The Private Sphere and Its Cracks:

How the Women of Caramel (2007) and Downtown Girls (2005) Find Their Places Within It

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Abstract

Both the figurative and sociological connotations of the private sphere can accurately describe what exactly it is that is portrayed in both the films *Caramel* (2007) directed by Lebanese filmmaker Nadine Labaki as well as *Downtown Girls* (2005) directed by Egyptian filmmaker Mohamed Khan as their plots revolve around female friendship explored in the environment of a beauty salon, in countries that share political turmoil and aggression towards the woman who live within them. The exact routes the private sphere is portrayed is analysed but more importantly in which ways the directors choose to explore the different routes and methods of breaking down and reassessing what the private sphere really means and how it fits in the modern day with modern, working women who do not conform to a domestic, picturesque image of them.

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1. Introduction

In some ways, to the bustling, mainstream film industry and its avid fans, the realm of foreign films can be described as private, closed-off, and hard to get into. Whether it be the language or cultural barriers, there seems to have been a long-standing apprehension from the general public to fully embrace and integrate foreign cinema into mainstream film culture. Arab cinema, in fact, has long stood as a relatively undiscovered gap within the market, and only until recent years have resurrections of great Arab filmmakers such as this year's BFI retrospective of Youssef Chahine emerged. But what may create these bridges may well be the subjects, which may be deemed unrelatable to some. Using the case studies, *Caramel* or *Sukkar Banat*[1](2007, dir. Nadine Labaki) and *Downtown Girls* (2005, dir. Mohamed Khan), this dissertation aims to explore how the sociological concept of the public/private sphere is represented within and around the conception of these films through the lenses of their subjects, the women of Beirut and Cairo, respectively. There is an interest exhibited by the directors at exploring the private sphere and its inhabitants, namely women, and in which ways they adjust to the spheres they have been assigned to.

Caramel is a romantic comedy, revolving around the lives of five women in Beirut, all connected to a beauty salon through friendship, work, and proximity. Layale, played by director Nadine Labaki, works and owns the salon and is engaging in an affair with a married man she spends her time unrequitedly pining after. Nisrine, her co-worker, is a Muslim woman engaged to be married whose fiance will not be the first man she has slept with. Jamale is an actress and frequent customer of the salon who is struggling with her age and its effect on her career and feelings of defeminisation. Rima, also working at the salon, is a closeted lesbian who falls for one of her customers. Rose is an unmarried, elderly tailor working close to the salon who lives with her older sister Lili who suffers from an unspecified mental illness. The film is entirely character driven, although the majority are static in character-development; instead the film values self-realisation and the women coming to terms with and acting on their situations.

The other case study is that of *Downtown Girls,* which is also a romantic comedy, following the lives of two working women in Downtown Cairo, Yasmine and Jomana. Like the many women of *Caramel,* Yasmine is a hairdresser who is vibrant and extroverted, who pushes her friend Jomana, a retail assistant at a lingerie store, into mischievous ploys with two men that they meet on the metro. Their story follows prominent romantic

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[1] The Arabic title (*Sukkar Banat*) literally translates to "Girl's Sugar," referring to a common epilation technique in the Middle East using caramelised sugar and its significance to the women in the region as well as the character's careers.

themes, with their characteristics backdrops for their decisions, growth, and their relationships with two smitten suitors, Osman, a business-savvy type, and Samir, a hopeless romantic chef. Their tricks land them into trouble with the world around them and each other, encapsulating the themes of young, intense female friendships and the search for love as employed women.

With similar concepts, the backdrop of political turmoil and traditionalist societal values work inherently against all of them, motivating internal and external conflicts that become microcosms for the treatment of women in Arab cultures. So how exactly can the sociological concept of the public and private spheres inform these characters, and are there any ways to subvert them and women's places within them?

2. Literature Review

A range of articles from different sources, both in Arabic and English, were used to provide anecdotal evidence and opinions directly from subjects the films were based around, habitants of both Lebanon and Egypt. Further reviews and journal articles were inspected and selected for their relevant information aiding to the analyses and understandings of the case studies and their creators, such as Balaa's article "Framed: The Door Swings Both Ways in Caramel" (2019). In an effort to pair the aforementioned evidence with outside areas of academia, books, excerpts, and reports on history, politics, and sociology were also considered such as Nancy Fraser's "Rethinking the Public Sphere" (2012), Lina Khatib's "Filming the Middle East" (2006), and the Human Rights Watch and the Institute of Development Studies reports revolving around law and vulnerable groups in Lebanon and Egypt.

3. Historical Context

Although not explicitly represented in both films, both countries were experiencing periods of intense economic and political turmoil. In fact, just a week after *Caramel* had completed shooting, the 2006 Lebanon war had erupted, and Labaki details her feelings towards the relation of her creation and the timing, 'That summer I felt guilty, useless — I'd just finished shooting a colourful film that wasn't about politics or war, but love, emotions and shared humour' (Carver, 2007). Although, Labaki would go on to create much more politically driven pieces such as *Where Do We Go Now?* (2011) and *Capernaum* (2018) which received much critical acclaim. And though it may not be political, Labaki ends *Caramel* with the reminder of what it truly was

to her and the non-professional actors cast into the roles of these women, a dedication, written, "To the woman of the world, my Beirut."[2]

On the other hand, Downtown Girls (2005) was released six years prior to the 2011 Egyptian revolution, which saw the abdication of president Hosni Mubarak, who had been re-elected the year of the release after 24 years of rule. The revolution had seen massive changes into the law regarding the treatment of women, and the absence of and need for this change lingers in the subtext of the film (See Chapters 5.3 and 5.4). With these contexts in mind, how accurately the directors could go in terms portraying private/public and how they can do so, may be hidden within the motifs that are shared within the two films.

Another interesting aspect of the creations of the films is who and how the films had successfully been made in the first place. *Downtown Girls* may have been directed by a very successful Egyptian director, who has made notable films such as the 1983 drama *The Street Player*, it seemed he had also veered towards representing the women of the films in a very traditional, voyeuristic way, focusing much on the bodies of the womens. With all that in mind, his wife had written the film in the first place, providing an extremely accurate look into the lives of Egyptian women by an Egyptian woman. Even with this information, the film would still be set to be domestically funded and produced, meaning there was little international participation as well as distribution. On the other hand, Labaki's film had famously been funded by the international market, ['Another way of securing funds from abroad is through co-production. Lebanon and France signed an agreement in March 2000 that encourages exchanges and co-productions between the two nations in the cinema industry,' (Schellen, 2016) leading it to compete in the Cannes Film Festival as well as gain more international traction and be marketed to appeal to their audiences, and it is interesting and important to look at which ways the directors choose to represent Arab culture.

4. The Venn Diagram of Motifs

The concept of intrusion may best be signified by the sacred world of salons, historically a symbol in Arab cultures as a safe space for women. A place women prepare for weddings, funerals, dates, job interviews, and the like, for gossip and support, and in many cases, animosity and competition. Both directors use similar motifs throughout the films inherent to Arab culture within this private space, and one that sticks out the most is the motif of the bride and music.

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[2] "Beirut, Set El Dounia" a patriotic song, released by Lebanese singer Majida El Roumi in 1995, with a colloquial phrase of endearment directed to the capital of Lebanon used by many. A similar phrase exists for Egyptians "Om El Dounia" describing Egypt as "mother of the world"

Figure 1 and 2: Nisrine from Caramel *(left) and Yasmine from* Downtown Girls *(right) celebrating*

In two very similar scenes, the soon-to-be-bride of each film, Nisrine and Yasmine, are in the salon with the closest of their friends [Fig.1&2]. With a make-shift veil, pink flowers, and rollers in her hair placed by her co-workers, Nisrine is serenaded with makeshift sing songs to the beat of traditional wedding tunes, choruses of ululations, the celebratory sounds of Arab women, and bouncing dances with the occasional flick of her veil, complete with the words "oh beautiful bride!" And two years prior around 920 kilometres away, Yasmine and Jomana dance around in dresses with a white veil singing to "Mutahasbush Ya Banat" by Al Masreyeen, with lyrics that playfully warn girls that marriage is no easy feat. The divide between the people of the Arab world on the basis of religion or beliefs is almost always transcended by the unification of marriage and the celebratory music that comes with it.

> On one hand nobody questions the origins of the music, the tradition or its connection to a certain religion, all Arabs of the region sing and dance to Dabkeh[3] tunes with great joy... these are only a few manifestations of how vocal music brings together both Muslims and Christians in the Arab Middle East, creating a moment of peaceful dialogue through their shared culture away from religious differences. (Hattar & Ramirez-Hurtado, 2014)

The scenes are very representative of a strong bond amongst the community surrounding the importance of marriage and dance with Arab cultures. However, with closer inspection on the cultural view of dancing, the representation of the act can still in a way be seen as rebellious. In 2020, with the rise of TikTok and dance challenges, the Egyptian government broke down on women creating content of belly dancing, charging them with the crime of "violating traditional, family values" (The Independent, 2020). It seems that although the films show traditions synonymous with Arab culture to both Nadine Labaki and Mohamed Khan, the representations of them do not exist in a vacuum, and will always in some way correspond to another breach of

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[3] Levantine circle folk dance traditionally performed by guests of all identities at a wedding

equality and may in the eyes of many, be preferred to remain hidden in the private sphere, which may be why breaching the notion of strict private/public sphere boundaries may be so vital to the directors.

Another similarity is found in the use of pseudonyms and names, many of the characters taking on a new identity for incredibly varying reasons. In *Downtown Girls*, Yasmine and Jomana participate in mischief and deception to their suitors, switching their names and phones around. In true romantic-comedy fashion, the switch is done for laughs and all the mishaps and confusions the girls get into, but Yasmine not only lies about her name, but also of her nationality, which she chooses for a sense of mystery and allure, and her job, something she is seems uncontent and unsatisfied with throughout the film (See Chapter 5.3). By both hiding her name, occupation, and nationality, her entrance into a passionate, blossoming relationship is overshadowed by her elaborate scheme that even confuses her at times. She creates a blockade for anyone, especially her love-interest, Samir, to get past, locking herself into a privacy she may not want to keep, even as her love transcends her practical jokes.

Whereas in *Caramel*, both Layale and Nisrine use pseudonyms, but for them, it is the only means they have to fully express the multitude of their love to their respective partners. When looking for a romantic getaway fit for two, Layale treks to a hotel with a fake name and a fake story, trying to find a place willing to let her and the married man she is seeing stay. She charms the receptionist, courteous and kind, but the hotel management insists on a proof of marriage foiling her plans and Layale is forced to settle on a hotel that is less than up to standard. Labaki reveals the severance of women's identity to themselves when they choose to go against traditionalist values. Later in shaded sunglasses and with stifled giggles, Layale accompanies Nisrine, under the new name of "Julie Pompidau" as she undergoes an intense surgery in order to restore her hymen. When both Layale and Nisrine commit acts looked down upon, they use fake names that also indicate other nationalities and origins, attributing themselves identities that may allow them exit from the private sphere of their hometowns.

5. Closed Doors: Breaking Down the Private Sphere

Within the base theory of Habermas's public/private dichotomy[4], feminist thinkers have reconsidered the place in which women can find themselves within the paradigm on the basis of class, race, and the state of women's rights; Simon Susen defines the public/private dichotomy into three distinct meanings. Closely linked

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[4] Habermas described how the private sphere encompassed the home, the family and its activities; the public sphere in the ancient city state. (Hohendal, 1974, p.46)

to feminist interpretations of the thought is the *openness* and *closure* definition, using examples of the state for open and the family for closed - acknowledging the figurative connotations of the terminology (2011, p. 42). The private sphere has become synonymous with the domestic world (Rosaldo, 1974, p.23) wherein women find themselves at the forefront of. However, what this paradigm fails to represent is the mobility of women within the workforce, and in turn the working women of the 2000s depicted in both films.

Figure 3: The figurative of the private sphere, looking to the outside

What these films do depict is that it came to stand rather that women had not assimilated into the public spheres of men, but shifted into private spheres that explored a further range of opportunity than the home; any sort of inclusion that had been feigned on women by a new-found independence or a welcome into the workforce resituated their positions into yet another private sphere in which they still lacked involvement in legislative sectors ['...we haven't succeeded in eradicating discrimination between women and men in personal status legislation, despite the fact that we have been successful in other professions, but not in politics,' two Lebanese Members of Parliament, Ms Maha Al-Khuri and Ms Bahaya Al-Hariri, interviewed by Gehan Abu-Zayd (2023)]. But the characters in *Caramel* and *Downtown Girls* push the boundary of the private sphere, either by destabilising them, creating new ones, shifting them, or pushing them.

5.1. Destabilising Through Action

While feigned ignorance may be assumed, Nadine Labaki acknowledges women's small role in the political and economic state of their country by choosing to ignore them altogether - the only times it does come to play within the film is when it directly invades these private spheres that the women willingly choose to uphold. In *Caramel*, Nisrine and her fiance, Bassam, are in a car alone after a dinner party. The innocence of their situation immediately comes into question by a local police officer and a defiant Bassam is violently punished for the crime. Police brutality motivated by the "immorality" of the arrestee has long been a habitual

practice in the Arab world. Interviews conducted between the Human Rights Watch and former Lebanese detainees recounts a young man, Nadim, whose brother was suspected of drug dealing - so they arrested Nadim.

> I denied it, so one of the officers hit me hard across the face. He then accused me of having a gun and covering for my brother, just crazy accusations out of nowhere. He hit me more, handcuffed me, and dragged me to my house and searched it without a warrant. (Human Rights Watch, 2013, p.27)

Nadim's story is among many that range from arrests for acts the ISP[5] deems immoral such as queerness, sex work, and drug use, each detailing the violence used against them. And while Bassam's punishment was short-lived, it solidified Nisrine's decision - her pre-marital engagements would never be accepted, not on a cultural, a societal, a political, or a personal level. She would undergo a hymenoplasty[6] discreetly and under the guise of a foreign girl, she would hide it from her family, and like many others 'blame themselves for indulging in "wrongful acts"… they try to "clean" and "fix" what they have done in an attempt to forget and start a marriage based on socially known and acceptable standards.' (Hajali, 2015, p.29) Although Nisrine has little influence on the public sphere containing laws and societal norms, she destabilises the structure by taking the abstract of a virginity into her own hands and reversing it, all from the closure of the private sphere.

5.2. Ambiguity, Creation, and Connotations

A room away from Nisrine is Rima. The room is dark and it is lit by scattered desk lamps and Rima and her client, Siham, are squeezed into the room that can barely contain the two backwash units and shelves of shampoos and creams. The running stream of the tap and brushes of fingertips through thick hair fill the chasm of silence between the two women. Instead, it is the closeness of Rima's hands on the hair she washes and the gazes they shyly envelop themselves in that narrates their romance [Fig.4].

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[5] Internal Security Forces Directorate, the Lebanese police force
[6] Also known as a hymenorrhaphy or hymen restoration surgery, undergone to "restore virginity" by promoting bleeding for consummation on the wedding night.

Figure 4: Rima and Siham in the sink room

Rima creates a new definition for a private sphere: a transformation of the domestic space by sexual and gender nonconformists that provides a privacy curated for inclusion, representation, and a freedom of desire away from the heteronormative binary (Gorman-Murray, 2012). When Siham returns, it is not an act of loyalty to the business, and when Siham asks for a drastic haircut, it is not just a change-up: these small acts of defiance, like some sort of espionage are the forefronts of the queer space, embedding their existence into the closure ascribed to the private sphere. These spaces have existed within Lebanese queer communities dating far back to the fabrication of Rima in *Caramel*.

> One could argue that in Lebanon, the civil war[7] and its resultant transformations played a crucial role in allowing the creation of 'queer space', the introduction of an LGBT politics of human rights, and the subsequent organisation of a small LGBT community. (Mohamed, 2015, p.9)

Labaki honours the lesbian community of Lebanon through a representation suited to the censorship requirements of the Arab film industry. She engages in concepts such as "connotative homosexuality"[8] and "structured ambiguity,"[9] choosing to recite this love story through mere implications, rather than neglecting its existence. When Rima is faced with pressure from her peers to shave her legs, to which she firmly rejects, this is both an instance of Rima's connotative homosexuality as well as dismantling the expectations of women's grooming in Arab cultures, which can be seen as an oppressive disciplinary practice, representing a much larger

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[7] From 1975-1990, ending seventeen years prior to the making of *Caramel*, the Lebanese Civil War saw the partition of Lebanon on the basis of religion and their opposing political affiliations.

[8] Described by Benshof and Griffin as "that a character might be queer, through subtle mannerisms, costuming, or speech patterns." (2006, p.9)

[9] Techniques used by filmmakers to create pieces that blur the lines of code requirements and censorship. (Tinoco, 2022)

hold society has on women's choices as well as their bodies (Bartky, 1990, p.103). Rima's discomfort, as well as the way she presents herself, aids to an obvious characterisation as a lesbian. Wherein queerbaiting may arch on these tropes, Labaki uses them as a rebellion and a means to depict intimacy, love, and connection with reduced displays of sexual activity to blur the lines of decent and indecent within the a conservative-led Arab film industry.

5.3. Outside Coming In: Invasion and Power Shifts

In the mornings, Yasmine and Jomana take the women's only carriage of the metro to work, all the way to Downtown Cairo. Jomana reads on the metro, Yasmine listens to music on the metro, they sing together on the metro, and sometimes in an alliance formed by the whole of the carriage, they kick a man off of their metro. But like the domestic private sphere, and like any private place, there is always a way in for an outsider. Just past the gangway are the men who gaze past the panes of glass, a romantic and metaphorical separation reminiscent of the lover's woes of miscommunication and a Romeo-and-Juliet forbidden romance. But the underbelly of the playful giggles and the mouthing of amorous pop music to their suitors is the sinister existence of segregation in the first place: the women's only carriage.

Although formally introduced into Egypt in 2007 (Wiskin, 2015), the 2005 case study of *Downtown Girls* shows women-only carriages have long been a safe means of transportation for Egyptian women. ['In a city like Cairo, leaving the house is a risk, especially at a time like this which is characterised by violence and aggression, directed towards women in particular. So I prefer the metro over other means of transportation,' says Hend El Sayed to interviewer Zizi Shoosha (2021)]. However for some like Shaima Mahmoud, another interviewee, she chooses to ride the mixed carriages instead.

> There is a violence inflicted on women by other women. In this society, women are hated, and when they want to direct that pent-up anger, they aim it at other women. If I do enter the women's carriage, I always feel the looks thrown my way, especially from veiled women. They often bully women who choose to not wear a hijab, and it's worse when you wear clothes they consider obscene. I choose to run from this world charged with anger, to preserve my inner peace. (Shoosha, 2021)

This animosity women pose towards others is explored in *Downtown Girls,* through not just the tumultuous friendship of the two main characters, but their interactions with competing women. In an act of triumph, Yasmine asserts her dominance over her ex-boyfriends new girlfriend, teasing her to push herself further above them. And in an act of retaliation, Yasmine is confronted in the bathroom by her and she berates Yasmine for her economic standing, targeting her and her father's occupations. It seems even within the private spheres created

to protect them, women struggle with external subjugation and more so its repercussions, affecting women who namely choose to not conform to the binary of "womanhood" that exists so strongly within Arab cultures, whether it be lesbians, trans women, sexually active women, or working women (See Chapter 4.2).

Figure 5: Yasmine after her haircut

Before heading to work, Yasmine opts to wear a tight-fitting white top with 'I'M A WOMAN' plastered on her chest. As she walks into the kitchen of her house, the dominating male figure (her brother) objects to her clothes, to her hair, gripping its long curls with disgust. He asks her, "What would they think of you? What will people say?" Even within the so-called private domestic sphere, women still inherit some form of retaliation, as succinctly put by Shaima. Later on, Yasmine cuts her hair, reminiscent of Siham (See Chapter 4.2) [Fig.5]. And similarly, it is not a change-up and it is not what her Samir suspects - a mark of a failed relationship. Rather it is as before, a quiet rebellion, a way of without words proving that not only does she not care what people say or think, but that her morality should not be called into question because of the way she expresses herself physically. In the sanctity of the salon, Yasmine shifts her sphere from the domestic home to her workplace: in there she has the power and the means to control herself, to dominate her environment.

5.4. Pushing Boundaries and Blurring the Divide

Where the private sphere can be representative of the hidden and closed off - the homes we live in that the public has little access to - it can also represent the subjects that are hidden and closed off. The subjects of sex and virginity (See Chapter 5.1) belong to the private sphere, their inherit relationship with the bedroom and vulnerability. But at times sex can creep into the public, bringing people from the outside in, in ways such as sex work and pornography. Breaching the gap between the public and the private by introducing taboos into

conversations, things meant to remain unspoken, can be a way to encourage the mobility between the two spheres, but its consequences may verge on adverse.

Figure 6: Jomana and Osman meet on the train

When Jomana and Osman meet by chance, they spend a night partying and dancing [Fig.6], and return to the latter's apartment that is lonely and bare. He makes sure to restate just how large his group of friends is and how happy his life is. While Osman caresses and speaks to a jittery Jomana, she upfront asks him, "When did you lose your virginity?" With this one question, riddled with a major taboo and an invasion of the vulnerable, Osman is furious, Jomana is taken aback. Osman asks, "What kind of girl asks a guy a question like that?" And with that Jomana has brought the private to the public, and just like her best friend Yasmine, is punished with the omnipresent rhetoric of the "decent girl." Jomana does not falter at Osman's initial physical touch and seduction, she does however challenge his perception of himself, her, and their relationship by pushing for the preliminary discussion to gain access to his history with women before embarking on a relationship with him herself. Their night abruptly ends, both parties rushing to get out and push past their humiliations. This discussion is more than an embarrassing moment between two unaccustomed lovers, it's a breach of honour and a completely inappropriate question to ask, even with Osman's hand fondling Jomana's thigh: with no right time or place or rhyme or reason to be asked, according to Osman's reaction. Charged by a lifetime's worth of disdain towards premarital sex on social and religious bases, the conversation of purity is unwelcomed by the men who occupy and command the public sphere.

About six years later, at the peak of the Arab spring and in the throes of the Egyptian revolution, women marching the streets for the power and overthrow of an oppressive regime for the whole country, private and public spheres included, were met with sexual violence. Violence justified by searching for empirical

evidence of the purity of the women who fought for the people. Samira Ibrahim, activist and revolutionary, was one of the many subject to this in the form of a virginity test performed by a licensed doctor, which was described as humiliating and violating. An article by Hana Zuhair from 2013 tells of how the military court had acquitted the doctor two years later, and it took one year after that for the decision of finally criminalising sexual harassment in Egypt to be made (Kingsley, 2014). The simple question of virginity raised by Jomana, within the context of the political state of Egypt, as well as women's rights, further the notions of just how far Jomana chose to push the boundaries in her question, and the weight of the decision to ask it. Khan's private spheres are consistently intersected with violence and suppressed by the public around them, but Yasmine and Jomana choose to prevail, and they, in the words of the metro-rider Shaima: "choose to run from this world charged with anger, to preserve [their] inner peace."

6. Conclusion

Whether it be a wedding or the metro or a salon or a ploy, uniting the public and the private can be found throughout the lively slice-of-life comedies both Labaki and Khan have created, sharing the humanity and intimacy behind women and their complicated relationships with the world and other women around them. The symbolic meanings, whether subtle or obvious, may propose and encourage introspection to Arab communities of their treatment of their women. Instead of directly appealing to what may be assumed or even warranted by the stories - developed and complex analyses of feminism, religion, and politics - the international audience may leave with understanding all of those obstacles Arab women may face will not necessarily break down their spirit or companionship. Looking towards the techniques these women assume to adjust their spheres to suit their needs and break the norm can also be applied to inform the ways of breaking into an exclusive industry such as filmmaking, something both the directors employ themselves. In a way, letting the outside in and discover worlds they may not have seen, or expected to see for a turbulent early 2000s in the Middle East and North Africa, is in of itself a collapse of a mould placed heavily onto the representations of Arab culture and its women.

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