronoun from "the" to "our" city is key to understanding the change in the perception of the department store and of the Jewish Egyptian community associated with it. Throughout the novel, Layla associates the fabric from Cicurel with the memory of the fire that destroyed the store and the city (qtd. Reynolds 2012, 196). In a sense, the Cairo fire was meant to reconfigure collective and national memory. It marked the stores as intruding imperial spaces in order to effect a break between "us" and "them," an Egyptian national identity and a foreign colonizer. In this situation, the Jewish community and the *magasins* that they owned are suddenly proclaimed as intruders. The Cicurel family, like many of the stores' owners, were Egyptian citizens and actively participated in Egypt's social and economic life, including the foundation of the iconic Bank Misr, the first Egyptian national bank (Reynolds 2012, 58). By referring to "our" city instead of the impersonal "the", El Zayat's novel addresses that heritage during the critical nationalist era of 1956, after the nationalization of the Suez Canal and the beginning of the departure of the different minorities from Egypt. Just as the department store marks a symbolic intersection between the city, the nation, and the human body, the wedding dress from Cicurel on Gamila's body becomes a site of memory for the store and the city. The categorical differences which the text brings out, such as outside/insider, imperialist/nationalist, and colonizer/ colonized, will remain central to the postcolonial memory of the department store, as discussion of the following works will show.

Writing from Paris, Paula Jacques, a contemporary novelist and radio presenter born in Egypt, documents the history of the modern exodus from Egypt. In her first novel *Lumière de l'oeil* (1980), Jacques narrates the story of the Castros, a middle-class Jewish family in the final years before they migrate to France, between 1952 and 1957. Their language and customs are a mélange of Franco-Arab-Jewish Egyptian culture. The novel begins with the Castro family dressed in their most elegant clothes on their way to a photographer's for a family portrait. For this portrait, the mother has bought an expensive dress from Cicurel. As the family passes by Soleiman Pacha Square, the father looks at the Pacha's statue located in the center. He remembers that Soleiman Pacha was actually a French soldier in Napoleon's army before he settled in Egypt and became the chief organizer of Mehmet Ali's army. Jacques thus emphasizes the commonality of modern French-Egyptian history (12). Becky Castro shows off her dress to an acquaintance: "la femme du Bey m'a demandé où j'ai acheté ma robe. Chez Cicurel, ma chère, mais le prix c'est de la braise ardente" [The Bey's wife asked me where I bought my dress. At Cicurel, my dear, but the price is a blaze] (18). Listening to her mother, Mona Castro fantasizes about burning her mother's dresses (18). The description of the cost of the dress as a "blaze" and Mona's idea's of her mother's wardrobe being set on fire foreshadow the Cairo fire which the family will watch from their roof of their house a few days later. For the Castros, this significant event marks the beginning of the end and they prepare to leave Egypt. The novel ends with the departure of the family, while Om Sayyeda, the servant, keeps their photo album (274).

In the novel, Cicurel becomes a racial, economic and cultural signifier that stands for bourgeois Egyptian Jews as a collective. Maurice Halbwachs explains that as “the bourgeoisie becomes conscious of itself, [it] molds its memory within the framework of responsibilities in which its best members have distinguished themselves” (136). For a considerable segment of Egyptian Jewry, trade and commerce were the fields that served to consolidate their collective identity within the bourgeoisie. Halbwachs adds that a rising bourgeois class seeks to become part of the collective by observing the society, understanding its trends, and introducing new values that could produce rapid change and reshape the image of the collective identity within a framework different from that of the traditional elite (Halbwachs 137, 157). The French *grands magasins* were a case in point, where the marketed French image of these spaces created common ground between the old Egyptian bourgeoisie and the new one in creation. The reference to Cicurel in the opening scene of the novel is the author’s way of “framing” the memory of the family as a middle-class Jewish one and situating it within the larger social map of Cairo. Similar to el Zayat’s novel, the dress from Cicurel becomes associated with the memory of the city, the store, Egyptian Jews and the nation before independence. This moment, which will be documented by the photo, will be left behind with the servant who keeps the memory alive.

In another novel, *Gilda Stambouli souffre et se plaint* (2002), [*Gilda Stambouli suffers and complains*], Jacques also begins with a reference to Cicurel. Gilda, a middle-class Jewish Egyptian widow, leaves Egypt in 1956 and settles in France in 1957. In between, she moves to Israel to live in a kibbutz. Disappointed with her situation, Gilda decides to migrate to France, leaving her young daughter behind. The

kibbutz manager tries to dissuade her: “You will see, in fifty years this country will be a paradise.” Gilda answers: “in this case, I will come back in fifty years” (42). Gilda spends her time in Paris trying to bring back her daughter who finally dies in the kibbutz.

In her attempt to find a job, Gilda applies to an atelier that had hired a previous owner of Cicurel as a seamstress. She exclaims: “Cicurel au Caire était la réplique des *Galleries Lafayette*, voyez un peu la destinée! [Cicurel in Cairo was the replica of *Galleries Lafayette*. Do you see how fate is!] (70). The brief reference to the “lady” from Cicurel, now hired as a seamstress, becomes a symbolic reference for Jewish Egyptians as a collective. By evoking the comparison between *Galleries Lafayette* and Cicurel, Jacques highlights the displacement of Egyptian Jews and the stark contrast between their central position in Egypt and their marginal situation in Paris. Gilda, like the “lady” from Cicurel, embodies a postcolonial condition in which French language and culture lost its crucial role as a means of integration. Instead Gilda finds herself on the margins of three nations and an unrecoverable past.

While Jacques links the department store with the history of the Francophone Jewish community, in a way that they became interchangeable, Robert Solé presents a competing perspective for that monopolized memory. Solé, a Francophone Egyptian of Syrian Christian origin, moved from Cairo to France at the age of eighteen. In *Tarbouche*, he rewrites Egyptian history while simultaneously documenting the role of his community in modern Egypt. The question of belonging to the emerging Egyptian nation takes center stage in his work. In the novel, the Batrakani family struggles to navigate the different currents between an emerging Egyptian nationalism, British

imperialism, Francophone culture, and its Syrian heritage. Although they had settled in Egypt three generations earlier, the Batrakanis are considered neither locals nor foreigners. In the novel, consumer culture becomes the key element around which they weave their national belonging to Egypt through the promotion of a new brand of fez (tarbouche) to the Egyptian public as authentic Egyptian attire. The fez was a charged image of modernity: imposed in the 1820s as the symbol of a modern Ottoman, it was later banned by Ataturk as a symbol of the outmoded past. Solé thus chooses an image fraught with ambiguity and even irony.

In the beginning of the trilogy, Solé depicts a competitive relationship between Syrians and Egyptian Jews by listing department stores. Solé parodies this situation in the following lines:

Mais que veulent-ils ces maudits juifs? Ils possèdent déjà tous les grands magasins d'Égypte. Cicurel c'est eux. Chemla, c'est eux. Gattegno, c'est eux. Et Orosdi-Back, ce n'est pas eux par hasard? Encore heureux que nous ayons Sednaoui! (216)

What do they want these accursed Jews? They own all the department stores in Egypt. Cicurel, it's them, Chemla, it's them. Gattegno it's them. And Orosdi-Back, it's not them by any chance? Lucky we've still got Sednaoui. (*Le tarbouche* 216)

In the passage, Georges Batrakani, the family patriarch, expresses his frustration at the control of the economy by Jews in Egypt. The listing of the cosmopolitan stores comes in contrast with the family's comic attempt to promote the traditional Turkish headdress as a marker of Egyptian nationalism.

The passage uses the same trope of inclusion-exclusion, "us" and "them," seen above in Zayat's novel, but reveals a more complex background that ties the two communities together. Although Solé highlights the economic competition between

the two Francophone communities — Egyptian Jews and Syrians —, in the eyes of the British occupier they were, through that shared language, similar. In *Modern Egypt*, Evelyn Baring, comments: “amongst the obstacles which have stood in the way of the British reformer in Egypt, none is more noteworthy than that both Europeanised Egyptians and Levantines are impregnated with French rather than English habits of thought” (Baring 236). The competition which Solé evokes through the listing of the *grands magasins*, is undercut by a common Francophone culture that sets them against the British occupier.

Solé’s reference in the contemporary context serves another purpose than documenting colonial history. By evoking, albeit comically, this past rivalry, Sednaoui versus Cicurel, he succinctly restores to the national memory the history of Syrian Egyptians. Sedanoui in contemporary Egyptian culture is always mistakenly associated with the history of Egyptian Jews. This comic moment in the novel, then, points out a contemporary competition between the two communities over their existence in official memory.

In Waguih Ghali’s *Beer in the Snooker Club* (1964), department stores feature in a different way from that of previous accounts. Although they still highlight the break between colonial and postcolonial cultures, the department store comes to address the possibility of perpetuating a cosmopolitan Egyptian culture after independence. In the novel, Ram, a poor Copt who comes from an affluent bourgeois family, falls in love with Edna, a rich Jewish Egyptian, the daughter of the owner of a department store. Together they seek to adjust to the rapid political and social changes



which occurred in the 1950's after independence and during the tripartite war. Ram meets Edna at a dinner party:

“Who’s that?” I asked my mother.  
“That’s la fille Salva, my dear, Just back from Europe.”  
Her father and mother were there too; I had met them before. One of the richest Jewish families in Egypt—our Woolworths. (47)

The reference to department stores instantly mobilizes the stereotype of the cosmopolitan Egyptian Jew. However, despite her elitist background, Edna surprises Ram by being a communist who rejects her parents' lifestyle. Both Edna and Ram try to define their identity in Nasser's Egypt. Ram travels to England and recognizes his double consciousness, his situation as a colonized subject who has perfected colonial mimicry. He asks Edna to help him understand who he is. Edna, the cosmopolitan woman whose father's business depends on the promotion of cosmopolitan ideals, has a view of the Egyptian which is similar to that of her class:

It was Edna who introduced me to Egyptian people. It is rare, in the milieu in which I born, to know Egyptians. She explained to me that the Sporting Club and the race meetings and the villa-owners and the European-dressed and-traveled people I met were not Egyptians. Cairo and Alexandria were cosmopolitan not so much because they contained foreigners, but because the Egyptian born in them is himself a stranger to his land.

She took me one day to... old Cairo. It was the first of many trips, bare-foot and peasant dress...She made me sit Arab fashion on the floor and told me to comb her hair. (53)

Edna considers Egyptianness and cosmopolitanism as mutually exclusive. She directs Ram to adopt her definition of Egyptian identity by having him dress and sit “Arab fashion.” One could argue that Edna's image of Egyptian identity is a prefabricated, artificial one that does not differ from the fetishised “look” promoted in department stores. Edna's views lead Ram to an impasse since he cannot resolve the conflict

between his cosmopolitan lifestyle and the ideal of achieving an “authentic” Egyptian identity. In “Drinking, Gambling, and Making Merry: Waguih Ghali’s search for Cosmopolitan Agency,” Deborah Starr suggests that Ram redeems the figure of the cosmopolitan by emphasizing the performative acts of drinking, gambling and making jokes. These idle cosmopolitan activities become Ram’s strategy to overcome the limitation of the dichotomized world that Edna imposed on him (275). Most importantly, by depicting Edna as someone who fails to perceive the different possibilities of being Egyptian, he questions the role of bourgeois Egyptian Jewry in Nasser’s socialist Egypt. Seeing the stores from the dichotomized perspective of colonial/postcolonial, and Arab/European, Ghali presents them as a colonial site that erases the fluid aspect of Egyptian cosmopolitan culture. As I argued in previous chapters, the Egyptian stores in practice challenged these reductive categories. However, by disconnecting the imaginary and the memory of the stores from their social context, Ram escapes the impasse. He dissociates space from its role as consolidator of a collective national experience. This is a critical strategy, especially after independence when the “cosmopolitan” city spaces lost their original meaning in the national culture. A multicultural lifestyle can be effected without these obsolete spaces.

In the semiautobiographical novel, *La lente decouverte de l’etrangeté*<sup>72</sup>, published in Quebec in 2002, Victor Teboul, a Franchopone Canadian writer born in Alexandria, describes himself as a “Jew from Egypt” and recalls a childhood

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<sup>72</sup> *The Slow Discovery of Foreignness*. (my translation)

experience that occurred after visiting a department store. Since Tébooul calls his departure from Egypt a second exodus, his first framework of memory is a religious one that roots the modern Jewish Egyptian experience within a broader Jewish memory. Just like Jacqueline Kahanoff (see Chapter 5), he creates this continuum for the history of Jewish Egyptians by transforming the departure into an “episodic” recollection which will be commemorated every year with the Passover (Wertsch 51). The memory gains a mystical religious aura in which the modern exodus becomes both a political and a spiritual tie that connects the community together.

In contrast to Ghali’s depiction, Tébooul, who celebrates cosmopolitanism and has founded an organization promoting tolerance in Canada, uses his memory of Egyptian department stores as a moment where he recognizes cultural and ethnic difference. In the following episode, the young narrator recalls a time when his father took him to visit the Bedouins in Alexandria.

Ahlan wasahlan, ya Moussa, they say<sup>73</sup>.

Under their rudimentary tent, they smile and offer me sugar cane juice just as they would have done for an adult. The children, barefoot, move closer toward me. I have the strange feeling of being different from them and resembling them at the same time. Here, my name is Moussa. This is how they translated my name once they knew that I was called “Maurice.” This was not the first time I visited them. I am wearing a striped shirt, white shorts and sandals bought at Cicurel, the *grand magasin* at Saad Zaghlool street. (Tébooul 28)<sup>74</sup>

In this passage, the narrator transfers the significance of the department store to his clothes. Tébooul reveals an ambivalent stance toward his life in Alexandria. In the beginning, the reference to Cicurel subtly connects the narrator to the Alexandrian

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<sup>73</sup> Welcome Moussa (Moses)

<sup>74</sup> My translation.

cityscape. The clothes from Cicurel stand for the barrier that protects him from becoming a barefoot Arab. In the Bedouin's tent, French gives way to Arabic. The narrator's name is transformed from "Maurice" to "Moussa," the Arabic equivalent of Moses. The illusion of cosmopolitanism suddenly recedes and reveals to the narrator his other reality. He has become an Oriental Jew. The fantasy of the Orient fascinates him and, gradually, he sheds his cosmopolitan side. He asks himself why he is wearing sandals; he even tells the chief of the tribe that he is one of his children and he wants to marry a Bedouin girl. The clothes from Cicurel, then, reveal the narrator's double consciousness. Maurice/Moussa perceives the Arab Other from the perspective of the Orientalist adventurer who desires to appropriate the Orient, and from the perspective of the Oriental Jew who connects with a classical image from Jewish religion, that of Moses and Hebrews wandering in the Sinai desert. In the latter case the narrator's clothes appear as a fake disguise, or a form of colonial mimicry that cannot hide the Oriental inside him (Said 110). Téboúl uses department stores as a symbol to express his complex cultural belonging to Alexandria and as a way to approach his situation in Quebec. Téboúl's novel alternates between 1950's Alexandria and Paris, and 1990's Quebec. For Téboúl, 1950's Paris stood for a disappointment: it was a reductive place that alienated him from his multicultural and multilingual background, in contrast to the Canadian melting-pot. Téboúl is also preoccupied by the fact that the French sector was at risk of being devoured by Anglophone Canada. His experience in the tent recalls his later insecure situation in Canada where, once again, he was facing the threat of losing his mother tongue—French.

In the same spirit of remembering cosmopolitan Egypt, Samir Raafat, an Egyptian writer and journalist, revisits colonial sites in Egypt and documents their stories on his website and in his book *Cairo, the Glory Years*, published in 2003. Raafat's work, however, evokes a romanticized idea of cosmopolitanism that filters many of social and colonial historical tensions. In his book Raafat laments the passing of the "belle époque" and criticizes the ignorance of the young generations (Raafat 2003, 9). In both the website and the book, he celebrates cosmopolitanism by delving into history and revealing the stories and mysteries encrypted on the walls of the houses and monuments which once belonged to the colonial bourgeoisie. Some of his articles even have mysterious titles similar to those of detective and romance novels. Among the many stories that he brings to life is that of the Cicurel family. In pieces featuring on his website, "The House of Cicurel" and "Murder at Villa Cicurel," Raafat traces the origins of the Cicurel family to their origin in Izmir and narrates their social ascension by evoking the mysterious murder of the family's patriarch by his chauffeur: "Cairo talked about little else during the *Khamasin* season of 1927. Not since the May 1921 Alexandria trial of murderesses Raya and Sakina (sisters who were serial killers) had Egyptian society been so gruesomely entertained. And now it was the brutal Hollywood-type murder of Solomon Cicurel that would absorb the nation's attention for the next few months" ("Murder"). In "The House of Cicurel," Raafat brings together the history of the department store with that of the mysterious murder:

In 1910, Moreno opened Au Petit Bazar in Cairo's European Ismailia district at No. 3 Avenue Boulac (later Avenue Fouad) next to Chemla Frères (No. 11) one of Cairo's oldest department stores. Moreno Cicurel chose his locations

well. Not only was Au Petit Bazar close to Opera Square where all the consulates and fashionable hotels - Continental Savoy, Metropole, Shepherds - were situated, but Avenue Boulac was fast replacing the Mousky and Hamzawi districts as the nexus of the Cairo commercial whirlpool. The area was also served by Cairo's oldest tramway Line No. 3 that crossed Cairo's east-west axis from the district of Boulac to the Citadel.... At Cicurel everything could be bought and the range was endless, from lavish glass, crockery, fabrics, cosmetics to the latest Parisian fashions. Many a high society lady's trousseau was prepared entirely at Cicurel. But before all this came to be, Moreno Cicurel launched several other ventures including Au Rêve des Dames, a haberdashery and ladies wear at No.19 Kasr al-Nil street. As his business expanded and as the Cicurels, père & fils, bought off and merged with, smaller competitors, Cicurel became Egypt's leading department store with branches in several of towns and cities. (Raafat 1994)

In his account of department of stores, Raafat brings to the forefront a colonial image of cosmopolitan Cairo by mapping its place and its function as a center for cultural capital. However, the historical narrative overlooks the colonial tensions and complexity and produces a suspense story in that could have been written by an English adventurer. Raafat even goes further in his detective endeavors to produce an updated genealogy of the family and contacts the grandson of the alleged murderer of the family's patriarch.

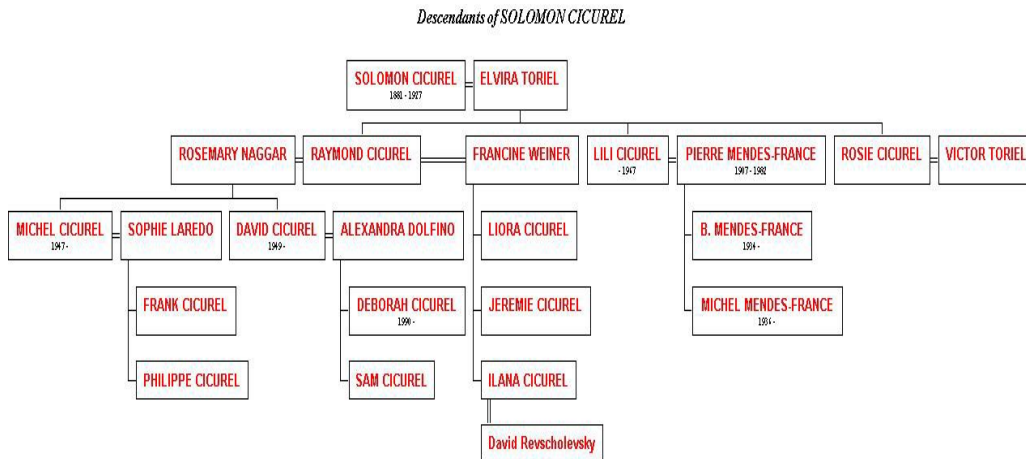


Figure 44: The Cicurel Family Tree (The House). Source: Samir Raafat, [www.egy.com](http://www.egy.com),



Figure 45: Pictures of the murderer of Moreno Cicurel and his grandson respectively (Murder). Source: Samir Raafat, [www.Egy.com](http://www.Egy.com)

Finally, Raafat juxtaposes the picture of the suspected murderer with that of the grandson who contacted Raafat to update the story. By creating the murderer's lineage and that of the Cicurel family, the writer uses the memory of the colonial elite to create an imaginary continuum that crosses over the history of postcolonial Egypt overall.

Through this framework, the writer expresses his society's nostalgia for colonial Egypt

and positions the current bourgeois postcolonial bourgeois community as an heir to, or a member of, to the glamorous pre-independence high society. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon predicts this trend when he describes the ascension of the native bourgeoisie after independence. The new class, which has replaced its colonial counterpart, emulates the lifestyle of the old one but without actively participating in the economic development of the country (Fanon 177-178).

However, on a more positive note, using the department stores as *lieux de mémoire* has mobilized and brought several communities into contact with each other. Not only does the writer's website, [www.egy.com](http://www.egy.com), reconstruct a fading moment of Egyptian history, but it has also triggered reactions from members of the Egyptian diaspora who corresponded with the writer through emails and posted their updated news on the site. This romantic framework, then, was able to overcome generational and unresolved political tensions.

Perhaps no text depicts Egyptian department stores as monuments of a bygone cosmopolitan life as much as that of Ilios Yannakakis's *Alexandria 1860-1960: The Brief Life of a Cosmopolitan Community*, published in Alexandria in 1997. The book attempts to reconstruct the space of Alexandria before 1960's through the collected accounts of the different minorities who lived in Alexandria at that time. Yannakakis, one of the contributors to this book, is a Greek Francophone Alexandrian who laments the disappearance of cosmopolitanism. He contrasts his experience in Alexandria with that following his emigration to Czechoslovakia in the 1950's when he had to redefine his identity and purge every aspect of cosmopolitanism to blend safely with the society. Like Raafat, Yannakakis's cosmopolitanism is still an expression of social



privilege based on his experience in Alexandria. In his narrative, the department stores embody several frameworks of memory. On the one hand, they serve as a tool for remembering his youth in Alexandria. On the other hand, they became a symbol for his estrangement and disenfranchisement outside his hometown. Yannakakis begins his description of cosmopolitan Alexandria with the following passage:

La place Muhammad-Ali étoile d'autres itinéraires de ma mémoire. Je me souviens des grands magasins, du côté de la place Sainte-Catherine: Hannaux, Chalon, Sédnaoui... Les vendeuses: Juives, Italiennes, Arméniennes, Grecques, Maltaises, veilles filles à maigre dot ou jeunes filles espérant le mariage promis et toujours repoussé, parlaient toutes le français, socles de leur polyglottisme. Elles étaient à l'image de leurs cadettes, ces écolières des écoles chrétiennes dont la scolarité atteignaient péniblement le niveau du certificat d'études (rares étaient celles qui allaient jusqu'au brevet élémentaire). Elles faisaient partie de ce petit peuple "européen" d'Alexandrie, d'origines ethniques et religieuses si diverses, à qui revenait le mérite d'avoir perpétué la *lingua franca* –le français–durant des générations. Nous les méprisions du haut de notre lycée français, de notre école laïque. Le français se lisait sur les enseignes des magasins, sur les plaques des rues, sur la publicité (nous disions la réclame »). Mais j'ai entendu aussi le grec parlé par les Egyptiens d'Ibrahimieh, ou l'italien par l'épicier arménien de Cléopatra, ou encore le franc-arabe des *shamis*, des Syriens et des Coptes et le cri du marchand arabe des quatre-saisons : « mādām, cresson, tamate, artichôh, patate douce... », où celui du chiffonnier: « roba vecchia »<sup>75</sup>. (Yannakakis 1992, 129)

Mehmet Ali Square lights up other avenues in my memory. I remember the grand department stores over towards St. Catherine's Square: Hannaux, Chalon, Sednaoui. The salesgirls were Jewish, Italian, Armenian, Greek, Maltese; some consigned to spinsterhood by meager dowries, others young and hopeful of the promised but ever postponed marriage. They all spoke French, the foundation of their polyglot world. They were the very image of their juniors, those pupils of the Christian schools whose studies scarcely reached the level of *certificat d'étude*. (Rare were they who went on to the elementary diploma). They were part of Alexandria's European proletariat of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, who could take credit for having perpetuated the *lingua franca*—French—over generations. We looked down on them from the giddy heights of our French lycée, our secular college... French was everywhere: on the store fronts, the street signs, in advertisements (we said

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Roba vecchia

“announcements”). But I also heard Greek spoken by the Egyptians of Ibrahimieh, Italian by the Armenian grocer of Cleopatra and even the Franco-Arabic of the Shamis (Syrians) and the Copts. The Arab barrow-driver would cry, “Madaam. wadercress, tamaytas, artachokes, sweet pataytas...” and the rag and bone man shout “old clothes.” (Yannakakis 1997, 110)

In this passage, the narrator evokes the stores to reconstruct the memory of Alexandria. They appear as the gates of the cosmopolitan city. Yannakakis excludes Arabic from that space. The stores transport the visitor to an exclusive Francophone space where one can practice cosmopolitanism and live its dream. Buyers might begin a romantic adventure with one of the salesgirls and sellers hope to find the right man who could secure their social ascension. Most importantly, as the center of the production and consumption of cultural capital, the stores are where Alexandrians can locate their position on the social map. Whereas the space of the department stores allows Alexandrian elites to flaunt their wealth and their cultural superiority, it offers less privileged groups the chance to advance on the social ladder by serving and coming into contact with the bourgeoisie.

Nevertheless, as Yannakakis elaborates on this utopia, the ideal image starts to break down. That tension between the middle and working classes surfaces in his allusion to the Francophone workers ridiculed for their simple education, and to the petty romantic adventures that could take place in the store. Despite the privilege that Yannakakis' class enjoyed, the passage reveals that this illusion depended mainly on the presence of the Francophone Mediterranean working class: “They were part of Alexandria's European proletariat of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, who could take credit for having perpetuated the lingua franca—French—over generations” (Yannakakis 110). Even French Alexandria breaks down into many subcultures. In

addition to Greek, Italian, and Armenian, alongside French was Franco-Arabic with its different registers ranging from the language of the educated classes to the lexicon of ambulant sellers who expressed themselves in French and Italian.

One can understand the significance of the department store as an idealized safe harbor for Yannakakis when, in a subsequent essay in the same book, he describes his life after moving to Czechoslovakia:

En 1952, la conférence idéologique du parti communiste tchécoslovaque...proclame la lutte sans merci contre les "cosmopolites". La peur s'amplifie et étreint tout ceux qui ne se sentent pas "purs ethniquement et culturellement". Les arrestations se succèdent à un rythme effréné. Des parodies de procès condamnent à mort des dizaines de "cosmopolites", traîtres à leur patrie qui n'est déjà donc plus la leur. Des pages entières de la l'histoire contemporaine sont arrachées de la mémoire: l'"ordre nouveau" orchestre son autodafé sous les applaudissements de « l'homme nouveau »  
Je vivais alors dans ce pays. Au milieu de la tourmente, je me terre. Je maquille ma "bio". Je gomme mes origines "cosmopolites", mes cultures croisées. Je me « nationalise », je "m'aryanise" je me "prolétarise." Me voici metamorphosé en « authentique » Grec, né accidentellement en Egypte de parents misérables. Je feins d'ignorer les langues étrangères apprises au Lycée Français, designées désormais comme capitalistes." (Yannakakis 1992, 220)

In 1952, the ideological conference of the communist party of Czechoslovakia...announced a war without mercy against "cosmopolitans". Fear grew and gripped all those who did not feel themselves to be "ethnically and culturally pure" Arrest followed arrest at a frantic pace. Kangaroo courts condemned dozens of "cosmopolitans" to death, "traitors" to their homeland, which was thus no longer their. Whole pages of contemporary history were erased from memory. The "new order" orchestrated its auto da fé to the applause of the "new man".

I was living in that country then. In the middle of this chaos I retreated underground. I changed my CV. I erased my "cosmopolitan" origins, my multiculturalism. I "nationalised", "aryanised", "proletarianized" myself. There I was, metamorphosed into an "authentic" Greek, born by accident in Egypt to poverty stricken parents. I pretended not to know the languages I had learned at the French Lycée which, from then on, were designated "capitalist."  
(Yannakakis 2007, 190)

Czechoslovakia features as a dystopia, an opposite image of Alexandrian cosmopolitan life celebrated in the department store. The same cultural capital in which he took pride became a source of disenfranchisement. Now he finds himself at the bottom of the social ladder trying to escape racism and ethnocentrism.

As these examples suggest, Egyptian department stores which survived different political regimes were rich signifiers that recurred in a variety of ways in the collective memories of those who lived in Cairo and Alexandria. They were sites which connected Egyptians on the mainland and those of the diaspora. They mapped the authors' location in their old and new societies simultaneously. The stores as *lieux de mémoire* opened up a space for the different groups to reenact their own subjectivity. Most importantly, they were also sites that provided an opportunity to reach beyond cultural and ideological differences and find a framework that might integrate those who had slipped within the "interstices" between maps and histories (Bhabha 3). In many of the cases, such as that of Solé, Jacques and Yannakakis, the French aspect of the department store and of Egyptian colonial urban life does not simply serve to lament the past but rather creates a tie between these authors and their new homeland, France.

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In Chaplin's masterpiece *Modern Times* (1936), Charlie the tramp celebrates his new position as a night guard at a department store. Chaplin's famous protagonist, with his iconographic bowler hat and cane, is a kind of impoverished flâneur who takes that new workspace as a playground. Living a fleeting bourgeois dream, the laid-off factory worker and his fiancée travel between a food-counter stacked with

delicacies, a toy department and, finally, a luxurious bedroom decked out with gaudy furniture. The tramp grabs a pair of roller-skaters from the toy section, and in choreographed dance movements, blindfolded, he sways pompously to the left and to the right, almost falling off a broken handrail into the bottom of the stairwell located at the center of the store; a precarious blind adventure taking place over an edgeless abyss, perhaps recalling the capitalist spirit of the short-lived “roaring twenties.” For the viewer, the contrast is startling between the homeless man’s strolls in this fantasmic house and the grim reality outside, the tragic sight of American streets sinking into the Great Depression. Dancing over the rubbles of modernity, Chaplin captures the sharp difference between economic stagnation and the inside of the store, between the chaotic outdoors and the minutely organized aisles. Postmodernism starts at the gates of the emporium, the sobering realization of that other face of “Modern Times,” described in the film’s foreword, “a story of industry, of individual enterprise—humanity crusading in the pursuit of happiness.” What makes the department store a powerful symbolic space, a multivalent signifier that registers the deferral between the modernist promise of progress and its disappointing aftermath, between a nationalist, colonialist, or imperialist, project and individual aspirations?

Charlie’s dance draws its effect from the fact that to stand in the department store is to find oneself at the intersection of many histories and geographies. This aspect of commercial utopianism in department stores, hinging on the emulation of empire and its geography, turning this into a commercial spectacle, makes it an unsettling map that calls its own coordinates into question.

French and Egyptian department stores attest to this enmeshment of maps and histories. They reconstructed the Saint-Simonian world order of interconnected networks of transport, trade, and people. They projected Saint-Simon's fantasmatic Mediterranean dream of uniting the Orient and the Occident. Spanning a sea divided among three empires, emporia and the narratives about them became the sites of many contested ideologies and spatial practices. They revealed a complex interconnected Mediterranean culture that surpassed Saint-Simon's Orientalist binary. The department store was a disputed map, a mirror to the self and to the society, a racial, social and cultural signifier, and a crumbling utopia that revealed and sometimes denounced its surroundings. This crisscrossing of maps and histories allowed the various peoples of Egypt and France, navigating between the ebb and flow of nation-states and empires, to reinvent their national identity and to interrogate and imagine new forms of modernity, citizenship, cosmopolitanism, and social equality.

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