Constructing Womanhood in Egypt's Hammams and Beauty Salons

By

Yasmeen Alaa El Din Abdel Atey Elsayed

Submitted to

Central European University – Private University

Department of Gender Studies

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for degree of Master of Women's and Gender Studies (GEMMA) 2023 – 2025

Supervisor: Prof. Adriana Qubaiova

Associated Supervisor: Prof. Izabela Desperak

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, **Yasmeen Alaa El Din Abdel Atey Elsayed**, candidate for the MA degree in Department of Gender Studies declare herewith that the present thesis titled "***Constructing Womanhood in Egypt's Hammams and Beauty Salons***" is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright.

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Body of thesis (all chapters excluding notes, references, appendices, etc.): 31, 995 words

Entire manuscript: 40,187 words

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Abstract

This thesis demonstrates that hammams and beauty salons in Egypt are not merely spaces for bodily care or aesthetic services, but rather sites saturated with gendered, political, social, and class-based meanings. Within these spaces, womanhood is constituted on a daily basis through emotions and embodied practices, where it constantly interacts with gender, power, religion, and class. Grounded in feminist methodology and ethnographic fieldwork, and drawing on multiple theoretical frameworks—including intersectionality, gender performativity, biopower, postcolonial critique, and theories of resistance—this thesis analyzes the formation of womanhood within these sites.

Across its three chapters, the thesis reveals how these spaces reproduce patriarchal norms while simultaneously offering women tools for negotiation and everyday resistance. The first chapter traces the historical, religious, and socio-political contexts that have shaped these spaces, uncovering how the oppression of women in both public and private spheres intersects with modern state projects characterized by capitalist consumerism and securitized control over the female body. The second chapter explores how beauty standards become tools of symbolic violence, enacted by women upon themselves and others within patriarchal and class-based structures. The third chapter highlights women's everyday acts of resistance through storytelling, emotional solidarity and support, bodily liberation, and informal sexual education—positioning these spaces as sites of solidarity, bodily emancipation, and daily resistance.

In doing so, the thesis argues that womanhood is not a fixed or given identity, but rather a shifting gendered, political, social, and class-based project, continually reconstituted through the body and daily practices—even within semi-public - private spaces such as hammams and beauty salons. These spaces, while informed by patriarchy, the state, the market, and religion, also emerge as complex terrains: simultaneously governed by systems of patriarchal power and functioning as arenas for resistance, where identities are reimagined and womanhood is actively shaped.

Acknowledgment

While I was experiencing deep disappointment due to my first master's thesis experience in Cairo, I received, at that very moment, the acceptance letter from the GEMMA program. From there, my life gradually began to change, both academically and personally. This scholarship was a true turning point in my journey, as it opened new horizons for learning, self-discovery, and reshaping my vision of the world around me. I extend my heartfelt thanks and gratitude to the program that granted me this invaluable educational opportunity, which has had a profound impact on changing my life.

I would also like to express my deep appreciation to my supervisor Dr.Q. at Central European University (CEU), with whom I found my academic voice for the first time. With her, I felt that I could finally write what I truly believe in—something I had been denied in my previous academic experience. She stood by me step by step, with both intellectual and emotional support, and inspired me with her vast and ethical readings that helped me better understand the context I belong to and which I tried to write about from a position of honesty and commitment.

I also thank my second supervisor, Prof. Izabela, at the University of Lodz, whose inspiring lectures on feminist readings helped me recognize the sense that something was happening in hammams and beauty salons—spaces that express the intersection of the body and politics, and the inspiration of resistance. These spaces became the core of this thesis.

I am deeply grateful to all the research participants who trusted me and shared their stories and experiences with me, despite the highly complex context. Without you, I would not have been able to write a single word. I learned from you more than I ever imagined and you taught me the meaning of hope and tenderness in challenging and complicated circumstances. Your creative

forms of resistance were a true source of inspiration for me, and I will do my utmost to translate this entire thesis into Arabic as I promised, so that your names and everyday experiences can be documented for others to learn from—myself included.

Finally, I would like to express my deep gratitude to everyone who supported me emotionally and psychologically during this long academic journey far from my homeland. At the heart of this unwavering support was my beloved Youssef Aroog, without whom I would not have been able to enroll in this program, due to long and exhausting bureaucratic procedures no one can imagine—particularly because of my racial background. His support, presence, and constant encouragement were the foundation I relied upon throughout this academic, professional, and personal path.

To my dear sister Sara, no words can do justice to her role in my life. She was always the light in my darkness, my pillar in moments of weakness, and the smile when things felt bleak. Without you, I would not have been able to take a single step forward.

Thank you to my family, my friends, collogues and everyone who believed in me and supported me on this journey, making it a rich and fulfilling experience.

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Introduction

This thesis explores how the semi - private – public spaces like bathhouses\ hammams and beauty salons in Egypt, function as gendered spaces of both conformity and resistance to patriarchal norms at the same time. The overarching **research question is** how do women's spaces such as bathhouses\ hammams and beauty salons in Egypt shape women's bodily experiences? How is femininity constructed within the context of hammams and beauty salons in Egypt? How can these spaces serve as tools for fostering feminist solidarity and liberation from imposed societal and beauty standards?

It examines the intersections of gender, power, and space, investigating how women use these traditionally female spheres to conform to or resist societal pressures besides mapping their emotions and how globalized beauty standards and local traditions shape their experiences. It also aims to analyze how these spaces reflect broader political, economic and social structures in Egypt, considering the role of state policies and cultural norms in shaping gender dynamics within these settings. The thesis on the status of women in bathhouses\ hammams and beauty salons in Egypt is of significant importance due to the intersections, as it highlights between the social, class, personal, and political dimensions related to women's bodily experiences and the constructed of womanhood in the Egyptian context.

1.1 Theoretical Framework:

The theoretical framework draws from intersectionality theory, gender performativity theory, biopower theory, and postcolonial theory to analyze the intersections of power, gender, and social representation in semi-private and public spaces such as hammams and beauty salons in Egypt.

Intersectionality theory is employed to analyze how overlapping systems of power—such as gender, class, and religion—shape women's experiences (Crenshaw, 1991). This theory will be utilized to examine how social positions influence access to these spaces and how intersecting forms of privilege or marginalization affect women's ability to conform to or resist societal expectations through their embodied practices.

Gender performativity theory offers insight into how gender is constituted through repeated acts (Butler, 1990). In the context of this thesis, it reveals how womanhood is performed and negotiated in rituals and interactions within hammams and salons. These spaces become performative stages where traditional gender roles are both enacted and contested through collective beauty practices. These spaces function as performative stages where women engage in ritualized acts—such as hair removal, skin treatments, and makeup application—that reiterate cultural norms of femininity and womanhood. At the same time, these acts also open possibilities for subversion, resistance, or redefinition of those norms through shared narratives and stories, bodily exposure, and the sexual knowledge and practice. Thus, gender is not merely expressed in these settings but actively made and remade through their embodied routines.

Biopower theory contributes to understanding how institutional and cultural norms regulate women's bodies in public and private domains. This framework helps analyze how standards of modesty and beauty are inscribed onto the female body in these settings. While such spaces may offer moments of autonomy, they also reproduce forms of bodily discipline. Yet, they can also become sites of resistance, where women subtly challenge these norms (Foucault, 1977).

Postcolonial theory addresses the lingering effects of colonialism on cultural and social structures (Mohanty, 1984). It informs this thesis's examination of the transformation of hammams and beauty salons from traditional communal or religious spaces to ones shaped by Western beauty

ideals. This tension between local traditions and global standards reveals how women navigate hybrid identities and competing cultural pressures.

These theories are further supported by social movement theory, which highlights how such spaces foster informal feminist solidarity and resistance (Fraser, 2005; hooks, 2000). Drawing on everyday resistance and alternative space theories (Scott, 1985; Lefebvre, 1991; de Certeau, 1984), hammams and beauty salons emerge as tactical sites where women negotiate identity and reclaim agency.

1.2Literature Review:

An extensive review of the literature reveals a marked lack of feminist theorization on semi-public - private spaces, particularly in the context of hammams and beauty salons in Egypt. This section critically examines key studies addressing these spaces and its diverse dimensions.

Hammams and beauty salons in Egypt are semi-private and semi-public spaces where social and political dynamics are reshaped, offering critical insight into the renegotiation of gender roles. This intersection of the private and public is central to feminist and sociological thought. Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989) outlines how this relationship evolves across cultures, while Nancy Fraser's *Rethinking the Public Sphere* (1990) emphasizes how marginalized groups utilize private spaces to challenge power. Similarly, Gill Valentine's *Feminism and Geography* (1993) shows that space is gendered and shaped by everyday practices.

These perspectives help understand how hammams and beauty salons allow Egyptian women to navigate and challenge gender norms through intimate yet socially open environments. Building

on the second wave feminist idea that "the personal is political", thinkers like Betty Friedan (*The Feminine Mystique*, 1963) and Carole Pateman (*The Sexual Contract*, 1988) revealed how domestic roles reinforce gendered power structures. Nawal El Saadawi's *The Hidden Face of Eve* (1977) brought this perspective to Egypt, showing how personal issues like circumcision and domestic violence are political, demanding public attention. This is reflected in the hammams and beauty salons under study, which, while traditionally seen as spaces concerned with personal and feminine matters such as beauty, hygiene, and self-care, become sites where gender roles are reproduced and where forms of social regulation, symbolic control, and patriarchal power over the female body are enacted. The contours of the female body are reshaped according to classed and patriarchal beauty standards—such as skin whitening or hair straightening—practices that are far from mere aesthetic preferences. Rather, they carry political meanings deeply rooted in patriarchal and neoliberal preferences for certain types of bodies over others. From this perspective, bodily care is not a simple individual or personal activity but a political act that reflects and reproduces power relations and opens the door to their everyday resistance, as seen in moments of solidarity among women or the sharing of embodied knowledge and practices.

Studies from the MENA region confirm the broader cultural role of hammams. Roxanne Bram's *The Traditional Hammams Bathhouse from Morocco to France* (2022) portrays hammams as places of solidarity and resistance, while Asia Belhamar Louzani's (2024) work explores their symbolism in Maghrebi literature. Burçay Basın's *Critical Analysis of Ottoman Hammams* (2021) presents these spaces as sites for social negotiation, a function echoed in Julie Peet's *The Hammam through Time and Space* (2024), which traces their evolution into gendered spaces. In Egypt, Dalila El-Kordany (2008) highlights the folkloric and modern dimensions of hammams, while André Raymond's *Cairo: City of History* (2007) notes their historic social roles. Journalistic sources (Al-

Araby 2019, Independent Arabia 2020, Raseef 22 2018) underscore their continuing role in women's social lives despite urban transformation. Through this, my thesis benefits from an expanded understanding of hammams as multifunctional social and cultural spaces that go beyond their physical function to become sites for the reproduction and constructing of womanhood, the negotiation of gender roles, and the cultivation of feminist solidarity through daily practices and shared embodied experiences. These works also allow me to analyze the Egyptian context within a historical and cultural continuum that highlights the transformations and intersections that have shaped the emergence and development of hammams, and the impact of these changes on women's bodies.

Regarding beauty salons, Hager Faisal Amer's (2013) study explores class, gender, and informality, revealing how these spaces both reproduce and resist social divisions. Beauty salons operate as vibrant social venues, particularly around life events, reinforcing their significance in shaping femininity and feminist solidarity (Franke,2022).

Ultimately, these literatures provide a framework for understanding hammams and beauty salons as multifunctional sites that offer women opportunities for social interaction, negotiation with social norms, and the reshaping of their gender identities. I will use these insights to analyze how Egyptian women utilize these spaces, navigating between compliance with and resistance to imposed gender norms.

1.3Methodology:

The thesis employs a qualitative approach to gain a nuanced understanding of women's experiences in bathhouses\hammams and beauty salons in Egypt. This approach combines personal narratives with an exploration of the broader cultural and societal frameworks that shape

these spaces. Two main methods were used: semi-structured interviews and participatory observation. These methods are widely used in feminist and ethnographic research due to their ability to access lived experiences, gendered power relations, and the complexities of everyday life (Oakley, 1981; Abu-Lughod, 1993; DeVault & Gross, 2007; Lokot, 2021). I conducted the 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted with both women who frequent hammams and beauty salons (clients), as well as workers and owners of these establishments. The interviews were evenly distributed across five Egyptian governorates—Cairo, Alexandria, Sharqia, Assiut, and North Sinai—ensuring regional diversity. Within each governorate, interviews were equally divided between beauty salons and hammams, and balanced across high-, middle-, and low-income neighborhoods to capture class-based variations. The average length of each interview ranged from 30 to 45 minutes.

The interviews followed a flexible, participant-centered approach, allowing space for emotion, memory, and storytelling in line with feminist research principles that emphasize co-produced knowledge through care and reflexivity (O'Keeffe, 2016). Their implementation within Egypt's politically and culturally sensitive context reflects broader feminist concerns about research in marginalized and sensitive environments. To facilitate the organization of interviews, I relied on existing networks and reached out to local individuals in each governorate to help identify and approach potential participants. By involving someone familiar within the community, I was able to create a safer and more familiar environment for the women involved. The full interviews' guide, included in the appendix, explores women's personal experiences, beauty perceptions, bodily autonomy, and the socio-political dynamics shaping these spaces, aiming to analyze gender, power, and societal expectations.

In this thesis, participants' identities were represented using initials only, as a commitment to affirming their identities despite contextual challenges. This approach wasn't specifically applied in Chapter Two, which focuses on the patriarchal dimensions of hammams and beauty salons. Except for two participants, all interviewees chose not to disclose their names or locations. They perceived their presence and interactions in these spaces as part of an ongoing, everyday resistance—one that cannot be separated from life itself, even when it involves pleasing or interacting with men. The women preferred to highlight their acts of resistance rather than their personal identities, affirming that "these spaces are by women and for women."

The absence of names or locations in this chapter should not be understood as an erasure of identity, but rather as a deliberate act—one that redefines everyday resistance as unspoken action and affirms women's right to own their narratives beyond public representation or academic documentation. This stance resonates with bell hooks' (1990) notion of privacy as a site of resistance. In *Yearning*, hooks emphasizes that refusing to appear under dominant terms is not an act of submission, but a conscious strategy of resisting imposed forms of representation. The participants' partial silence was not a denial of their experiences, but a defense of their right to shape their daily narratives in the ways they deem appropriate.

I employed also participatory observation following the "participant-as-observer" model for exploring the social dynamics and gendered practices within hammams and beauty salons. In line with ethical guidelines, I introduced myself and clarified the aims of my research to participants. I immersed myself in the everyday life of hammams and salons, observing not only verbal exchanges and the language used, but also bodily postures in relation to nudity and clothing, periods of silence, glances, specific services requested, the way personal topics were discussed,

and the emotions expressed and their degrees of openness. These elements were reflected clearly in my analytical chapters, revealing how womanhood is continuously negotiated and constructed within these spaces.

I also intentionally visited hammams and salons during peak hours—typically after 3:00 PM, when most people leave work, children finish school, and university students return home. I would often wait for extended periods—sometimes hours or even a full day—delaying the disclosure of my researcher identity in order to observe social and spatial dynamics as naturally as possible. This strategy enabled access to embodied and affective practices that are often difficult to articulate verbally. This use of observation aligns with feminist ethnography that values immersion to access embodied, unspoken experiences shaped by gendered and classed power relations (Smith, 1987; Skeggs, 1997; Abu-Lughod, 1993). In Egypt's politically sensitive context—marked by surveillance and social constraint—participant observation proved crucial for accessing layers of experience beyond the reach of interviews (Gilbert, 2008; Lokot, 2021). As feminist methods stress, immersive observation is key to understanding how power, discipline, the body, and emotion intersect (Craven & Davis, 2013; Emerald Publishing, 2023). Data was analyzed through a process of coding, using the keywords embedded in the subheadings of each chapter to help track the full scope of insights shared by participants and those I observed directly. I kept detailed notes during interviews and observation, which allowed me to return regularly to the raw data during analysis, ensuring that interpretations remained faithful to the participants' narratives and contexts while also safeguarding their identities and views on the topics under study.

The chosen methods provide a multi-dimensional approach, combining personal narratives with broader societal discourses. This blend of interviews and participatory observation is designed to

offer a comprehensive understanding of women's experiences in these under-researched spaces. As part of the research tools, I also used AI-based applications to assist with the translation of specific difficult terms, linguistic refinement, and the correction of grammatical errors. These tools were employed solely as supportive instruments, without influencing data analysis or the interpretive process. All analytical decisions remained grounded in my own research perspective and methodological and academic framework.

1.4 Positionality and Fieldwork Challenges:

As an Egyptian researcher conducting this research in my home country, I greatly anticipated cultural familiarity, which presumably would facilitate access to participants and build trust with them. However, this familiarity was often superficial and frequently fragmented due to intersecting elements of gender, class, education, politics, and religion. My appearance and self-identification as a heterosexual woman, my Cairene-accented Arabic, my modern attire and hijab, my educational background—having earned a master's degree in my home country and pursuing another abroad—provided a sense of apparent moral safety. Many women perceived me as "trustworthy" and "serious," enabling them to participate in the interviews and granting me moral and social legitimacy in women's spaces such as beauty salons and hammams.

Nevertheless, the fact that I was completing my master's thesis at a European university and my position, particularly as an assistant lecturer in the Political Science Department at Cairo University, quickly positioned me, albeit unintentionally, as elite in the eyes of participants. I was perceived either as someone affiliated with the Western world, occasionally associated with a political trend, or at least as someone belonging to a class that observes from above. I also sensed this in the participants' eyes. This often materially impacted the participants' adherence to a certain

level of seriousness and politeness in their conversations with me, using measured language notably free of embarrassing or sexual terms from their perspective. I observed this in their formal posture during our interactions, their comparisons of their own attire with mine after I introduced myself, and the shift in their language with customers once they recognized me and consented to the interviews. Additionally, when using sexually explicit terms, they often prefaced these with apologetic expressions like "sorry", "lamoakhza\ excuse me", or similar phrases conveying the same meaning.

This tension also manifested in the political sensitivity that governed many interviews. The fraught political situation in Egypt led some women to fear speaking openly, resulting in their refusal to answer questions specifically about politics, sex, and non-normative gender identities. They also refrained from naming specific streets and neighborhoods where their workplaces were located, limiting their identification to initials or occasionally mentioning the governorate where they worked, attempting to protect their identity without completely erasing it. This caution—alongside maintaining their identities in a manner that can be read as a form of resistance—made me continually attentive to the boundaries of conducting research within authoritarian contexts, and the limits of what could be articulated and what must remain unspoken, ensuring no security tracking would threaten or compromise the participants' personal safety.

Regarding access to certain places, I faced particular difficulty entering hammams and beauty salons in governorates outside Cairo and Alexandria. Local individuals assisted me by introducing me as a safe contact, paving the way for interviews. I also encountered some hammams and beauty salons functioning covertly as fronts for informal prostitution networks, neither publicly advertised

nor widely known within Egypt or by local residents. Often, I was unexpectedly denied entry by workers at these establishments or by the police patrolling nearby streets.

This ethnographic and fieldwork experience was not merely about data collection; it was an ongoing negotiation among multiple identities that I carry and through which I am read, against boundaries of authority, knowledge, and mobility within local spaces that appear familiar but are, in reality, saturated with layers of fear, surveillance, silence, and complex representation (MacKinnon, 2020; Mahmood, 2005; Rai, 2015; Riles, 2000).

Chapter One: The Historical and Sociopolitical Context of Egypt's Hammams and Beauty Salons

2.1 Introduction:

The first chapter seeks to analyze and trace the historical, political, social, and cultural transformations that hammams and beauty salons in Egypt have undergone from the Pharaonic era (approximately the 27th to the 4th century BCE) through the 14th century CE and up to the present day. These spaces, both material and symbolic, serve as sites through which womanhood and femininity[1] is constructed and the female body is regulated, while also reflecting the intersections of gender, class, religion, modernity, and the patriarchal state. I will begin with examining the emergence of hammams during the Mamluk and Ottoman periods—and their transition from communal spaces of ritual cleansing to heritage sites or elite beauty services in the context of colonialism and modernity. I will also follow the development of beauty salons from simple home-based services to institutions that produce new, imported, and globalized beauty norms. In doing so, this chapter illuminates the structures that have reshaped the female body within shifting socio-political contexts.

[1] . The thesis affirms the importance of understanding how *womanhood* is shaped within hammams and beauty salons in Egypt. It is essential to distinguish between the concepts of femininity and womanhood. The latter refers to the social, political, and cultural experience of being a woman as it is shaped through intersections with race, class, religion, and gender (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2000) —precisely the layers I seek to analysis within these spaces. Within this broader framework, femininity is understood as a set of traits, behaviors, and bodily aesthetics that are culturally coded as appropriate for women. In many instances throughout this thesis, femininity is linked to idealized notions of how the Egyptian woman should appear—her body, preferences, and presentation. These ideals are enforced through societal and institutional mechanisms of discipline (Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993; Butler, 1990).
This distinction is critical to understanding how women in these spaces either reproduce or construct or resist dominant norms, allowing femininity to be read as a social performance, while womanhood remains a lived identity (Ahmed, 2017).

Additionally, the chapter analyzes the contemporary Egyptian context across various spatial spaces to understand the relationship between the gender, body, class and power under a neoliberal security state. It explores how these spaces have transformed from sites of comfort, hygiene, and social interaction into mechanisms of class-based regulation, self-surveillance, and bodily discipline. The chapter also highlights the class dynamics and social tensions embedded within these spaces, and how these dynamics have contributed to the control of women's bodies through patriarchal systems—an issue that continues to permeate hammams and beauty salons and will be further examined in the following chapters through the lens of control and resistance.

2.2 The Historical Evolution of Hammams in Egypt:

The emergence of hammams dates back to the Mamluk and Ottoman eras. The idea of hammams flourished after the Islamic conquest of Egypt and reached its peak during the Mamluk period, aided by Egypt's commercial position, which bolstered its economy and provided the resources to build lavish hammams that catered to all social classes (Rizq, n.d., p. 231). In the Mamluk[2] period, Cairo became famous for several prominent hammams, which became major urban landmarks,

[2] The Mamluk class emerged in Egypt during the Ayyubid era, as they were brought from Central Asia and the Caucasus, particularly from the Turks and Circassians, to serve as soldiers in the Ayyubid army. They were purchased at a young age, trained in horsemanship and combat skills, and then promoted to high-ranking positions within the state. After the death of the Ayyubid Sultan Al-Salih Najm al-Din Ayyub in 1249, the Mamluks seized power, establishing their rule in 1250 when Shajar al-Durr and later Izz al-Din Aybak assumed leadership (Ayalon, 1994).
The Mamluks were not colonizers of Egypt in the traditional sense, as they were not affiliated with a foreign power seeking to exploit the country's resources for its own benefit. However, their rule was based on a military aristocracy, where power was concentrated in the hands of the Mamluk elite without direct participation from the general Egyptian population. According to Peter Holt (Holt, 1993), the Mamluks perceived themselves as the "defenders of Islam," especially after their success in repelling the Mongol invasion at the Battle of Ain Jalut in 1260.
Economically, the Mamluks focused on strengthening trade, as Egypt was a key commercial hub between the East and the West during the Middle Ages. They developed infrastructure, such as constructing canals and bridges, and supported religious and educational institutions by establishing schools and mosques, many of which remain standing today. Despite these achievements, their political system was unstable due to the military nature of their rule, as their state experienced frequent power struggles among Mamluk emirs, ultimately leading to their decline and the fall of their state at the hands of the Ottomans in 1517 (Irwin, 1999).

such as the Hammam Sultan Qalawun, built as part of the Qalawun complex on Al-Muizz Street, Hammam Bab al-Bahr, one of Cairo's oldest, and Hammam al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh (Rizq, n.d., pp. 242-250).

It reveals that hammams typically followed a tripartite spatial layout: an entrance or changing area (al-mashlah) or (the barani), a warm transitional zone (al-wastani), and a hot steam chamber (al-jawwani), supported by an underground water-heating system. These spaces guided the visitor through a symbolic and physical process of purification, aligning with Islamic values of *tahāra* (ritual purity) further adapted through gender separation in different places inside Cairo and Alexandria. Most commonly, this spatial segregation took the form of separate sections constructed within the same building or in adjoining structures, each equipped with its own entrance, changing rooms, and bathing facilities. Women's hammams were exclusively managed and attended by women, often under the supervision of trained female attendants such as *dayas* (midwives or traditional bath assistants) or *muzayyinat* (beauticians responsible for grooming and aesthetic care) which ensured privacy and fostered a sense of communal trust. These gendered arrangements were not merely practical solutions; they were also deeply symbolic enactments of religious and cultural frameworks that governed bodily comportment, gender roles, and the moral regulation of public and private space (Raymond, 1974). Some archival sources[3] demonstrate that hammams were central to daily and cultural life, playing a crucial role in maintaining personal cleanliness according to Islamic teachings, while also serving as important social and economic centers.

[3] . Such as waqf (endowment) deeds from the Mamluk period preserved in the Siyāsīyah Collection at the Egyptian National Archives, Ottoman court registers (sijillat), and urban planning records cited in works by Mubarak (1889) and Creswell (1952)

2.2.1 The Flourishing of Hammams in Mamluk and Ottoman Egypt:

Hammams were particularly prevalent in major cities like Cairo and Alexandria, and their construction was part of a broader urban renaissance initiated by Mamluk sultans like Sultan Qalawun and Al-Zahir Baybars. Architectural inscriptions and endowment records, now housed at Dar al-Watha'iq al-Qawmiyya (Egyptian National Archives), support this narrative. Early Islamic figures such as 'Amr ibn al-'As are also credited with introducing urban reforms that laid the foundation for hammams as the main site of public hygiene, ritual purification, and social interaction in Muslim society in Egypt (Creswell, 1952).

Alongside the religious factors previously discussed, the origins and spread of hammams in Egypt were also driven by a variety of health, economic and social factors. In terms of health, hammams provided a space for body care, promoting public hygiene and disease prevention, in addition to offering relaxation and therapeutic treatments like steam baths and hot water therapy (Rizq, n.d., p.232). Economically, the waqf system played a central role in the construction and sustainability of hammams, many of which were endowed to support religious and civil institutions like mosques and schools. These endowments not only guaranteed ongoing income for charitable organizations and power holders but also made hammams highly profitable, surpassing the returns of many other establishments during the Mamluk period. This profitability attracted wealthy individuals and state officials to invest in building or owning hammams (Rizq, n.d., pp. 250–259). Beyond their economic value, hammams stimulated local economies by creating diverse job opportunities—from water heating and cleaning to personal care—and played a role in bridging class divides. While the wealthy often had private baths, their presence in public hammams was motivated by social interaction, enabling them to connect with people across class boundaries, exchange news and business prospects, and foster communal cohesion (Rizq, n.d., pp. 233–236).

Women's hammams played an important role in the social and cultural life of the time. Separate hammams for women were often designated in order to ensure privacy and safeguard the “awrah”\ the parts of the body that must be covered according to Islamic modesty codes, in accordance with values derived from Islamic principles, or specific hours were allocated for them, reflecting the gendered division of labor, with women expected to focus on domestic duties and personal appearance. The allocation of specific hours for women in hammams—typically from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., corresponding to official working hours—reveals the gendered division of labor in daily life. While these daytime hours were designated for women, men typically frequented the hammams in the evening, after completing their work in the public sphere. This temporal arrangement reflects a social perception that women were not engaged in paid labor but were instead available for domestic duties and bodily self-care, in line with their expected roles in the private sphere (Hammam, 2012; Ilkkaracan, 2008).

In this context, going to the hammam was not merely a practice of personal hygiene, but a socially and culturally charged act. Women’s hammams, during designated hours, became vibrant social hubs and relatively autonomous spaces where women gathered to exchange news, participate in collective rituals, and prepare for major life events such as weddings. Bridal preparations, in particular, transformed the hammam into a site of communal celebration, where the bride was pampered and honored by the women of her community. These spaces also offered beauty services—exfoliation, traditional soap treatments, and henna applications—that aligned with the societal emphasis on the continuous beautification of the female body, viewed through a patriarchal lens that linked women’s attractiveness to marital readiness or spousal satisfaction (Hammam, 2012; Ilkkaracan, 2008; Amer, 2021; Al-Watan, 2021).

This dual function of the hammam—as a space of relaxation and as a site for reinforcing beauty norms—situated it firmly within broader gendered and cultural frameworks. Historical accounts such as *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* and the *Atlas of Islamic and Coptic Architecture* document how khattabas (matchmakers) and ummahat al-rijal (mothers of potential grooms) would frequent hammams to observe unmarried women's bodies, evaluating them according to patriarchal standards of beauty such as full-figuredness and smooth, hairless skin (Lane, 1836). In a society where women's bodies were largely veiled in public and contact with men was restricted, hammams offered a rare opportunity for women to both see and be seen by other women. As such, they functioned not only as practical spaces for hygiene but also as essential arenas for female visibility, social networking, and the reproduction of gendered norms embedded in everyday life.

2.2.2 Colonial Disruption through European Standards of Hygiene and Modernity:

However, with the onset of British colonialism in 1882, the social status of hammams shifted significantly. Colonial authorities and Western-educated elites began promoting European standards of hygiene and individual bathing practices, such as private bathrooms and piped water systems, which were framed as symbols of progress and modernity. This medicalized, individualist approach to cleanliness stood in contrast to the communal and ritualistic nature of the hammam. As a result, the middle and upper classes gradually distanced themselves from these public hammams, perceiving them as backward, unsanitary, or linked to lower-class traditions. Nonetheless, public hammams continued to operate in poorer neighborhoods, where infrastructure was lacking and communal bathing retained its cultural and social significance (Raymond, 2007).

Over time, many of the historical hammams located in popular neighborhoods became increasingly neglected, lacking adequate maintenance, water infrastructure, and sanitary services. These once-vibrant communal spaces were gradually transformed into heritage sites—valued more for their architectural and historical significance than for their practical function. In contrast, during and after British colonial rule, a different type of hammam and beauty establishment began to emerge, often situated in more affluent urban areas. These new spaces promoted Westernized standards of beauty—such as fair skin, slim figures, and individualized grooming rituals—reinforcing colonial ideals of modern femininity where the female body became a site for enacting modernization and national identity through Eurocentric ideals (Abu-Lughod, 2005; Raymond, 2007).

2.2.3 The Hammam between Heritage and Luxury in Postcolonial and Neoliberal Contexts:

In recent decades, this shift has intensified with the increasing commercialization of body care. Traditional hammams are now being rebranded as luxury wellness centers or "oriental spas," incorporating Western features such as jacuzzis, aromatherapy, and massage treatments. These additions reflect a neoliberal reimagining of self-care, where beauty and relaxation are marketed as individual responsibilities tied to productivity, success, and consumption. The communal, social essence of the hammam is thus replaced with privatized, sanitized, and commodified experiences that mirror global wellness trends (Gill, 2007).

The class stratification that accompanied colonialism and the neoliberal economy in Egypt. The division between upscale and popular hammams reflects the class disparities in Egyptian society. While traditional hammams, once inclusive spaces accommodating various social classes, now face economic constraints that limit their accessibility. These disparities highlight how economic

barriers shape women's ability to engage in beauty practices across different settings. For example, a relaxation massage in high-end hammams may cost around EGP 2000 for 90 minutes. In contrast, hammams serving middle-income clients may charge up to half that amount, while traditional hammams may offer similar services for as low as EGP 300.

In contrast, modern hammams, inspired by Moroccan and Syrian traditions, blend cultural heritage with contemporary luxury. Moroccan hammams, rooted in Amazigh and Arab-Islamic traditions, emphasize natural skincare rituals using ghassoul clay, black soap, and vigorous exfoliation. Syrian hammams, influenced by Roman and Byzantine designs, focus on relaxation with herbal treatments and traditional massage techniques. These practices have transcended their geographic origins, gaining popularity in Egypt and beyond due to cultural exchanges and migration. Nonetheless, they continue to be shaped by class-based inequalities in the types and quality of services offered, similar to other hammams operating in Egypt.

Thus, hammams in Egypt have evolved over time into transcultural sites that reflect the intersection of local traditions with regional and global influences. From medieval hammams that served communal and religious needs to contemporary spaces that blend authenticity with luxury, this transformation reveals deeper social and economic dynamics—reshaping the meanings of the body, relaxation, and well-being in the modern Egyptian context.

2.3 The Historical Evolution of Beauty Salons in Egypt:

The roots of organized beauty services in Egypt can be traced back to Pharaonic era (circa 27th to 4th century BCE), when beauty care was not merely practiced at home but also offered by professional women within elite households. While not "salons" in the modern sense, these early forms of mobile or domestic service providers—particularly hairdressers—laid the foundation for

what would later become institutionalized beauty spaces and salons. These practitioners served royal and aristocratic women, and their craft was often passed down through generations (Sadiq, n.d.). In the absence of fixed beauty salons during the Fatimid period (909–1171 CE), hammams served as alternative spaces for grooming and beauty care, functioning as informal predecessors to modern beauty salons (Amer, 2013).

Following this period, there is a significant gap in documenting beauty professions in Egypt. From the medieval era until the 20th century, there is no formal documentation of fixed-location beauty salons. The absence of records suggests that beauty services likely persisted in domestic or informal community contexts, especially among women, but without institutional recognition.

2.3.1 Beauty Practices and the Birth of the Beauty Salon:

Beauty salons emerged in Egypt during the 20th century as a distinct expression of modernity. Initially catering to the upper classes influenced by European culture, these salons embodied Western beauty standards in their services such as yellow hair dyes, hair straightening treatments to make it smooth, and whitening products—all of which reflect European beauty standards that do not align with the natural features of Egyptian women, including their wheat-toned\ beige skin, predominantly black or brown hair, and diverse hair textures. Also, offering hairstyles, makeup techniques, and grooming products influenced by Parisian trends (Al Masry Al Youm,2010).

By the mid-20th century, urban expansion facilitated their growing popularity among the middle classes, transforming salons into spaces for social interaction and the cultivation of new relationships among women, such as mothers exchanging advice, for example of how to maintain and please a husband at home sexually, or hiding problems from him out of fear of his temper and ruining his mood when he returns home. Additionally, the constant focus on a woman's cleanliness,

taking care of her body, and consistently adorning herself to keep her husband and maintain her family — meaning, out of fear that he might marry another woman, or young women discussing fashion and beauty trends (Ossman ,2002). In recent decades, the rise of a consumer-driven economy has brought significant changes to the beauty salon industry, making these spaces accessible to women across diverse social backgrounds. For instance, modest salons in lower-income neighborhoods often focus on affordable beauty services such as basic haircuts, facial hair removal, and henna designs, while upscale establishments in wealthier areas provide premium treatments like keratin hair therapy, spa services, and luxury imported products. Despite this accessibility, a stark contrast remains in the quality, hygiene standards, and range of services offered, reflecting broader issues of class disparities, body aesthetics, and social inequality. These spatial origins have complicated women's experiences in these salons rather than flattening or simplifying them (S. Muñoz, 2013; Chalhoub, 2009).

Beauty salons provide unique opportunities for encounters among women from different social and class backgrounds, making them key spaces for class negotiation. Pricing strategies, for instance, illustrate efforts to attract clients from diverse classes, generating complex interactions between workers and customers. These interactions expose disparities in power and resources while also revealing potential forms of solidarity. As such, these spaces become crucial for exploring how class and gender differences are navigated within Egyptian society.

2.3.2 The Politics of Beauty in Everyday Salon Life:

Through my fieldwork in beauty salons in Egypt, I noticed that pricing and rates vary significantly depending on the social class of the clientele. However, to obscure these divisions, beauty salons nowadays tend to offer the same services to all social groups. The difference, however, lies in the

quality of the products used. In beauty salons catering to the upper classes, imported cosmetic and skincare products—often from the West—are used, such as high-end skincare creams or specialized aromatic oils that are considered to be of higher quality and come at a higher cost. In contrast, establishments targeting middle or working-class clients typically use locally made or lower-quality products, such as locally sourced vegetable oils or more affordable creams.

I also observed that the workers in these spaces, especially in salons and hammams serving middle- and upper-class clients, do not outwardly display any class distinctions. They all wear a standardized uniform and are trained in a specific way of communicating with customers. For instance, they are taught to speak in the Cairene dialect and are prohibited from using rural or Upper Egyptian dialects. This linguistic discipline was not limited to individual initiative to hide spatial origins in order to enjoy better social advantages, as they believe and as they expressed to me, but often imposed by salon owners themselves, who are acutely aware of the classed and regional dynamics of speech. As one salon worker told me, *"We were told to stop speaking in our village accent and to use Cairene instead—it makes the clients more comfortable and sounds more professional".* Additionally, they are trained to provide services in English, which, at certain points, imposes the dominant and "superior" language and appearance in Egypt, reflecting the perception of Cairo as the epitome of modernity.

Beauty salons are also spaces where the female body is reproduced according to socially imposed beauty and femininity standards, making them arenas for negotiating compliance or rebellion against these aesthetic norms. Women in these spaces often challenge societal expectations by asserting control over their appearance and using beauty as a tool for self-expression and empowerment, both within their families and broader communities. Rather than reflecting a dichotomy, these practices reveal how systems of power, gender expectations, and economic

pressures converge—shaping women's choices while simultaneously offering opportunities for subtle resistance, negotiation, and the redefinition of femininity on their own terms.

2.3.3 Shifting Beauty Norms:

The evolution of beauty standards in Egypt's beauty salons further underscores these transformations. In the mid-20th century, fashion shows featuring prominent designers like Saad El-Saghir – the most famous hairdresser, makeup artist and beauty consultant in Egypt who has a huge beauty salon in Cairo – played a pivotal role in shaping public taste. Hairstyles such as the "chignon" and "pixie" cuts became symbols of modernity, influenced by Parisian elegance. However, the rise of the hijab in the 1980s and 1990s, driven by the growing influence of Islamist movements, reshaped beauty standards to align with religious and conservative values. This shift led to the emergence of specialized "Islamic" salons catering to veiled women, offering services that ensured privacy while adapting beauty practices to accommodate the hijab (Al Masry Al Youm,2010). Over time, beauty salons in Egypt have adapted their services in response to shifting political and economic conditions, reshaping both their structures and functions, as will be demonstrated in the following sections and across the different chapters of this thesis.

This evolution highlights the necessity of examining the contemporary context and its impact on these spaces—particularly concerning the female body, which has consistently been a site of patriarchal control. Through processes of securitization, class differentiation, and modernist aesthetics, the female body has been subjected to evolving beauty standards, increasingly shaped by a Western neoliberal consumerist logic. As such, hammams and beauty salons today reproduce the intersections of gender, class, and power in their most embodied forms.

2.4 Manifestations of the Oppression of Egyptian Women in the Public and Private Spheres:

The emergence and development of hammams and beauty salons in Egypt are embedded in political, class-based, and social structures that reflect systemic forms of gendered oppression across laws, norms, institutions, and daily life. This structure manifests itself in practices beginning within the household and extending into the street, where women are continually subjected to physical and symbolic surveillance and control. This is explicitly highlighted in chapters two and three, focusing on issues that have infiltrated beauty salons and hammams on which I conducted my fieldwork. Therefore, examining the following issues within the Egyptian context is crucial for achieving a nuanced and comprehensive understanding what is happening in the Egyptian context in general and its effects on hammams and beauty salons in particular. High rates of sexual harassment[4](UN Women, 2013; World Bank, 2025), early marriage, school dropout, domestic violence, and the sharp decline in women's economic[5] and political participation reveal that Egyptian women live within a context of double oppression[6]. In the public sphere, they are

[4] Egyptian Women face high levels of sexual harassment and symbolic violence. Approximately 99% of women report experiencing some form of sexual harassment in public spaces (UN Women, 2013), and 95% of women in Greater Cairo have experienced verbal or physical harassment (HarassMap, 2014). Annually, about 7.8 million women experience various forms of violence from intimate partners or strangers in public places (CAPMAS & UNFPA, 2015).

[5] female enrollment in higher education, reaching 49.6% in 2023/2024 (Cairo Scene, 2024), gender gaps persist, especially in rural areas. As well as, over 117,000 girls aged 10-17 are married, 36% of whom have dropped out of education, and 40% are illiterate (CAPMAS & DevelopmentAid, 2023). These figures reinforce dominance relationships in the private sphere, limiting women's effective entry into public spaces and exacerbating their marginalization. Women's economic participation in Egypt is particularly low after marriage, with only 13% of married women working, and many withdrawing from the labor market upon marriage, especially in the private sector (Krafft, 2023). Overall, women's labor force participation remains limited, at only 18% compared to 73% for men (World Bank, 2025).

[6] The political sphere similarly reflects limited female empowerment. Although women's parliamentary representation increased to 27.7% in 2023, their effective political participation remains limited. Women are not given real tools for policy-making, often viewed as symbolic representation aimed at improving the state's external image without dismantling the patriarchal structures within the political system. Additionally, Egypt's legal environment has gendered gaps restricting women's empowerment, scoring only 50.6 out of 100 in legal gender equality, highlighting significant shortcomings in women's rights related to employment, marriage, motherhood, and entrepreneurship. Personal status

threatened by physical and symbolic violence through harassment, surveillance, and blame-based discourse. In the private sphere, they are subjected to traditional gender roles such as unpaid domestic and care work[7], in addition to being constrained by personal status laws that restrict their agency, and practices such as forced marriage, female genital mutilation, and domestic abuse[8](CAPMAS, UNFPA, & NCW, 2015; Child Marriage Data, 2021; El-Mikawy, 2021). These structural forms of violence have infiltrated spaces like hammams and beauty salons—spaces traditionally associated with care and comfort—transforming them into sites where patriarchal discipline is both reproduced and contested. As women's access to rights and spaces in both the public and private spheres continues to shrink, these semi-public and private arenas[9] such as

laws also continue to exclude women from making decisions about their family and financial lives (World Bank, 2023).

[7] Social norms in Egypt perpetuate a sharp gender division in household and caregiving tasks, with women bearing the majority of unpaid care work (cooking, cleaning, laundry, childcare, eldercare, and care for the sick). Approximately 88% of working-age women engage daily in unpaid care tasks, compared to 29% of men, spending an average of 5.4 hours per day versus 1.1 hours for men. This structural imbalance restricts women's opportunities in work, education, and public participation, exacerbating the gender gap and contributing to the time burden, a major structural obstacle to women's economic and social empowerment (El-Mikawy, 2021).

[8] Early marriage remains prevalent, especially in rural areas and among poorer girls, with 15.8% of Egyptian women married before age 18, rising to 20.6% in rural areas compared to 8.7% in urban areas. Girls from lower-income classes are particularly vulnerable, with early marriage rates reaching 22.2% among the second-lowest income group (Child Marriage Data, 2021). Despite legislative and awareness efforts, FGM remains widespread, with married women aged 15-49 having undergone the procedure performed by doctors or others, reflecting medicalization and continued legitimization of this violent practice within healthcare (UNFPA, 2021).

[9] . These semi-public and semi-private spaces, such as hammams and beauty salons, occupy a transitional and in-between position—both spatially and affectively. They are considered semi-public because they intersect with the street and commercial life: they offer services, are publicly visible, and are accessible to a wide range of women from various backgrounds and locations. Yet access to them is sex-segregated \ gendered regulated, as they are women-only spaces. Their thresholds are open to the public—but only to women—thus producing a spatial and social boundary, a form of gendered privacy that is both visible and restricted.
At the same time, these spaces are semi-private because they allow women to engage in practices and conversations typically reserved for domestic and private spheres. Within them, women tend to their bodies, rest, share personal stories, and express solidarity with one another, carrying with them the burdens and rhythms of their private lives. The hammam or beauty salon, in this sense, becomes an extension of the home—a feminine enclave where the boundaries between the personal and the communal, the intimate and the social, are blurred. These spaces thus offer a unique setting for the performance of femininity, constructing womanhood, the negotiation of social roles, and the expression of emotional and embodied experiences that may not find space in fully public or fully private realms, precisely due to the pervasive reach of patriarchal control.

hammams and beauty salons emerge as critical zones where women navigate, negotiate, and resist the pressures they face in their everyday lives, as the following chapters will explore.

Persistent violence across various contexts indicates that women's bodies are controlled not only externally but internally colonized through self-surveillance practices, forcing women to mold their bodies according to patriarchal norms (Bartky, 1990). Modern power operates through bodily techniques disciplining the body into obedience and productivity (Foucault, 1977), clearly evident in daily practices imposed upon women within family and public spaces, from dress codes to movement.

Thus, women's agency is understood not merely as resisting authority but as shaped by specific ethical and spatial contexts. The female body is shaped through interactions of faith, discipline, and place, with free spaces absent as such spaces are constructed through ethics and practice rather than mere withdrawal from authoritarian structures (Chalhoub, 2009; Saba Mahmood, 2005). These issues of oppression clearly appear within hammams and beauty salons in subsequent chapters, highlighting women's lack of safe spaces for negotiating their bodies or narrating their experiences. Relationships to public and private spaces remain tied to honor, obedience, and inadequate legal discourses. Consequently, women's bodies are reproduced as boundaries between self and authority, simultaneously objects of discipline and carriers of memories of structural violence experienced across public, private, and intermediate spaces like beauty salons and hammams, fundamentally linked to the securitization and modernization contexts in Egypt, reinforcing patriarchal control across all domains and spaces.

2.4.1 Securitization Across Spatial Spaces:

Over the past decade, the Egyptian public sphere has undergone a radical transformation, characterized by the expansion of the state's security apparatus from controlling political activities to surveilling everyday life. This expansion, termed "securitization," is not limited to terrorism or national threats but extends to personal, social, and moral aspects, transforming the public domain into a continuous site of surveillance and discipline. "Securitization" refers to redefining social issues as security threats, thereby justifying intensified state policing and increased control mechanisms (Amar, 2013; 17). Consequently, everyday spaces—from streets to social media—have become areas where the state asserts sovereignty through disciplinary and surveillance tools.

In this context, the collapse of the boundary between public and private spheres has disproportionately affected women, making their everyday presence, choices, and expressions subjects of legal and social scrutiny. Resulting in the politicization of everyday life and the criminalization of personal practices. Women appearing in attire considered socially unacceptable can be charged with "violating public morals," while those expressing dissenting opinions online may face charges such as "spreading false\fake news" or "joining banned groups" (Human Rights Watch, 2019). These practices target individuals and redefine the public sphere itself as a hazardous space, constantly casting individuals under suspicion. The self is formed within the ethical and legal space it occupies (Mahmood, 2005), clearly evident in Egypt, where individual behavior transforms into a security incident.

Another crucial moment in contemporary Egyptian history was the January 2011 Revolution, which opened the public sphere to previously marginalized groups, notably women, the poor, and youth from peripheral areas, briefly enabling a reclaiming of space. However, this moment was

short-lived. The state quickly regained control using discourses of stability, counter-terrorism, and protecting values, reconstructing an even stricter security-class-moral system than before (El-Mahdi, 2014). Nowadays, public spaces in Egypt are managed with pre-revolutionary methods, perhaps even more severely. Gatherings are monitored, demonstrations are deemed security threats, and moral codes excluding dissenting groups are reinforced, turning the public sphere from a site of citizenship into a reflection of state power.

This is primarily evident in the repressive policies adopted by the state since 2013, embodying as iron fist. Legislation has criminalized protests, muzzled media, and controlled digital spaces. Laws such as the Counter-Terrorism Law (2015), Media Regulation Law (2018), and Cybercrime Law (2018) have become tools restricting freedom of expression under the pretexts of "combating extremism" or "protecting national security" (Access Now, 2018). With increasing arbitrary arrests and trials targeting freedom of expression, this right in Egypt is now contingent on state will rather than constitutional guarantee (Adalah for All, 2023).

Surveillance is also implemented under the guise of protecting public morals, feminizing and politicizing moral discourse (Amar, 2011). Women face persecution for "inappropriate content" in public and virtual spaces such as TikTok or Instagram, prosecuted under vague charges like "inciting immorality" and "threatening Egyptian family values" (Egyptian Front for Human Rights, 2020). This entrenches a moralistic state intervening in both body and intent, reproducing patriarchal authority under the guise of virtue. Surveillance of women's bodies occurs not only institutionally but through women's self-discipline due to fear of punishment or social ostracism (Bartky, 1990;63).

Security presence in Egypt is no longer limited to squares and public spaces but permeates every corner of daily life. Surveillance cameras, call recording laws, internet monitoring, and intensified

security forces on streets create a continuous state of "surveillance consciousness," fostering "preventative self-surveillance" (Abaza, 2006, pp. 129-132; Human Rights Watch, 2021; Amnesty International, 2022). This phenomenon aligns with Foucault's analysis of "disciplinary power," wherein individuals' police their own behavior to comply with authority's expectations (Foucault, 1977, pp. 135-138, 200-202; Ketchley, 2017, pp. 148-152)

The securitization context in Egypt reveals that the public sphere is no longer a space for democratic participation but a tool for accumulating sovereignty. Personal behavior becomes criminalizable, morality is measured by state standards, and politics intertwine with national security. Here, the human body is not merely subject to surveillance but transforms into a site of moral, political, and sexual conflict, simultaneously disciplined, criminalized, and stigmatized. With safe spaces absent, narratives constrained, and identities surveilled, the Egyptian public sphere remains under a security grip that perpetuates fear as a means of sustained control. This dynamic was evident during personal interviews, where respondents feared disclosing their names, locations, or answering sensitive questions related to patriarchal authority and sexuality, apprehensive about lifelong security repercussions.

2.4.2 Egypt's Modernity and Changing Class Dynamics in The Public Sphere

Additionally, despite the progressive discourse associated with modernization projects in Egypt's public sphere since the Nasserist era (1952–1970), which correlated with the rise of new middle classes resulting from the expansion of education and government employment. However, these classes were not firmly based on independent economic foundations[10] . The Nasserist state utilized

[10] . It's meaning that their economic stability relied largely on government employment and state subsidies—often marred by corruption—rather than on genuine private capital, entrepreneurial activity, ownership of productive assets. Nor did these projects lead to the empowerment of these classes through real economic skills and capabilities—modernity was less a tool for social liberation and more an authoritarian project aimed at reproducing dominance.

concepts such as social justice and technological progress to reorganize society from above through central planning policies, nationalization of production, and bureaucratic expansion (Mitchell, 2002; Beinin, 2001, pp. 121-124; Cook, 2012, pp. 47-53). This form of modernity, characterized by security and cultural systems, regulated the public sphere and transformed social or class issues into security and moral questions (Abdelrahman, 2014, pp. 78-83; Kandil, 2012, pp. 135-140). Rather than dismantling traditional structures, the modern state reshaped them to serve authoritarian projects, despite successive waves of modernization in Egypt (Tripp, 2013, pp. 89-92; Hinnebusch, 1985, pp. 14-18).

The transformations of the 1970s, particularly under Sadat's economic liberalization policies (1974–1981), introduced new class gaps accompanied by spatial and social exclusion, especially among the urban poor (Denis, 1994, 2006; Denis & Bayat 1999). Urban beautification projects emerged as modern facades through which the state excluded poor groups from public spaces, employing "symbolic expulsion", redefining city belonging not merely economically but also morally and behaviorally (Ghannam, 2002;69). Neoliberal transformations from the 1990s onward further privatized the public sphere, turning it into consumer spaces allowing entry only to specific types of bodies, thereby excluding the poor symbolically and materially, as they did not "fit" consumerist behavior or desired appearances.

Urban neoliberalism in recent decades has continuously reshaped the public sphere to serve elite interests rather than broader participation. Although modernity was promoted as a developmental tool, the Egyptian experience revealed that it often reinforced authoritarianism and class differentiation (Mitchell, 2002, pp. 11-17). This authoritarian modernity is evident in urban projects such as shopping malls, gated compounds, and coastal resorts, segregated from broader society and presented as symbols of development and well-being, while traditional public spaces

and popular neighborhoods are marginalized under slogans of "organization," "cleanliness," and combating "slums" (Abaza, 2006, pp. 47-52).

In this context, the state privatizes and selectively regulates the public sphere, granting legitimacy of presence to those with capital or who embody values of "civilization." The class-based public space in Egypt thus becomes a "Revanchist City," where neoliberal urban policies cleanse the public sphere of poor populations, reclaiming it for the upper classes (Smith, 1996, pp. 3-10). This model manifests through forced evictions of informal area residents, transforming squares and streets into spaces doubly regulated by security and capitalist interests. Thus, the city is managed not only spatially but also symbolically, class-wise, and morally.

Class in contemporary Egypt is no longer purely economic - while class in Egypt was historically grounded in economic indicators such as employment, income (Wright, 1997; Savage et al., 2013), and state-supported mobility—particularly during the Nasserist era—contemporary definitions have increasingly shifted toward symbolic and moral dimensions- it has transformed into a cultural and moral identity measured through behavior patterns, dress, speech, and physical appearance. Class discrimination often occurs through values such as "taste," "respect," and "modesty," reinforcing a covert social hierarchy within a moral framework (Ghannam, 2002, pp. 68-72). In public spaces, women, in particular, are monitored as class symbols, with their appearance serving as a marker of class and belonging, regulated not only by the state but also by societal class discourses.

The body—especially the female body—has become a prominent site for producing class modernity, interpreted not merely biologically but as a social performance shaped by appearance, movements, and levels of modesty or elegance Middle- and upper-class women are expected to adhere to certain physical standards: thinness, elegance, moderate makeup, refined speech, and

distance from vulgarity. Bodies not conforming to these standards—such as those of working-class or rural women—are stigmatized as "uncivilized," subjected to class and moral discrimination (Ghannam, 2002, pp. 68–72).

The authoritarian modernity project intersects with patriarchal authority, reproducing the female body as a class, moral, and political boundary. While upper-class women may appear publicly as "modern" consumers adhering to class standards, lower-class women face surveillance and discipline, suppressed under the guise of protecting public morals (Hamzeh, 2019, pp. 45–49).

This process, the feminization of securitization and class stratification, uses the female body as a testing ground for control and discipline: bodies conforming to norms are permitted public presence, while others face exclusion or surveillance. These policies transform public spaces into arenas showcasing authority and class, rather than citizenship or diversity[11]. However, current gendered and securitized policies have emptied these concepts of their substantive meaning, redefining the right to be present in public spaces based on obedience and conformity rather than on the principles of citizenship and diversity (Hamzeh, 2019, pp. 51–55). The control over physical appearance in public spaces indicates that the presence of marginalized bodies is an act of resistance (Bayat, 2010), challenging what is considered normative or acceptable. Non-conforming women's visibility in streets threatens prevailing symbolic and social orders, triggering institutional and popular repression.

[11] Citizenship here is not understood merely as a legal status (such as holding nationality), but rather as the right to exist and participate equally in public life—where every individual, regardless of their class, appearance, or gender identity, is entitled to be seen and treated with dignity. Similarly, diversity refers to the recognition of the legitimacy of differences among individuals in terms of gender, class, cultural background, and more—without allowing these differences to become tools of exclusion or discrimination.

2.4.3 Constructing the Female Body as a Tool of Patriarchal Control:

This socio-political and economic context closely associates women's bodies in Egypt with symbolic meanings of morality, culture, and politics. Women's bodies are perceived not as independent entities but as symbols representing "family honor," "societal values," and even "national identity." This perspective reinforces patriarchal authority by linking morality to the body, making control over women's bodies a mechanism for enforcing broader social discipline (Abou El Hassan, 2016; El Saadawi, 1980, pp. 25–28). Such control is exerted through religious discourse, education, laws, and customs, rendering women's bodies permanent sites of moral scrutiny. Dress, walking style, tone of voice, and public space usage are interpreted as indicators of respectability or transgression, perpetuating patriarchal norms under a conservative moral veneer (Ghannam, 2013, pp. 71–74).

The modern state employs women's bodies as tools for social discipline, monitored and regulated as symbols of political project success or failure (Al-Ali, 2000, pp. 45–48). Consequently, the female body becomes nationalized property—belonging to families, society, and the state—transformed into "national honor" defended and avenged, justifying security and legislative interventions (Abu-Lughod, 2005; Hatem, 1992, p. 231). This view politically disenfranchises women, denying their bodily autonomy and turning the body into a moral barrier permissible only under patriarchal conditions (Reynolds, 2011; Mahmood, 2001, pp. 203–204).

Simultaneously, neoliberal consumerism reintroduces female bodies into disciplined consumption patterns. Women, especially from higher classes, pursue cosmetic clinics, diets, and fitness centers to align with modern beauty standards. The patriarchal system intersects with market ideologies, exerting bodily control via beauty and appearance standards (Abdelrahman, 2015, pp. 55–58).

These beauty standards have shifted toward globalized norms, significantly affecting beauty salons and hammams, which have become sites producing class-specific beauty capital available only to affluent women (Amer, 2021, pp. 33–36).

This transformation reveals deeper class and racial dimensions, associating beauty with whiteness and Eurocentric standards, making women's bodies sites of ongoing colonial and class-based struggles (Ahmed, 1992, pp. 162–165). Thus, the female body becomes a walking advertisement of class and value, illustrating how beauty is intertwined with neoliberal economics, patriarchal control, and societal expectations, ultimately converting personal appearance into a tool of social and political discipline.

2.5 Conclusion:

This chapter reveals that hammams and beauty salons in Egypt are not merely spaces for bodily care, but are instead charged with political, social, and class-based meanings and symbols. These spaces have become sites for the reproduction of patriarchal power on the one hand, and arenas for the daily negotiation of beauty, respectability, and social status on the other. Throughout the chapter, it becomes evident that these spaces actively reshape the concept of acceptable femininity according to intersecting economic, religious, and modernist standards, through which the state, the market, religion, and society converge.

Amid securitization policies, surveillance practices, deteriorating social justice, and the systemic repression of women across all spheres, women's bodies have been transformed into terrains of discipline and control—rendered symbols of honor, identity, and class belonging. As such, the hammam and beauty salon emerge as complex extensions of broader arenas of struggle in Egypt—between colonialism, modernity, and tradition, and between repression, negotiation, and

resistance, as well as between the state and women. Therefore, understanding these spaces through their origins and historical evolution enables a deeper reading of the structures of power in Egypt, and how they are manifested in the details of everyday life and within the body itself—particularly the female body, as a vital site of both symbolic and material contestation. This contestation, and its seepage into spaces that blur the boundaries between the public and the private—such as hammams and beauty salons—will be further explored in Chapters Two and Three.

Chapter Two: Manifestations of Patriarchal Power in Egypt's Hammams and Beauty Salons

3.1 Introduction:

This chapter explores the correlative relationship between beauty, patriarchy, and class in the spaces of hammams and beauty salons, where these spaces shift from places assumed to offer comfort and daily feminist resistance to the patriarchal system, into sites where multiple forms of gendered discipline and class discrimination are exercised. Through my fieldwork, it became evident that prevailing beauty standards are not always imposed through direct commands, but often come in the form of "professional advice" disguised as expertise, reproducing patriarchal discourse through soft tools administered by women themselves.

This chapter reveals how beauty services are used as mechanisms for shaping socially accepted femininity and regulating the body according to aesthetic standards that are intertwined with patriarchal power, religion, morality, class, and neoliberalism. In this way, beauty salons and hammams become daily social institutions that reproduce the patriarchal system through women's interactions with one another. The chapter also discusses the complex relationships between clients and workers, and the social stigma they carry—not only as service-based relationships, but as ones of power, surveillance, competition, and stigma—where aesthetics is transformed into social tools that reproduce gendered and classed identities.

The chapter primarily analyzes patriarchal manifestations in hammams and beauty salons, it is important to consider that engaging in beauty practices is not always a tension-free experience. It may be accompanied by what is known as "guilty pleasure" (Craig, 2006). Despite women

enjoying beauty procedures and the physical or psychological comfort they bring, they are aware that this pleasure is conditioned by externally imposed beauty standards—racialized, gendered, and classed—which restrict their freedom to act with their bodies. Thus, beauty becomes a space full of ambiguity; it brings pleasure, but at the same time reinforces subordination to patriarchal authority.

Beauty is not merely passive submission to these standards, but is often a complex act in which resistance, adaptation, and flexibility intersect. Women do not use beauty only to conform to dominant aesthetic norms; they sometimes reshape these norms to express themselves. Here, beauty becomes a dual site: practiced from a position of vulnerability and relative subordination, yet also bearing the potential for agency and the assertion of a personal presence that challenges marginalization or exclusion in society.

Beauty cannot be separated from its political, gendered, and racial positioning. It is not just an appearance or an individual choice, but a social performance linked to deep-rooted cultural expectations of "respectable femininity" and the "virtuous woman." When these expectations intersect with race, religion, and class, women's choices regarding their appearance become loaded with moral and political dimensions, through which their position in society is evaluated. In this way, beauty becomes a normative tool used to affirm or deny women's respect for themselves or others, according to their class, race, and gender affiliations (Craig, 2006).

This is what the chapter seeks to reveal and analyze—not to critique these spaces in and of themselves, but to examine the patriarchal control and challenges that permeate these spaces, which are simultaneously sites of women's and feminist action.

3.2Patriarchal Beauty Standards:

During my fieldwork in beauty salons and hammams, I observed how workers interact with clients by imposing patriarchal beauty standards on their bodies—not as direct orders but as "professional advice" masked by expertise and a desire to "improve" the client's appearance. It often begins with a phrase like; *"If you do this, you'll look more beautiful,"* opening the door to broad interventions in women's decisions regarding their own bodies. Some services may be imposed over others, not based on the client's request, but on what the worker deems suitable for her, depending on her skin tone, facial features, or social status.

In the spaces of hammams and beauty salons, beauty services are not offered as mere cosmetic procedures but are practiced as tools for disciplining and shaping the female body according to specific standards that reproduce both the patriarchal notions of beauty and class-based systems. The workers in these spaces are not merely transmitters of dominant beauty standards; they also perform a role of authority—though veiled in "expertise" and "a desire to help"—over the clients. This authority is often exercised through symbolic violence, a form of violence that operates subtly and invisibly, where control is exerted without the need for direct coercion (Bourdieu, 2001).

I see this clearly in beauty salons, where beauty services acquire a coercive dimension. For example, when dyeing hair, workers suggest colors based on the client's skin tone or what they perceive about her social situation—whether she is married or single. The color red is interrogated: *"Are you married? Then why do you want red?"*—as if the color itself carries a moral implication associated with boldness and sexual allure, justified or rejected according to social context. It is framed as a daring choice, suitable only for a married woman to please her husband. The same goes for light blond, which is not only linked to marital status but is presented as appropriate only

for women of higher social classes, or those expected to maintain a certain "modesty" or "plainness", as it aligns with Western beauty standards. For lower-income women, this same hair color is often applied using lower-quality products or in the form of "Khosal\highlights" (i.e., partial bleaching).

These interactions carry a deep moral charge that regulates women's desires and ties their aesthetic choices to social respectability and sexual discipline. The same applies to haircutting, where the authority of patriarchal standards is clearly reproduced. Long hair is considered a symbol of perfect femininity. Many workers advise against cutting hair or do so hesitantly, insisting that *"long is more beautiful—it makes you feel feminine—you won't look like a man."*

Hair texture, too, is not free from judgment. Straight hair is preferred and often enforced through blow-drying, flat irons, or chemical treatments like "keratin" and "protein" to make straight hair last longer—despite the long-term damage to hair, as many participants told me. The materials used also depend directly on cost. Straight hair is particularly imposed on women from lower and middle classes, while curly hair is only accepted when the client belongs to a higher social class. In such cases, curly hair is re-framed as a "style" or a "free choice" rather than a sign of neglect—thanks in part to its expensive maintenance.

This can be directly linked to recent shifts in Egypt, where curly hair has become a popular trend among girls from upper and upper-middle classes—whereas for years it was considered "unruly" or even "socially unacceptable." This shift in aesthetic perception cannot be separated from class, cultural, and global factors that redefined the symbolic meaning of curly hair in everyday discourse and visual culture.

Cultural globalization played a major role in introducing new beauty models to Egypt, especially those stemming from Black feminist movements in the United States, such as the natural hair movement, which began in the early 2000s. This movement encouraged women to embrace their "natural hair" as a form of resistance against White and Eurocentric beauty standards (Byrd & Tharps, 2014). Egyptian elites connected to Western cultures—due to travel, international education, and engagement in global digital networks like social media—were more receptive to this discourse. They began to see curly hair as a symbol of personal liberation and self-identity, particularly among women interested in feminist or cultural movements, or simply as a marker of a specific socio-economic class.

At the same time, we cannot ignore the capitalist and aesthetic forces that helped reframe curly hair as a fashion statement. It now requires financial investment in specialized, expensive haircare products that are not easily accessible to lower-income groups. Curly hair thus shifts from being a "symbol of poverty or neglect" to a "marker of aesthetic awareness and purchasing power." This aligns with the notion of "taste distinction," where beauty becomes a direct reflection of social class rather than an individual matter (Bourdieu, 1984).

In contrast, many women from lower and lower-middle classes continue to adopt beauty standards that regard straight hair as a symbol of discipline, cleanliness, and respectability. All of these women expressed to me that they prefer straight hair, as they consider it "highly feminine, a marker of elegance, and more attractive to men". These perceptions stem from long-standing cultural legacies, reinforced by advertising, television dramas, and even school education (Bordo, 1993; Gill, 2007). For these classes, straight hair represents an aspiration to align with the beauty ideals of "higher classes," while curly hair is still seen as "Mankosh\ messy," "childish," or indicative of

a lack of seriousness and insufficient femininity—creating a form of reverse class discrimination (Elias & Gill, 2018), where lower classes reject the beauty model embraced by elites, not necessarily out of resistance, but due to differing social and material references.

Moreover, social media has accelerated this shift, especially with the rise of Egyptian influencers with curly hair—such as Maha Hassan, Sara El Sady, and Ophelia[12]—among many others, who presented an alternative image of the "natural or ideal" self-aware woman through caring for her hair texture. This created a feminized model embraced by the elite. As workers in beauty salons and customers confirmed to me that "*they feel the need to constantly follow 'trends'—especially those promoted by influencers to stay updated on the latest products, hairstyles, and care routines"*. However, this model remains inaccessible to women of other classes—not only due to cost but because curly hair is often not celebrated in these classes. Rather, it is fought against—through straightening, chemical treatments, or wearing the veil in a way that hides it.

Finally, it is important to view this shift through the lens of *class-based feminism* (Skeggs, 1997; Fraser, 1997), which reveals how aesthetic liberation is conditioned by resources and privilege. While a woman from an upper class can wear her curly hair as a symbol of strength and freedom, another from a working-class neighborhood may face ridicule or exclusion for doing the same.

As for facial hair removal, it is practiced as a collective ritual of acceptance. The worker tells the client: *"You have to remove your facial hair—it'll make you look more elegant and beautiful. Or*

[12] Maha Hassan is a beauty content creator who promotes natural hair acceptance and offers tutorials for curl care; Sara El Sady, a well-known advocate for embracing natural beauty standards and the founder of the local curly hair community "Curly Talks"; and Ophelia, a digital creator who not only uses her platform to challenge traditional beauty ideals and normalize curly hair textures in mainstream Egyptian culture, but also recently launched her own line of natural haircare products specifically designed for curly hair, further professionalizing and commercializing the curly hair movement in Egypt (Hassan, 2024a; El Sady, 2024b; Ophelia, 2024c).

do you want a mustache like a man and no one will look at you?"—as if a woman's face is always subject to judgment from both men and women in public and private spaces. Here, choice is not offered; a hairless face is presumed by default. Workers also tie it to personal hygiene and religious obligation to further persuade clients. For example, the workers often repeat a well-known phrase\ hadith and popular saying in Egyptian culture: *"Cleanliness is part of faith,"* emphasizing that everyone must be clean and free of body or facial hair. Leaving such hair is consistently stigmatized as a sign of being dirty, leading to social rejection and exclusion. The workers persistently and insistently say things like, "*Do you want people to call you filthy and look down on you?"* or *"You're a woman—you have to take care of your personal hygiene, whether for your husband or to get married and be respected by others."*

With the increasing demand for services such as meticulously drawn eyebrows—whether natural, tattooed, or microbladed —alongside the application of straight hair extensions or wigs, false eyelashes, lip fillers, cheek lifts, dimple creation, lip and skin tinting, or permanent makeup, these non-surgical beauty enhancements are promoted as part of a "necessary" beauty package, not as individual choices.

Whereas such cosmetic procedures were once only performed in medical clinics, beauty salons have now entered this domain, often without medical supervision or accreditation, in order to make them regularly and widely accessible to women at varying prices based on their class.

One of the most dangerous practices promoted in hammams and beauty salons is skin-whitening**.** Creams, masks, and recipes are offered under the label of *"*brightening the face," as if whiteness were the ultimate desire —aligned with Western beauty standards (Hunter, 2002)—and anything else is an exception in need of correction. In some cases, clients are pressured to apply whitening

cream to their entire body, in order to conform to an imposed image of the "ideal" body—one that is white, smooth, and hairless—as a means of constructing Egyptian femininity.

3.2.1 Aesthetic Discipline and the Reproduction of Femininity:

The authority of beauty salon and hammam workers does not stop at offering cosmetic services; it extends to direct commentary on the bodies of clients. I often observed women confronted with comments that begin with phrases like: *"You need to lose some weight,"* or *"There are dark areas on your body that need to be lightened."* These remarks, delivered in a context where the workers are assumed to "know best," create a persistent sense of inadequacy and incompleteness, keeping women in a constant state of anxiety over their appearance.

Full-body hair removal, including sensitive areas, is presented not as an option but as a necessity—often linked to religion and personal hygiene. Women are told: *"Your husband might look elsewhere"*—meaning he might cheat or remarry—if she is not "clean enough," reflecting a patriarchal and religious logic that ties beauty to sexual purity and a woman's worthiness of love and marital desire.

This beauty authority does not emerge in a vacuum. Workers often draw their standards from visual media—beauty shows, social media pages, TV series, and films, as they told me. The curvy body, blonde hair, and white skin are all presented as Western trends that the client must chase (Elias et al., 2017; Azzam, 1996). These ideals are transmitted as absolute truths and as the definition of perfect beauty, and hence femininity and ideal womanhood.

At times, clothing also becomes a subject of intervention. A client may be criticized for wearing tight clothing and is advised to change it "for your reputation," or "so you don't get harassed," or

"so you don't bring shame to your family or your husband." Such advice reproduces patriarchal discourse around controlling women's bodies (Butler, 1993), blaming the victim in cases of harassment, and restricting women's freedom in public spaces.

In many cases, workers don't stop at commentary; they use tools like the *"loofah"* to scrub the body harshly, with the aim of "lightening" or "smoothing" it—as if the body is not acceptable as is, but must be modified, peeled, and reshaped to conform to the ideal beauty model. These beauty services are accompanied by feelings of jealousy and comparison among clients, as described by the workers in both salons and hammams. A silent—sometimes overt—competition arises, through direct comments or gossip among women inside these spaces, about who has the most beautiful body, the fairest skin, or the smoothest and best hair, while other features are treated as flaws that need to be corrected.

Thus, beauty salons and hammams become social institutions that reproduce class structures and gender norms, through daily and material practices enacted directly on women's bodies: from the scraping of the loofah to the prick of the needle, from soft words to harsh patriarchal remarks. What emerges in these spaces is not only a reproduction of dominant beauty standards but also a reproduction of women's status within the patriarchal social order—and the shaping of femininity among women themselves—where the female body becomes a perpetual project of correction, refinement, and alignment with an imported model crafted by social media, media, fashion, art, and the dominant class.

3.2.2 The Cost of Beauty under Class Competition and Consumer Control :

The financial cost of beauty services in Egypt also constitutes a significant burden for many women, especially in the context of class disparities and economic pressures. Prices vary widely depending on location, the fame of the beauty salon or hammam, and the quality of products used. For example, in some salons targeting upper-class clientele, the cost of a simple haircut may reach 1,000 EGP (after a discount from 1,460 EGP), while in middle-class areas, it may cost 400 EGP—and in low-income areas, only 35 EGP. In other cases, facial cleansing may cost between 3,500 to 4,000 EGP (discounted from 5,000 EGP), compared to half the price or less in middle-class salons, and only 300 to 500 EGP in lower-income salons. In many cases, the cost of a single cosmetic service equals the total monthly income of women from lower socioeconomic classes.

This financial burden particularly affects women, whether they work in the public sphere or are homemakers, as these expenses consume a significant portion of their income, increasing their economic vulnerability. If they are married, they often rely on their husbands to cover these costs, which can impose additional pressure and affect their financial independence. Sometimes, beauty expenses are imposed on women as a basic necessity that must be fulfilled, even if it means cutting from their limited financial resources.

Likewise, social class plays a decisive role in determining the type of services and products used in beauty salons and hammams. In spaces targeting upper-class clientele, imported high-quality products are used, considered safer and more effective for skin, hair, body, and cosmetic procedures, as reported to me by workers in beauty salons and hammams. In contrast, in spaces targeting middle- and lower-class clients, cheaper local products are often used, which may be of lower quality, in addition to non-medically supervised cosmetic procedures that may pose potential

risks to women's health. This disparity in quality reflects the class gap in access to safe and effective beauty services.

These dynamics highlight the need to rethink socially imposed beauty standards and the idea of self-acceptance outside societal pressures and the construction of femininity in these spaces. This contrast not only reflects economic disparity but also embodies what could be called "aesthetic discrimination," where the body becomes a medium of class separation, and beauty practices become tools for reproducing social distinction. In this context, beauty is understood as a form of capital that is invested and circulated within a social market governed by standards of taste and "proper" appearance, which creates class-based distances between women based on bodily appearance (Bourdieu, 1984). Beauty is also used as a means of social mobility, in which marriage, work, and class affiliation are linked to physical appearance (Durham, 2004). This reality reflects a consumerist structure governed by neoliberal values that place individual responsibility on women to improve their bodies under market conditions where resources and access to "safe" beauty are not equal.

Beauty salons and hammams in Egypt form spaces that go beyond merely offering beauty services; they also play a central role in enhancing self-satisfaction and social interaction among women. Despite economic challenges, many women insist on regularly visiting these places, as they feel these visits give them a sense of satisfaction with their external and internal appearance. As most participants expressed to me, when they perform the same services at home, they do not feel the same degree of satisfaction due to constant self-doubt, believing they are not capable of doing something for themselves and must resort to hammams and salons to feel good about themselves and their bodies.

Sometimes, some of the participants, particularly those in hammams and beauty salons serving middle and low -income clients, shared with me that there are shared spaces between the workers and clients where bodies are openly criticized. These critiques often target what is perceived as negligence in hair care: coarse or "*inappropriate"* hair texture, mismatched hair color, or excessive body hair. At first, some of the women told me they felt frustrated and ashamed by such comments. However, once they *"corrected"* these so-called flaws, as they described them, they reported feeling satisfied with themselves and believed they had become more beautiful.

Such spaces of overt commentary, I observed, are not commonly found in upper-class salons, where beauty work tends to be performed more quietly, without direct negative comments. In these higher-end spaces, workers often cannot openly express criticism; instead, they privately offer advice for each client that is better taken seriously. In the end, the pressure to conform is present, but less coercive, with more room left for the client's personal choice.

This dynamic is largely shaped by the class hierarchy, which defines what is allowed or not allowed—even in speech—and determines who has the right to speak and who should remain silent. It creates emotional spaces where fear of speaking out or violating others' feelings is itself classed. In salons that serve lower social classes, it is more permissible to express emotions of criticism, judgment, or disciplinary remarks toward clients, in order to push them to conform to dominant patriarchal beauty standards.

Importantly, many participants noted that the differences in opinion between workers and clients were minimal. It was often preferable to comply with the worker's perspective, whether the worker genuinely believed it was in the client's best interest or was motivated by economic reasons, such as offering additional beauty services to increase payment. Either way, the workers are perceived

as knowledgeable and up-to-date with the latest beauty trends, and their interventions are framed as being for the client's own good, so that they may become more beautiful than they already are. Beauty practices in hammams and salons reflect a "*beauty myth"* that "*is always actually prescribing behavior and not appearance*" (Wolf, 1991, p. 13). As well as how these beauty standards require "*constant self-monitoring and disciplining,"* turning the female body into "a site of social control" (Bordo, 1993, p. 166). Through repeated performance of specific beauty rituals—such as hair removal or hair styling—women strive towards what society recognizes as acceptable femininity, thus continuously reproducing the idealized image of the ideal woman, defined by patriarchal and class-based standards. This dynamic exemplifies the notion of gender performativity, where femininity is not innate but rather a continuous performance enacted to meet societal expectations and norms (Butler, 2004, pp 41-42).

This is largely due to Egyptian popular culture, which compels many women from all social classes to visit beauty salons and hammams regularly, especially during religious celebrations, both Christian and Islamic, and weddings, as it is part of popular culture and is also patriarchally and religiously linked to personal hygiene and controlling women's "proper" appearance (Amer, 2013). Thus, femininity is reshaped and reproduced through these daily practices—including body care practices—subject to deeply rooted cultural standards. This kind of gender performance is not only practiced for the self but also for the societal gaze and in conformity with cultural norms that regulate and direct the woman's body, behavior, and outward appearance (Butler, 1990).

This feeling can be interpreted through the theory of "beautification as a tool for empowerment" (Bartky, 1990), where taking care of appearance is seen as a way to regain control over the body and enhance the self. But on the other hand, this empowerment may be limited, as specific beauty

standards are imposed that reproduce social pressures on women to conform to certain beauty ideals, and this is what happens inside hammams and beauty salons in Egypt.

The competitive element among women also increases the demand for these services. Some women in the interviews told me they constantly follow what their sister-in-law, a relative, or a friend—whom they compete with—does in the salon or hammam. They go after her and ask the worker what she did and make sure to get the same cosmetic services and add more. The worker also plays on these feelings by saying things like "*You're definitely better than her"* and points out the other's physical flaws, such as thick facial or body hair, or "*coarse"* hair, and so on—features the woman then considers her own strengths as conveyed to her by the worker in order to feel superior in appearance. This competition extends to daily life at home or in public, where each woman seeks to display her aesthetic superiority. Hence, women in this context do not only submit to externally imposed beauty standards but become themselves agents in reproducing these standards through competing with one another. In this context, women turn into tools for disciplining one another, where competitiveness among women becomes evident in these spaces, as some seek to match or surpass others in appearance. This competition can be explained through the notion of "internalized patriarchal authority," where women reproduce patriarchal standards by competing to fulfill socially imposed beauty ideals, turning it into a form of "self-discipline" within the "beauty prison" (Wolf, 1991).

Consumer culture plays a prominent role in this context. Beauty salons and hammams capitalize on different occasions—whether religious holidays like Islamic and Christian feasts or social events like weddings—to offer enticing promotional packages labeled with names such as *"Eid Offers," "Christmas Offers," "Bridal Offers," or "Friends and Family Offers,"* and other

promotional names designed to attract more clients each month in line with the various occasions. These recurring promotions encourage women to frequent these places continuously, and for some, it may reach the point of addiction to these beauty services. Within these dynamics, beauty salons and hammams become more than just places for services; they become spaces where identities are reinforced, social and feminine norms are reproduced, and pressure and competition among women are practiced. Beauty standards are used as tools of control over women, keeping them preoccupied with chasing unrealistic ideals and in a perpetually unhealthy emotional state. These dynamics contribute to the creation of bodily capital used for social superiority within kinship networks and the public sphere (Bourdieu, 1984). Consumer culture, in turn, fuels this competition, turning beauty salons and hammams into spaces where identities and standards are sold and reinforced through seasonal offers and discounts that feed repetition and habitual engagement (Bauman, 2007).

3.2.3 FGM as Aesthetic Violence in Hammams and Beauty Salons:

Also, during my fieldwork, I was shocked to discover that the crime of female genital mutilation is performed in some hammams and beauty salons, specifically in the Sharqia Governorate. While I was in some of these hammams and beauty salons, I noticed some women speaking in an ambiguous language I didn't understand, while holding sharp instruments in their hands. When I asked about what they were doing, I was met with a shocking question: *"Have you been purified or not?"*—meaning, had I undergone circumcision. It became clear through conversation that some women were performing FGM inside these hammams and beauty salons under the name of "beautification," regardless of the client's age, and often with prior approval or arrangement with the girl's and women's family. Many of those subjected to these crimes were unaware beforehand

and went there without knowing, as the act was secretly agreed upon between the worker and the family. This crime continues despite the serious physical and psychological harm it may cause and despite the existence of explicit legal provisions criminalizing it[13] (UNICEF, 2021).

Recent statistics indicate that the prevalence of FGM in Egypt remains high, despite a gradual decrease due to awareness campaigns and legal reforms. According to the Egypt Demographic and Health Survey (EDHS 2021), around 86% of women and girls aged 15–49 have undergone this practice. The same study shows that the rates do not differ significantly between rural and urban areas, reflecting the widespread continuation of this crime. Despite harsher penalties, the persistence of FGM is largely due to deep-rooted cultural beliefs that view such practices as means of "purifying" women and controlling their bodies and sexual desires. These acts are not seen as gender-based violence but are socially reconfigured as necessary rituals to regulate femininity and the sexual life of women (El Saadawi, 1980; Ahmed, 2004).

In this context, women's bodies are understood as spaces to be purified, refined, and subjected to social authority— whether by the family, religion, or customs—strengthening the persistence of practices like FGM, not as acts of violence, but as "cultural necessities." This can be interpreted within the framework of "disciplinary power," where repression is not enforced through visible violence but reproduced through medical, religious, and traditional discourse. Older women often

[13] . According to Egyptian law, FGM is explicitly criminalized under Article 242 bis of the Penal Code, which states: *"Anyone who performs female circumcision by removing any part of the female genital organs, whether partially or completely, or inflicts injuries on those organs without medical necessity, shall be punished with imprisonment for no less than five years. If the circumcision leads to permanent disability or death, the punishment shall be aggravated imprisonment. If the perpetrator is a doctor or nurse, the penalty shall be aggravated imprisonment for no less than seven years and not exceeding fifteen years."* (Egyptian Penal Code, Article 242 bis, 2021 amendment)

practice this discipline on younger women under the guise of "protection" or "duty" (Foucault, 1977).

Thus, the body becomes a site of control and regulation, and violence becomes accepted—sometimes even demanded—as long as it reinforces the social norms of acceptable gender and femininity. These views show that gender-based violence is not only physical but also symbolic, political and cultural, reproduced within everyday institutions like hammams and beauty salons.

3.3. The Male Dominance Within Women's Spaces:

Beauty salons and hammams are not isolated from the patriarchal power structures that govern both public and private spheres; rather, they often reproduce them through communication patterns and imposed expectations on women within. Even in these “women-only” spaces, male authority remains present—directly or indirectly—whether through the discourse directed at women or through the surveillance imposed by husbands and male family members. These spaces reproduce traditional gender roles and exercise symbolic forms of male control through seemingly supportive everyday language and practices. This control is not only exercised from outside but is also perpetuated and reinforced by women themselves, within their collective interactions in these spaces.

3.3.1 Patriarchal Power in Shaping Women's Daily Speech and Choices:

This became evident through my fieldwork in hammams and beauty salons. Although women perform beauty services for themselves, they often do so for others—particularly for husbands and society—and not necessarily from a purely self-driven desire. This male control is clearly reflected in the everyday conversations that occur in hammams and beauty salons, where workers ask clients

about their husbands' preferences, such as: "*What does your husband like?"* or "*What does the man want?"* referring to a lover, fiancé, or husband—as if beauty must be directed primarily to please the man. In some cases, a woman's attendance at these spaces is subject to close scrutiny by her husband. Some women told me that their husbands accompany them and wait outside—not out of support, but out of fear that their wives might be exposed to "sensitive" conversations inside the salon, especially those related to sex, sexual desire, and marital relationships—or "*fear of the wife's morals being corrupted by the women's and feminist conversations exchanged in these spaces,"* as they told me. Some men are aware that these spaces offer women opportunities to speak about themselves, their personal and professional problems, and solidarity among one another, along with temporary bodily liberation from clothing or the veil, as well as access to sexual knowledge, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Multiple testimonies were repeated by unmarried women who said they regularly attend hammams and beauty salons because they want to get married, and that improving their appearance—in their opinion or as encouraged by society—increases their chances of marriage. Whether through encounters with a mother seeking a wife for her son or simply by being seen as "beautiful" by other women in proximity, they believed this enhanced their marriage prospects.

In this context, conversations exchanged between women about their secrets and marital problems in these spaces also become a tool for reproducing traditional social roles; they include explicit or implicit advice about the necessity of marital obedience, commitment to domestic duties, and providing unpaid care as central to "proper femininity." Common expressions heard from workers and clients when a woman is in conflict with her husband/fiancé/boyfriend—such as making a crucial decision in their relationship, as many of the participants shared with me when discussing

financial negotiations about household expenses or demanding more money from their husbands to meet household needs—include; *"You have no right; he has the right,"* said by another client and the worker. Similarly, regarding matters related to marital and sexual intimacy, such as not wanting to engage in intercourse or not wishing to conceive, women are advised: *"Don't go against God's will and Islamic Sharia", "You must obey your husband,"* When discussing beauty standards related to their bodies—what the husband prefers—or sharing problems about domestic duties, such as being forced to clean the house daily or regularly serve and care for the husband's family, including cleaning the mother-in-law's apartment or treating the mother-in-law kindly despite harsh treatment, women are told: *"What does your husband like? Follow his lead."*

This dynamic was also reflected in almost all the beauty salons and hammams I visited for ethnographic observation and participation as a member of the community, where I was often asked at the beginning about my marital status and what my man likes or prefers. Similarly, clients frequently asked each other about their marital status, and if a woman answered that she was single, uninterested in marriage, a working women, or successful and independent woman, she often receives comments that pull her back into the mold of a woman who is not complete without a man to protect her, such as: "*No matter how strong you are, you need a man to support you and protect you and your money".*

Here, the discourse of marital obedience is reactivated as part of ideal femininity, intersecting with patriarchal discursive authority (Foucault, 1978), where power is not only exercised through law or direct violence but through everyday language that reshapes subjectivities. In this context, unpaid emotional and care work is reaffirmed—as one of the main social roles a woman must perform—and understood as a form of institutionalized emotional exploitation within the

patriarchal system (Hochschild, 1983), framed as a "feminine duty" rather than a choice, even for working or independent women.

At other times, some interviewees revealed to me that they refrain from regular beauty practices—or even reduce them—because their husbands or sons are overly possessive. One woman said: *"I like to change my look a lot, but my husband and son are extremely jealous—they love me natural,"* a clear indication that male control does not stop at imposing beauty as a duty, but is sometimes enacted as guardianship over the body (Bartky, 1990; Butler, 1997), where a woman's appearance and behavior are controlled under the pretext of "jealousy" or "protection." This kind of control is not necessarily confined to the home; it also follows women into semi-public and private beauty spaces such as salons and hammams. As well as, in Arab and Egyptian cultural contexts, the honor of the family is deeply tied to the control of women's bodies, with both husbands and sons or any men belonging to the family seen as bearers and protectors of family honor. As such, they are socially authorized to monitor and regulate the bodies and behaviors of female family members, including mothers (Abu-Lughod, 1986; Mernissi,1987; Joseph, 1993).

3.3.2 Women's Advice in a Patriarchal Voice:

In other cases, the traditional role of women is directly transmitted. Some women advise each other with comments like: "*Study and work, but you must get married and have children—that's the most important thing,"* or "*Try to work something light, but don't forget your role at home."* Although these remarks may be understood as part of female solidarity, they reveal the extent to which patriarchal values are embedded in women's own discourse, even in spaces assumed to be for self-expression and solidarity. In these spaces, women perceived and assumed them as safe environments free from judgment. However, the same expected discourses heart there because that

is tied to societal values—rooted in religion, customs, and traditions—continue to circulate. Women do not label these discourses as "patriarchal," largely due to their unfamiliarity with the concept. Instead, they view them as “natural” social roles imposed by societal expectations upon them as females as they said to me.

The same applies when a woman requests the removal of pubic hair. The worker is first asked, “*Are you married or not?”* If she is single, the service is denied. If she is married, it is accepted, based on the belief that it serves the primary purpose of the husband’s pleasure. For single women, as they told me, “*She should do it herself to preserve her honor and avoid touching that area—especially to protect her virginity, in case we accidentally do something that might compromise it, which could put us at risk with her family.”* They also told me, “*A virgin woman should not tamper with that area in order to preserve her honor.”* This is a result of the prevailing and distorted understanding within Egyptian culture which is based on social norms, unauthentic religious texts, or unverified medical sources, but rather stems from popular culture. It stems from the cultural association between the concept of honor and the girl's hymen, which is perceived as extremely delicate—described by some women I interviewed "as thin as cigarette paper"—and easily ruptured.

Based on this perception, there is a widespread fear that a woman might lose her virginity through any "tampering" with that area, whether through hair removal or through the practice of masturbation. For this reason, beauty workers often advise unmarried \ single clients not to remove pubic hair or touch that area. This concern is further fueled by the fear that the loss of the hymen could expose the girl to the risk of being killed in so-called Killing\"honor’ crimes, regardless of

the circumstances—even if no sexual activity with a man took place. What matters socially is not the context, but merely the physical existence or absence of the hymen.

This practice reveals how women's bodies, particularly their sexual and intimate parts, are policed not only by male, familial and social norms, but also through professional services that reproduce patriarchal control. The logic behind such restrictions reflects a deeply gendered assumption that a woman's body, especially her sexuality, must remain under male authority—whether it be the husband or future husband's or the family's. Grooming becomes permissible only when it is aligned with male pleasure, reinforcing the idea that a woman's bodily autonomy is conditional and externally regulated. In this way, the regulation of intimate beauty practices becomes a means through which male control over the female body is normalized and institutionalized.

3.3.3 Aesthetic Practices as Symbolic Capital:

Another manifestation of this male control is the use of beauty as a means of concealing class or regional background. Some women change their skin tone using makeup or whitening products, or straighten their hair regularly, to avoid revealing their rural or provincial origins. One woman told me she does this "*so that no one knows I'm from the countryside,"* adding that she also trains herself to speak in a Cairene accent so that "*no one discovers my origin,"* reflecting how beauty is linked to class and social belonging and how it is used in attempts to ascend or belong to an imagined urban middle class. It makes her more socially acceptable—both in the eyes of society and of men—in order to gain their respect in both public and private spheres.

As they explained to me by the participants during interviews across the various governorates I visited, they believed that this issue is closely tied to marriage; One woman expressed that may

increase her chances of finding a spouse, while another mentioned it could justify a higher dowry, or ensure more respect from her husband at home and reduce her exposure to domestic violence. This is because he perceives her as belonging to a particular social class. Conversely, society, in turn, facilitates her access to job opportunities based on her appearance and linguistic performance. Many of the participants shared with me that this contributes to a form of partial independence, where the woman is not entirely dependent on her husband. This dynamic often intimidates the husband or partner, as he fears the woman's elevated social position. Several participants recounted situations where the husband or partner felt threatened, particularly because men are frequently trapped in a constant comparison between their own social standing and that of their partner. If the woman holds a higher social position, it tends to evoke fear and forces the man to treat her with greater respect.

These dynamics illustrate how women strategically mobilize beauty practices as a form of "symbolic capital" whereby physical appearance, comportment, and class-coded aesthetics become tools for navigating patriarchal structures. In this context, beauty is not merely about conformity to gender norms but also about negotiating power and protection within the institution of marriage. By cultivating a certain image, a woman may gain leverage: she may raise her perceived value in the marriage market, increase her social mobility, and subtly resist total dependency on her spouse. Yet, this very strategy remains constrained by the dominant logic of male approval and societal validation, reinforcing a system in which women's worth continues to be mediated through their desirability and conformity to class-based and gendered aesthetics.

This practice—using beauty to mask class or regional belonging—shows how the female body becomes a site for both class and gender performance. Beauty here is no longer a luxury or

adornment but a strategic social tool used to renegotiate identity, belonging, and social status. Through skin lightening, hair styling, or altering one's accent, women engage in what can be called "class performativity," where the body is reshaped to mimic the standards of the urban middle class, thus attempting to "hide" or "overcome" class or regional origins (Bourdieu, 1984).

Likewise, these feminine strategies can also be understood as attempts to attain "socially acceptable femininity," meaning a form of femininity that is performed in alignment with beauty standards complicit with patriarchal and class-based authority (Ahmed, 2014). In this context, beauty becomes a tool for social belonging—but also a tool of self-exclusion, as women strive to minimize the cultural and class differences that are deemed undesirable in the public sphere.

Moreover, the desire to whiten the skin or erase "rural," "Upper Egyptian," or "borderland and marginalized" features reflect the epistemological structure of postcolonialism, where bodily and cultural traits associated with rural, Upper Egyptian, southern, or non-capital regions are viewed as inferior, while the Cairene urban model is celebrated as the superior norm. "*Colonization repeatedly constructs Third World women as a homogeneous, powerless group often located as victims of particular cultural and social systems, thus justifying dominant cultural narratives that privilege Western or elite models of being"*(Mohanty, 2003, p.39). As Cairene urban culture has become the standard against which rural and provincial lifestyles are measured and often found lacking. This culture is associated with modernity, elite, refinement, and proximity to globalized Western norms found exclusively in Cairo (Ismail, 2006, p. 87).

3.4 Social Stigmatization of Workers and Frequent Visitors:

Workers in beauty salons and hammams in Egypt face a compounded societal stigma intertwined with religion, gender, and social class. Often, these women associate their work with questions of halal (permissible) and haram (forbidden). For example, Wafaa, a worker in a beauty salon, said that after performing Umrah[14], she decided not to work in this field again because she saw the money earned from it as *"haram."* However, she faced severe financial hardship and was forced to return to this work, despite her feelings of guilt, adding that she constantly asks God for forgiveness. This persistent tension between economic necessity and what is perceived as *"religiously unacceptable work"* is also clearly reflected during the month of Ramadan. Some workers avoid opening their shops during the day out of respect for the sacredness of the month and refrain from performing certain services, such as eyebrow shaping, based on the prophetic hadith reported by Al-Bukhari (5931) and Muslim (2124): *"May Allah curse the one who plucks eyebrows (al-nāmiṣa) and the one who requests it (al-mutanammisa)."* "Al-nāmiṣa" refers to the woman who removes hair from the eyebrows, while "al-mutanammisa" is the one who asks another to do it for her. This also applies to services like applying hard gel to nails, as it prevents

[14] . Performing Umrah refers to undertaking a pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca in Islam, involving a set of sacred rituals carried out at the Kaaba and its surrounding sites. While not obligatory, Umrah holds deep spiritual significance for Muslims and is considered a profound act of devotion and renewal.
The purpose of performing Umrah is to seek spiritual purification, demonstrate submission to God (Allah), and attain forgiveness and inner peace. It is an act of humility and worship, symbolizing the believer's desire to detach from worldly distractions and reconnect with the sacred. Through rituals such as Tawaf (circumambulating the Kaaba), Sa'i (walking between the hills of Safa and Marwah), and Ihram (entering a state of spiritual consecration), the person enacts both physical and spiritual surrender to the divine. For many, Umrah serves as a personal journey of transformation, reflection, and reaffirmation of faith.
The Kaaba is a cuboid structure located at the center of the Masjid al-Haram (the Sacred Mosque) in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, and is considered the most sacred site in Islam. It is believed by Muslims to have been originally built by Prophet Abraham (Ibrahim) and his son Ishmael (Isma'il) as a house of monotheistic worship (Qur'an, 2:125–127). The Kaaba serves as the qibla, the direction toward which Muslims around the world face during prayer. Symbolically, it represents the oneness of God and the unity of the Muslim community (ummah) in devotion and spiritual orientation (Peters, 1994). During rituals such as Tawaf, pilgrims circle the Kaaba seven times as an act of submission and remembrance of the divine.

proper ablution (wudu') and thus makes prayer invalid. It also includes cosmetic procedures such as eyebrow tattooing, wearing hair extensions on the head or eyebrows, or other non-surgical beauty enhancements.

This prohibition is supported by another hadith narrated by al-Bukhari (5931) and Muslim (2124): *"May Allah curse the tattooer (al-wāshima) and the one who gets tattooed (al-mustawshima)."* In the interpretations of al-Ṭabarī (2001) and Ibn Kathīr (1998), al-wāshima is the one who performs the tattoo, and al-mustawshima is the one who requests it. The hadith mentions this as a form of altering Allah's creation, which some scholars take as evidence of its prohibition, especially if the purpose is permanent beautification, imitation, or deception. Additionally, a Quranic verse in Surah An-Nisa (4:119) states: *"I will command them so they will change the creation of Allah."* Some scholars interpret "*changing the creation of Allah"* to include non-essential bodily modifications, such as tattoos, nose reshaping, or cosmetic surgeries for beautification not related to treatment. Discussions of sexual topics are also often avoided, as these matters are considered *"haram."*

This inner conflict is deepened by the social pressures imposed on these workers by clients and the surrounding community. One worker recounted how a client scolded her, saying: *"Shame on you, woman! We're in Ramadan,"* objecting to the nature of conversations in the salon during the holy month.

Religion, meanwhile, plays a dual role in the lives of these workers. While some religious practices provide them with meaning or comfort, religious discourse is also used socially to generate a constant sense of guilt. The religious discourse functions not only as a tool of social regulation but also as an internal mechanism for shaping personal conscience and a sense of moral

responsibility (Mahmood, 2005). Consequently, feelings of guilt arise not merely due to external surveillance but from an internalized sense of falling short of achieving the desired model of piety or religious devotion, making guilt an almost permanent condition. This can be reflected in the practice of religiosity among these women, which is not simply the result of external coercion but a conscious choice rooted in an inner desire to discipline the self according to precise religious standards, even if this process entails continuous suffering or persistent feelings of guilt. This is evident in the narratives of workers who close their salons during Ramadan or who seek forgiveness from God for working in a field they consider "haram." These actions demonstrate that emotions such as shame and guilt are not born internally but are socially produced and used as tools of moral and political discipline. Religion here is not merely a personal relationship with God but a social discourse used to monitor and discipline the female body (Ahmed, 2014).

3.4.1 Stigma and Social Inferiority among Beauty Workers:

Workers also shared stories linking societal stigma to recurring experiences, particularly when their work is reduced to a stereotype associated with indecency or moral and social inferiority. For example, a worker named Doaa, working in a low-income beauty salon, is commonly known as "*Doaa Fetla\ Sewing Thread",* a nickname referencing her manual hair removal technique using sewing thread. This name is used to mock her and even her son, who is bullied by his peers because of his mother's work, with comments like: "*Don't act like you're better than us—your mom is Doaa Fetla\ Sewing Thread".* This reflects a form of contempt based on class and religion, rooted in the mother's profession as a beauty worker and the social expectations that stigmatize women working in this field as lacking moral propriety and occupying a lower social status. The profession

is perceived as inappropriate and dishonorable, as the participant explained to me, describing how such images are deeply ingrained in the minds of people in her village.

By contrast, when I asked about stigma among workers in salons targeting upper-class clientele, particularly in Cairo and Alexandria, they said they did not face the same degree of stigma or exclusion—just occasional comments about whether the work is halal or haram. This stigma stems from a moral-class logic that reproduces distinctions among women themselves. The job is reduced to a physical task linked to inferiority and becomes a "family stigma" that serves as a tool of class and social exclusion. This reflects the same idea argued by Butler (1993), where bodies are constructed and socially assigned meaning through language and the social gaze, processes that inscribe value and status onto bodies based on norms such as class, gender, and occupation. This dynamic is clearly illustrated in the case studies of the participants.

3.4.2 Moral Stigma and Precarious Labor in Feminized Beauty Economies:

The stigma is not limited to the workers but extends to the types of clients they serve, such as dancers or sex workers, reinforcing the stereotype that these salons are part of an "immoral world". This social perception weighs heavily on workers, who suffer from condescending attitudes and are treated as "*servants*", as some described, rather than as women workers equal to others in various professions. They also expressed a deep sense that their work is neither respectable nor worthy of recognition, often feeling the need to hide it to avoid stigma and stereotyping.

Some workers even avoid certain tasks, such as hair removal from sensitive areas, considering them "demeaning," and prefer to assign them to less experienced workers or those from poorer backgrounds to avoid the social stigma attached to these services.

These cases reveal a complex reality governed by contradictions between beauty standards, religious and social norms and economic pressures. Workers try to negotiate these daily challenges to preserve their "dignity" in an environment that does not readily accept women's work in such spaces like hammams and beauty salons. Alongside social and religious stigma, workers in beauty salons and hammams try to adapt to clients' expectations by maintaining a good outward appearance and beautifying themselves first to instill client confidence in their cosmetic expertise.

Workers in these spaces are not merely seen as a labor force providing beauty services—they are also imbued with moral and gendered meanings that reproduce the patriarchal system within these spaces. Caring for women's bodies—whether by the workers or the clients—is not understood as a self-care practice, a personal right, or simply a form of women's economic empowerment, but rather interpreted in light of presumed intentions linked to pleasing the patriarchal order centered on men or preparing for marriage. This control over the body aligns with the disciplining of the female body in patriarchal societies, where strict standards are imposed on a woman's appearance and behavior, and her body becomes a site of constant discipline (Bartky, 1988, p.84).

Despite these efforts, their work remains part of the informal economy (Elmenshawy, 2022), making it vulnerable to economic precarity. Although many of them enjoy a degree of financial independence and believe in the importance of hammams and beauty salons as sources of income and support, the absence of regulation and guarantees renders their job security contingent on the salon owner's preferences or the fluctuation in customer turnout. In most cases, workers rely on a "daily wage" determined informally, which can vary from day to day based on the employer's mood or workload—placing them in a precarious position lacking rights or social protection (Elson, 1999). Thus, women workers in these spaces face a complex mix of social, economic, and

religious pressures, as they try to navigate a daily reality that demands performance, compliance, and concealment—all within an obvious fragility in professional protection and economic empowerment. Moreover, the feminization of unpaid or informal labor forms an integral part of the patriarchal capitalist economy, which depends on women's labor without recognizing or protecting it legally (Federici, 2012). This is clearly evident in hammams and beauty salons in Egypt.

3.4.3 Clients Also Under Surveillance and Stigma:

Stigma affects not only the workers but also the clients— especially women who frequently visit beauty salons and hammams. Their intentions and behaviors are often questioned based on their appearance or the frequency of their visits. Some women reported being subjected to accusatory looks or offensive comments assuming they are "sex workers" or "dancers" or "disrespectable women." This stigma is especially pronounced in areas like Sharqia, Upper Egypt, and Sinai, as well as in certain middle- or low-income neighborhoods in Cairo and Alexandria, where conservative values prevail and body care and appearance are considered an unacceptable luxury for unmarried women—or a concern that must be continually monitored by the husband in the case of married women. In these communities, where people know each other well, families are often contacted to restrict the freedom of their daughters or wives to frequently attend these spaces "to protect their reputation," out of fear of gossip. As a result, many women request salon or hammam workers to visit them at home—an option that is far more expensive.

In such contexts, singlehood itself becomes a marker of suspicion. Some clients recounted being criticized within these spaces, hearing comments from workers or other clients like: *"It's inappropriate for you, my daughter, to care so much about your looks,"* or "*Why is she so into her*

appearance? She's not even married!" This reveals a strict social surveillance imposed on women's bodies, particularly regarding their choices about beauty, hygiene, and personal care. These practices—which should be spaces for comfort and autonomy—are reduced to being "acceptable" only if they serve marriage or male satisfaction, and not as a woman's right to self-care. As such, strict behavioral rules are imposed on clients—especially unmarried ones—determining what they should and shouldn't do, based on social constructs that reinforce moral control over the female body, assessing it by its relationship to marriage, rather than by freedom or personal autonomy.

This deep paradox is also reflected in how unmarried clients interact with these spaces. While beauty salons are assumed to be places of privacy and self-care, they sometimes become sites for reproducing stigma—not just from the outside but from within. These women are accused of being "wrong" for caring for themselves before marriage, or are viewed as "suspicious," as if female beauty must remain deferred until patriarchal approval is granted through marriage. This control over the timing and legitimacy of a woman's beauty reinforces the logic of deferred femininity and reveals how feminine beauty is understood as a commodity offered to men, rather than as a woman's right (Butler, 1993, pp. 2–16; 120–121).

3.5 Conclusion:

The multiple dynamics explored in this chapter reveal that beauty salons and hammams are central sites for producing and reinforcing patriarchal and class-based beauty standards and for exercising control over the female body—both by others and by the self-monitoring subject. Beauty in these spaces is practiced as a form of symbolic violence—not imposed by force, but through desire and normalization. Women themselves—both clients and workers—participate in reproducing this

patriarchal aesthetic system, sometimes out of economic necessity, and sometimes due to cultural and political influences on how they perceive their bodies.

Although beauty can offer fleeting moments of satisfaction or surface-level empowerment, it remains governed by exclusionary standards that are not equally accessible to all. These standards are shaped by purchasing power, access to safe cosmetic products, class background, geographic location, and even marital status. At the heart of all this, social stigma emerges as one of the most effective tools for disciplining the body and female identity. Workers are morally and socially devalued, and clients' behaviors are misinterpreted—especially when they deviate from socially accepted norms. Thus, beauty becomes a deeply social and political domain, where dominance is exercised and femininity is reshaped according to the logic of the patriarchal neoliberal system.

Despite what is noted in the next chapter—regarding these spaces as sites of everyday feminist resistance where women regularly interact to resist the patriarchal system using multiple tools—hammams and beauty salons are still influenced by both public and private spheres under patriarchal structures. Patriarchal manifestations infiltrate these spaces and impose themselves on women's bodies.

Chapter Three: Women's Experiences in Egypt's Hammams and Beauty Salons

4.1 Introduction:

This chapter focuses on the formation of hammams and beauty salons in Egypt as spaces of women's solidarity, where women share their life experiences in various dimensions, whether related to romantic and marital relationships, motherhood, work, or the social constraints imposed on them. Women, regardless of their class, age, educational, and geographical backgrounds, find a safe space to talk about their problems without fear of judgment. In these spaces, confession and consolation become forms of mutual emotional support, and collective conversations about beauty, marriage, and work strengthen relationships among women, building a cohesive social network that challenges the individualism imposed on them and their problems by the patriarchal society as demonstrated in the previous two chapters.

This chapter also focuses on temporary bodily liberation, whether as a feeling or a practice, as it is one of the fundamental aspects of these spaces. In hammams, women free themselves from the layers of clothing that conceal their bodies in public spaces, reclaiming a sense of control over their bodies beyond the male gaze. Similarly, in beauty salons, removing the hijab or niqab in these spaces has become a form of temporary liberation that women experience away from men's surveillance of their bodies and appearance in both public and private spheres. Unveiling their hair and bodies serves as a means of self-reclamation, shaping women's experiences and constructing femininity and womanhood. Hair removal, massages, and body care in these spaces become rituals that enhance women's sense of their bodies—not just as subjects of beauty, but as sources of

comfort and self-pleasure, offering a retreat from the social roles imposed on them, whether in unpaid domestic and caregiving work or in demanding paid labor.

Beyond these aspects, these spaces serve as sites for the informal production of sexual knowledge, where women learn about their bodies, desires, and sexual needs away from social taboos and the restrictions on discussing such topics in the public sphere. The exchange of experiences about the wedding night, ways to arouse one's partner, and achieving sexual pleasure reshapes women's perceptions of intimate relationships. In some cases, it even leads to reevaluating these relationships and making radical decisions, such as improving communication with their husbands or even seeking divorce in cases of persistent sexual dissatisfaction. Women who have undergone female genital mutilation (FGM) discuss with one another how they can still experience pleasure despite the physical harm inflicted upon them, reflecting a feminist everyday resistance to the bodily oppression they have faced since childhood.

These collective practices generate different forms of female and everyday resistance within these spaces. Through forming solidarities, sharing experiences, and challenging taboos related to the body and sexuality, women reconstruct their own narratives, distancing themselves from patriarchal discourses that enforce compliance and silence. This resistance may be indirect, but it is effective, as women redefine femininity and womanhood beyond the narrow frameworks that confine it to obedience and sacrifice, reshaping it through their own experiences, desires, and needs in beauty salons and hammams.

During my fieldwork, I noticed how the material structure and social atmosphere of hammams and beauty salons are deeply shaped by class differences, especially in terms of their relationship to the street and the surrounding public life. In working\lower -class neighborhoods, I entered places that could be best described as "homes" or "shelter" opened for women. These hammams and

beauty salons were not entirely separate from the street; rather, they seemed like an extension of it—flexible spaces, charged with emotion. I often felt as though I was still in the street, but the door of the salon or hammam marked a boundary—offering greater protection and privacy to those inside.

Women would enter wearing abayas (a robe-like dress, worn by some Muslim women) headscarves\hijab\veil, or niqabs, then remove these garments as soon as they stepped in. They would sit in their undergarments, or in the house clothes they had worn beneath the abaya, or even in tight clothes they wished they could wear in the street—if only the street felt safe enough, as they expressed to me. These spaces offered the body a kind of comfort and breath—a temporary escape from the moral and visual surveillance imposed by the public sphere. While street sounds were still audible—vendors calling out, children yelling—there was a particular intimacy that characterized these spaces, making them profoundly feminine and saturated with emotion. The women did not seem self-conscious about their bodies, even as they observed one another. Their gazes were discreet, yet it was clear that they were looking, and looking deeply.

The hammams and beauty salons frequented by middle- and upper-class women were markedly separated from the street, both architecturally and symbolically. They were often located on the first floors of residential buildings, in private commercial spaces, or up a couple of steps with tightly secured doors. These locations were carefully chosen, as women told me, to be distant from the chaos and the surveillance associated with the street. These spaces were cleaner, more orderly, and governed by a clear desire for privacy and detachment. Women arrived in clothing appropriate for the public sphere and generally remained dressed as such—except for those undergoing full-body hair removal, for whom a private room was provided. Yet, just as in working-class salons, all women would remove their headscarves or niqabs upon entering, signaling that these interior

spaces—regardless of class—remained temporary zones for bodily exposure and intimate transformation.

What struck me most was how social class shaped the sensory and emotional experience of these spaces. Working-class and lower-middle-class salons were full of movement, noise, spontaneous chatter, and uninhibited bodily expression. In contrast, the spaces frequented by the upper class—especially the hammams—were quieter, more restrained. Still, despite these differences, all of these spaces—regardless of class—functioned as temporary sanctuaries. I saw this in the women's feelings and in the stories they shared. Hammams and beauty salons still offered them space to renegotiate their appearance, their comfort, and their sense of safety, if only for a few hours as they told me and I felt.

4.2. Mechanisms of Solidarity and Self-Expression:

Solidarity can be defined as a form of social support based on cohesion and cooperation among individuals/women or groups to confront shared challenges, whether emotional, economic, or practical. Solidarity is not merely an attitude or a feeling; rather, it is a practice that emerges from collective action toward a common goal or through the shared experience of social pressures. Women's solidarity, in particular, refers to the bonds that women build among themselves through support and mutual assistance, grounded in their shared or intersecting experiences, even if these experiences are not entirely identical (Ahmed, 2006).

This solidarity is evident in the fieldwork conducted in beauty salons and hammams, where informal relationships develop based on repeated interactions, trust, mutual need, and support. It also manifests in the stories women share and their exchanges about personal, familial, professional, and emotional challenges. These narratives create an open and safe space for free

expression within beauty salons and hammams, fostering a female experience rooted in solidarity through psychological and material support, as well as through advice-sharing and problem-solving related to the diverse challenges faced by women.

4.2.1 Confiding Problems as a Form of Self-Expression:

All the women who participated in my fieldwork expressed their struggle with the lack of spaces[15] where they could freely express themselves without judgment. Most of them also pointed to a profound sense of the absence of solidarity in both their personal and professional lives. In the face of this void, visiting the hammam or beauty salon becomes their only opportunity to relieve daily pressures and speak openly about their problems—regardless of their age, marital status, or socio-economic background. One interviewee (A.M.) articulated this need, saying, *"I need a place where I feel seen, where expressing my emotions is not condemned or ridiculed."* She added that she only finds such refuge in hammams or beauty salons, and she saves money regularly to afford visiting them every two weeks or once a month.

Many women described these spaces as meeting points where social suffering is shared among women. One participant (S.M.) stated, *"My father believes that marriage is the only purpose of my existence, and he doesn't care about what I feel or want."* Another (E.G.) spoke of her father's interference in her relationships with male colleagues at work, perceiving her friendships with men

[15] . This sense of marginalization and lack of being heard reflects their reality in both public and private spaces—a reality corroborated by UN reports on the absence of safe spaces for women in Egypt's public and private spheres (UNFPA Egypt, 2023). These spaces do not grant women full freedom to express their emotions and thoughts or openly and safely share their concerns. The following narratives in the text reflect the patriarchal social context in Egypt that restricts women's experiences. The stories collected from hammams and beauty salons illustrate the various social, economic, and familial pressures women endure. These spaces become vital feminist enclaves where women enhance their ability to express themselves and resist societal oppression.

as shameful and damaging to her reputation: *"I feel trapped; I can't live my life normally."* A third woman (N.A.) recounted the pressure from her father to obey her husband even when he was clearly in the wrong: *"My father tells me, 'You are his wife; you must obey him even if he is unjust.'"*

This relationship between women and male family members—father, brother, and husband—also becomes evident through the concept of "*patriarchal connectivity"* where women are based on mutual dependency within a hierarchical framework that demands loyalty and obedience in exchange for protection and support[16](Joseph,1999). One participant (Y.S.) described how her brother controls her finances and appearance: *"I feel like a prisoner in my own body and life."* Another (H.) said: *"My husband gives me money to go to the beauty salon or hammam only to arouse him sexually, as if I am just an object he owns."* In another case, a woman was forced to visit the salon solely to fulfill her husband's sexual desires—reducing her role to that of a sexual object, her identity and autonomy erased.

More distressingly, one woman (S.) spoke of being subjected to violence by her son and feeling replaced in her maternal role by his wife: *"I feel like I've lost my place as a mother, and no one listens to me."* Another (K.) shared: *"I have never found a true friend who listens to me without judgment,"* reflecting the emotional loneliness experienced by many women in the absence of safe, non-judgmental friendships.

[16] . This concept reflects the deep interdependence between women and men within the family structure in Arab societies such as Egypt. The father represents the primary authority figure who enforces social values and expectations, and his influence often extends even after a daughter's marriage. The elder brother can serve as an extension of this authority, at times exercising control over his sister's decisions. Upon marriage, a woman transitions from the authority of her father to that of her husband, reinforcing the continuity of the patriarchal system. Within this structure, a woman's value is closely tied to her adherence to familial and gendered norms, particularly in relation to obedience, compliance, and social conduct—especially concerning honor and morality.

In this context, hammams and beauty salons emerge as everyday spaces of feminist solidarity, where women engage in symbolic resistance against patriarchal control through mutual listening, sharing experiences of male violence, and freely expressing themselves without judgment. This solidarity is not merely empathetic; it forms a structure of psychological support that allows women to reassert their agency, reframe their identities, and exchange embodied and emotional knowledge—making these spaces safe havens far from the violence of male-dominated environments.

4.2.2 Mutual Trust and Openness among Women as the Heart of Solidarity:

On another level, hammams and beauty salons contribute to building strong female and feminist support networks. Through daily interactions, informal relationships develop among women that may extend beyond these spaces into real social support networks, where they arrange to meet outside of hammams and beauty salons or exchange phone numbers to stay in touch. These networks also provide opportunities to exchange advice on daily life issues, such as how to deal with marital problems or confront social restrictions. Such networks help women feel they are not alone in their struggles and that there are others who listen and stand by them in times of need.

These spaces also provide an opportunity for emotional release and the free expression of feelings. Expressing frustration, anger, or even laughter—laughter was particularly noted in beauty salons in North Sinai, where all the interviewees emphasized how they are unable to laugh freely in the streets, workplaces, or even within their families, as it is considered inappropriate and diminishes a woman's honor and status—helps alleviate the psychological burdens accumulated due to daily social and familial challenges. This emotional release is not merely an outlet for feelings but a

means of liberating oneself from restrictions that may sometimes seem impossible to break, as confirmed by all the interviewees across different governorates.

Moreover, open conversations in these spaces provide opportunities to challenge dominant social values, such as discussing relationships with the opposite sex, including intimate relationships with a boyfriend or fiancé, and sharing problems with other women in beauty salons and hammams—especially in cases where families disapprove of a woman's choice of partner. Conversations about the desire to delay, reject, or reconsider marriage and childbearing become platforms for critical dialogue, allowing women to reassess values that are often imposed upon them without choice. These discussions contribute to developing a critical awareness that encourages women to explore new ways of navigating traditional social roles and reshaping their realities based on their own desires and aspirations.

This openness also reflects the struggle women face in finding genuine spaces of solidarity. The public and private spheres remain charged with social expectations and stereotypes that make free expression difficult. However, spaces like hammams and beauty salons offer unique possibilities for solidarity.

4.2.3 Telling the Untold on ('Urfi) Marriage and Women's Intimate Lives:

One woman (T.) shared her experience of confiding in others about her marital problems at the hammam she regularly visits. She said, "*My husband spends long hours away from home, and I cannot ask him where he is. I fear that he might have married another woman, but I do not have the courage to confront him. Every time I come to the hammam, I talk to other women about my fears and try to understand how to deal with this situation."* In this context, women do not just offer superficial advice; they share personal experiences in similar situations, creating a sense of

solidarity and psychological support. Some suggest avoiding excessive doubt and focusing on self-care—both mentally and physically—as well as engaging in activities that promote relaxation, such as massages and mughtas (alternating between hot and cold-water immersion to stimulate circulation and promote relaxation). Others encourage changes in appearance, such as trying a new hairstyle or makeup look to create a sense of renewal and boost confidence or to please her husband in this way.

Another woman (S.H.) spoke about the pressure she faces to maintain her appearance so that "her husband does not look outside." She said, "*My husband always tells me that women outside take better care of themselves and that I should look like actresses. I feel like I constantly have to change my look and dye my hair to keep his attention."* In the beauty salon, she found a space to discuss these pressures with other women experiencing similar feelings of anxiety and insecurity. These spaces also facilitate transformations, allowing women to emulate celebrities through non-surgical beauty enhancements, such as lip fillers, or by adopting hairstyles, makeup, and nail designs that resemble those of famous actresses.

A newly married woman shared her attempts to please her husband by regularly visiting the hammam. She said, *"He asked me to go to the hammam frequently so I could feel more feminine. I feel like he treats me as an object that needs constant beautification to keep him interested."* Despite her frustration, discussing these feelings with other women in the hammam provided her with some relief, as they shared similar experiences and strategies for handling such expectations.

Some women also spoke about ʻurfi (customary) marriage[17] as one of the "sensitive topics" revealed in these spaces. One interviewee (L.N.) said, "*I got married ʻurfi without my family's knowledge, and I cannot talk to anyone about it except in the hammam. The hammam is the only place where I feel I can be honest without fear of judgment."* She found empathy among other women—some had similar experiences, while others, even if they had not, were at least willing to listen without harsh judgment.

Through fieldwork observations, it became evident that ʻurfi marriage is highly prevalent in the narratives of women from Cairo, Alexandria, and Sharqia. This practice was particularly noticeable among women from the middle and lower classes, as they were more willing to disclose their experiences. However, women from the upper class tended to conceal such matters due to the social stigma associated with them. Interestingly, beauty salon and hammam workers from elite circles confirmed that ʻurfi marriage is also widespread among affluent women, but it is rarely discussed openly. Instead, it is only shared discreetly among women of the same social status and with trusted workers inside these private spaces.

Conversely, in Assiut and North Sinai, no women—regardless of social class—openly admitted to engaging in ʻurfi marriage. This reluctance appears to stem from the deeply conservative and

[17] . According to Al-Azhar, *ʻurfi* marriage is defined as an incomplete marriage contract, named as such because it is not officially registered in court, rendering it religiously invalid. This type of marriage often resembles a secret marriage, as it is conducted without public announcement, without the presence of the bride's guardian (*wali*), or without two just witnesses—conditions that are essential for the validity of a marriage contract under Islamic law. Due to these deficiencies, Al-Azhar considers this form of marriage a source of legal and social complications, particularly when one party seeks to deny the contract and renounce the marital relationship.
Many individuals resort to *ʻurfi* marriage to bypass legal restrictions, such as age limitations for marriage registration or the requirement of a guardian's approval in certain cases. Economic and legal factors also drive some people toward this form of marriage, including the high costs of formal marriage, attempts to circumvent restrictions on second marriages, or avoidance of divorce and alimony obligations. However, the absence of official documentation creates complex legal issues, particularly concerning the wife's rights and the establishment of paternity, making *ʻurfi* marriage a frequent source of disputes and litigation in courts. (Al-Azhar, 2024)

patriarchal environment that governs these regions. In these areas, the repercussions of engaging in ‘urfi marriage could be severe and even deadly, as such acts, if exposed outside the confines of beauty salons and hammams, could lead to honor-based violence, including the killing of women involved. Beauty salon and hammam workers in these regions denied any knowledge of such cases, yet their visible tension, cautious glances, and lowered voices suggested an underlying awareness of its existence. Their nervous demeanor when answering questions indicated that ‘urfi marriage likely occurs in these areas as well, but extreme discretion is necessary to ensure the safety of the women involved.

For women who turn to hammams to talk about ‘urfi (customary) marriage, these spaces play a vital role in enabling them to express their experiences without fear of judgment. ‘Urfi marriage represents a violation of traditional social norms, particularly religious ones, as it is often considered illicit under Islamic law. It is usually treated as a "secret" that must be hidden. However, in the hammam or beauty salon, this secret becomes an open topic of discussion, creating a space of acceptance and understanding while breaking the societal taboo surrounding it. This experience fosters a sense of psychological and social liberation among women, enhancing their self-confidence and contributing to the construction of a more independent female identity.

However, a young unmarried woman (R.) expressed a completely different perspective on these spaces. She said, “*I don’t feel any concern about marriage or relationships right now. I go to the hammam or beauty salon to enjoy my time, chat with my friends, and release negative energy.”* For her, these spaces are less about confronting crises and more about relaxation and restoring emotional balance. She added, “*I feel whole and complete—I lack nothing. Just being here makes me feel comfortable and satisfied with myself.”*

Another woman (Y.) spoke about her desire to visit the hammam or beauty salon to display her body to other women—not out of vanity but to boost her self-confidence. She said, "*Sometimes I deliberately wear new clothes or try a different look and present myself to the women here to hear positive comments. These compliments boost my confidence and make me feel beautiful."*

These narratives reflect the complex nature of hammams and beauty salons as gendered spaces. These spaces serve as tools for self-expression, social and everyday resistance, and negotiation with the patriarchal structures that shape women's lives in traditional Egyptian contexts. When women discuss marital concerns—such as fears of a second wife or the pressure to maintain a particular appearance—they are not only voicing their worries but also engaging in a form of feminist everyday resistance. These spaces provide women with an opportunity to redefine their experiences beyond the male gaze. By sharing their stories with others, women reframe these issues as broader social concerns affecting women collectively, fostering a shared awareness of the practices that constrain their roles in society.

The pressure on women to enhance their appearance—*"so that the husband does not look elsewhere" or "to look like actresses"*—illustrates how the female body is used as a tool of social control. These pressures deepen women's feelings of anxiety and insecurity. However, hammams and beauty salons offer them a chance to speak openly about these issues. This openness is, in itself, a form of resistance, as women refuse to remain silent or fully conform to societal expectations. Instead, they use these spaces to reconstruct their identities through dialogue and discussion with other women.

Some young unmarried women expressed a different perception of these spaces, particularly regarding marriage. They use them as sites for psychological release and enjoyment, detached from the burdens of marriage or relationships. This shift in how hammams and beauty salons are

used points to an ongoing social transformation, where these spaces serve multiple purposes—not only as places for crisis resolution but also as sites of empowerment, independence, and social liberation from traditional expectations of women's roles regarding marriage.

When women talk about displaying their bodies or wearing new clothes in these spaces to receive positive feedback, they are engaging in a process of redefining beauty on their own terms rather than conforming to societal or male-imposed standards. In these spaces, the body becomes a means of self-expression rather than a mere object of control. This dynamic reflects a shift in how women perceive their bodily identities and seek affirmation from other women.

The mechanisms of female and feminist solidarity within these spaces allow women to feel complete and satisfied with themselves, strengthening their confidence in their ability to face challenges. This temporary sense of wholeness is part of the solidarity and everyday resistance fostered within these safe environments. In this context, I adopt the concept of everyday resistance, which refers to a form of indirect resistance used by marginalized individuals and groups to challenge oppressive systems without direct confrontation or open conflict. This is done through subtle tactics such as evasion, mockery, and feigned compliance, allowing individuals to resist authority without engaging in explicit defiance (Scott, 1985).

Similarly, the concept of feminist everyday resistance recognizes that women do not need to participate in formal political protests to be considered resistors; rather, they resist by redefining themselves, building solidarity networks, and challenging societal norms from within their daily lives. Thus, redefining female self-identity and shaping women's experiences emerges as one of the most critical tools of everyday resistance, particularly for marginalized women. In patriarchal societies, women are forced to conform to rigid gender norms that measure their value through appearance, obedience, and traditional family roles. However, they resist these expectations in

various ways, such as challenging imposed stereotypes and presenting themselves on their own terms, independent of male-centered expectations (Hooks, 1984), as evidenced by the respondents' experiences. Moreover, informal female relationships serve as a mechanism for everyday resistance, where women create support networks to help each other navigate social and economic pressures, as seen in beauty salons and hammams. The exchange of psychological support and advice in these spaces can be considered a form of women's knowledge-sharing, enabling them to develop context-specific resistance strategies while also recognizing the oppression they face (Hooks, 1994).

4.2.4 Emotional Support and Complex Problem-Solving:

Providing psychological comfort is at the core of these spaces, where the hammam or beauty salon becomes a refuge where women can express their emotions without fear of judgment. Words of reassurance such as *"Don't worry," "It's going to be okay,"* and *"I am here for you"* are commonly exchanged in these settings, as reported by interviewees from Cairo, Alexandria, Sharqia, Assiut, and North Sinai. These simple phrases convey empathy and understanding, reassuring women that they are not alone in facing their struggles. Women also share their personal experiences in a way that resembles confession, with phrases like *"I was like you"* affirming that a woman's struggles are not unique or isolated. This exchange creates a sense of deep emotional connection, where opening up about one's emotions becomes an opportunity to build relationships based on mutual understanding and support.

Additionally, both visitors and workers in beauty salons and hammams shared that they have witnessed many women crying upon entering these spaces, highlighting the depth of emotional distress carried by the women who come to them. In response, other women express solidarity

through comforting phrases such as *"It's okay," "Instead of crying, you'll be okay,"* or *"Everything will get better, leave it to God."* Women also exchange hugs—either among themselves or between customers and workers—as an additional means of expressing repressed emotions. Often, embracing serves as a way to alleviate pain or anxiety, with physical touch becoming a form of feminist solidarity. Sharing these emotions in a safe and reassuring environment creates a space for psychological healing, where a woman feels surrounded by unconditional support and care.

These interactions among women in beauty salons and hammams can be understood through the concept of "*emotional solidarity*", a form of feminist solidarity that goes beyond political or economic support to include the exchange of emotions and psychological care, reinforcing a shared sense of belonging. Emotion is not merely an individual experience; it is a social tool that redistributes power among women in their resistance to patriarchal oppression (Fraser, 1997).

In these spaces, the sharing of emotions such as sadness, anxiety, and isolation becomes a means of forging collective bonds. The expression of shared pain does not merely generate sympathy but transforms individual experiences into a communal one—one that reproduces feminist and women's knowledge through the mutual recognition of common struggles. This recognition enables women to resist the isolation imposed by the patriarchal system, fostering solidarity that is both affective and transformative.

When women express their sense of helplessness with phrases like *"I don't know what to do on my own, and there's no one beside me who understands me,"* these admissions act as an implicit call for support. Through such statements, women encourage others to offer assistance—whether in the form of practical advice, a solution to their problem, or simply emotional reassurance. These

spaces transform into micro-communities where women share their experiences, fostering a form of collective healing.

During fieldwork in lower-middle and working-class areas of Cairo, numerous narratives emerged from beauty salon workers about issues such as virginity restoration and social pressures related to honor. In these neighborhoods, beauty salons are not merely places for physical beautification but serve as intimate spaces where women share their life experiences and deep emotions, particularly those tied to stringent societal constraints surrounding honor within the Egyptian context.

One woman (Z.) recounted a story about her friend, who faced intense family pressure after losing her virginity outside of marriage. She turned to the beauty salon as a refuge to seek advice and express her distress, where salon workers and other customers listened to her without judgment. In this empathetic environment, various solutions were openly discussed, including medical interventions, guidance on secret clinics that perform virginity restoration procedures, and specific pharmacies that discreetly sell such treatments. Others suggested quick marriage as a way to "save face" in the eyes of society.

Similarly, a beauty salon worker (H.M.) in a popular neighborhood in Alexandria shared the story of a woman who was under severe pressure from her family, especially her husband, who suspected her of having an affair. She sought refuge in the salon to talk about her fears of scandal, She is in an emotional \ sexual relationship with another man, whom she refers to as her "ashiqi\ affair partner", and her husband's suspicions. In these informal sessions, women exchanged advice on how to handle such accusations, sharing similar personal stories or cases they had heard about. The discussions revolved around strategies to prove one's "innocence" and included practical suggestions such as checking and deleting messages and photos from social media accounts and

phones to prevent misunderstandings. Notably, the women did not focus on whether this woman was actually in a relationship with another man but instead prioritized offering her emotional and practical support to navigate the situation within the constraints of societal expectations.

At times, some women expressed frustration over having to resort to such solutions due to the double standards of honor, which place the entire burden of preserving family reputation on women alone. One interviewee (L.) stated, *"I feel imprisoned in my own body and life because of the laws society imposes on us."*

Thus, many women view these spaces as places to address their most difficult problems, particularly those exposing them to severe social constraints, religious and legal restrictions, or even life-threatening consequences—such as honor crimes. These crimes, often carried out by family members against women perceived as having violated social norms, include murder as a means of "cleansing" the family's reputation[18]. In this harsh reality, beauty salons and hammams offer one of the few safe spaces where women can seek emotional relief, practical advice, and support from one another. These spaces do not eliminate the risks women face, but they serve as temporary sanctuaries where they can discuss their fears and strategize survival mechanisms, often within an environment that understands their struggles rather than condemns them.

[18] . A 2021 study by the National Center for Social and Criminal Research revealed that most family-related homicides in Egypt fall under the category of "honor crimes." These crimes are committed by husbands, fathers, or brothers out of perceived jealousy or the need to restore family honor. The report indicated that 70% of honor crimes were committed by husbands against their wives, 20% were carried out by brothers against their sisters, 7% were committed by fathers against their daughters, and 3% were committed by sons against their mothers. The study further estimated that between 900 to 2,000 honor crimes are committed annually in Egypt (Al-Shorouk, 2021).

4.2.5 Beauty Workers as Anchors of Solidarity and Women's Self-Expression:

It is also important to examine how the workers in these spaces deal with these various issues, especially in beauty salons, as observed through my fieldwork. The workers possess unique qualities that make their presence a central aspect of the lives of the women who frequent these spaces. Unlike hammams, where the worker's role is limited to providing a service for a short period, beauty salon workers become a continuous part of their clients' lives, reinforcing their role in offering psychological and social support to women.

For example, Manal S. from Alexandria opened her beauty salon with the aim of changing stereotypical perceptions of women's bodies. She believed that beauty treatments could serve as a non-surgical tool for restoring women's confidence in themselves and enhancing their sense of self-satisfaction. During our interview, she was busy fitting a wig and said, *"I can't talk to you without working,"* reflecting her deep focus on her craft while also demonstrating her skills in conversation and self-expression, just as women turn to her to express themselves. She also stated, *"I believe in improving women's self-image through my work, and my salon is open to all women from all social classes to share their different problems. I do my best to help solve these issues as if they were my own."*

As for Gigi from Alexandria, she emphasized, while looking into the mirror throughout the interview, her mission to change the lives of her clients for the better. She sought to present an honorable image of Alexandrian women, especially in comparison to women in Cairo. She expressed her desire to challenge the stereotype that Alexandrian women are less conservative and more open than those in Cairo. She saw herself as religious and believed that working in a beauty salon reflected her strong sense of belonging and pride in her local identity, as well as her

responsibility toward her clients in solving their various problems. She described herself as a *"social worker,"* explaining that she had developed this skill due to the many clients she encountered who shared diverse stories, allowing them to help one another solve their issues.

Manal and Amgad from Cairo found companionship and mutual support in their work, despite the repeated challenges they faced due to their move from Upper Egypt to work in the capital. They saw working in Cairo as an open opportunity to earn a living and operate more freely among women. Amgad, who described herself as introverted and quiet, explained that despite her personality, she was forced to engage in continuous conversations with clients and help resolve their problems. She stated clearly, *"I have to talk and solve all the problems,"* illustrating how her social and psychological skills developed through the nature of her work.

Duaa from Sharqia expressed the deep psychological role she plays by saying, *"I am a psychologist, and even better."* She explained that her work requires continuous psychological support for the women who frequent these spaces, believing that women's beauty is linked to the healing of their emotional wounds. She saw her role as going beyond beauty treatments to providing constant comfort and support for women, reflecting a profound sense of empathy and responsibility. Shaimaa from Upper Egypt also echoed this sentiment, highlighting her role in offering continuous emotional support and listening to women.

Through these examples, it is evident that beauty salon workers do not merely provide cosmetic services; they play a fundamental role in supporting women psychologically and socially, creating free and safe spaces for those who visit these establishments. They serve as intermediaries of solidarity among women and act as channels for expressing emotions and alleviating social pressures, reinforcing women's sense of confidence and empowerment within these spaces. Additionally, their self-expression and belief in changing the stereotypes attached to different

geographical areas, as well as their pursuit of greater opportunities in major cities like Cairo and Alexandria or regional centers like Sharqia, reflect the effects of modernization in Egypt since the 1970s and the transformation of Cairo and Alexandria into lands of opportunity (Zinkina & Korotayev, 2013). They also demonstrate their commitment to improving the lives of the women who visit these salons.

Personal narratives are another factor that strengthens the construction of femininity and womanhood within these spaces for both clients and workers. The exchange of multiple stories about marriage, divorce, marital issues, and motherhood provides women with the opportunity to reshape their experiences from an independent feminist perspective—whether among themselves or through interactions with salon workers. These narratives redefine womanhood through women's voices and lived experiences, allowing them to temporarily break free from imposed roles and recognize their experiences as part of a collective feminine identity.

During my fieldwork, I observed that workers in beauty salons and hammams frequently ask customers, especially those from middle and lower-income backgrounds, about their financial situation. This reflects complex economic and social dynamics linked to financial status and its impact on a woman's confidence and self-image. While this behavior may initially seem like a way to determine the range of services a client can afford, at a deeper level, it reveals a form of understanding and flexibility that characterizes these women-centered spaces. Workers use phrases such as *"This amount is enough," "That's excellent for achieving the latest trends for you,"* or *"You will be transformed and won't even recognize yourself,"* which reinforce a sense of possibility and change regardless of financial constraints.

Workers in these spaces do not merely provide beauty services; they play an empowering role by offering clients spaces for personal transformation. Even in cases of limited financial resources,

one form of support is providing services that align with a customer's budget without compromising the quality of the experience. Through this, workers contribute to enhancing a woman's sense of self-worth, independent of the purchasing power imposed by capitalist structures on individuals.

The feeling that one can undergo a transformation for the better, even without substantial financial means, reflects the strength of the social and symbolic rituals embedded in these spaces. The beauty salon or hammam becomes a platform for challenging the notion that beauty and relaxation are privileges reserved only for wealthy women. Many workers in these spaces come from similar socio-economic backgrounds as their clients, creating a sense of empathy and mutual recognition of the constraints imposed by economic conditions.

Conversations about money are not solely about maximizing profit; they also reflect a form of feminist solidarity. Workers may demonstrate flexibility in pricing or offer advice on how to maximize the benefits of their services within a limited budget. In some cases, the support extends beyond financial considerations to include emotional encouragement, with affirmations of both inner and outer beauty, regardless of material resources.

Thus, these spaces play a crucial role in supporting and standing in solidarity with women as they navigate daily struggles with class disparities and societal pressures. In this context, they also redefine the concept of beauty—not just as a material luxury linked to the commodification of the body but as a collective feminist right to reclaim confidence and self-empowerment, regardless of financial means.

4.3 Temporary Body Liberation Between Practice and Sensation:

"Finally, I took it off. I can see my body now. I leave everything at this door, as if it were a boundary separating my life," said the interviewee (K.S.).

When I was conducting an interview with a respondent inside a beauty salon serving the middle and lower-income classes in Alexandria, she took off her hijab and abaya at the entrance. When I asked her why she did that, she told me this statement and explained, "I leave my life behind," meaning that she takes a break and a pause from the problems she faces in both the public and private spheres when she enters the salon to take care of her body. She told me, "I will take off even more and be as my mother gave birth to me," referring to removing all her clothes to do sugaring \ sweet (full-body hair removal).

The concept of temporary bodily liberation takes on different dimensions in hammams and beauty salons, where it intertwines with both practice and emotion. These spaces become unique sites for bodily expression in diverse ways that vary across cultures and social classes, depending on the moments in which women frequent them. However, this liberation remains temporary, tied to the act of entering these spaces, where women feel they can engage with their bodies in ways that allow them to experience femininity and construct womanhood beyond both public and private domains.

4.3.1 Unveiling as Emotional Release and Bodily Autonomy:

In hammams, this liberation is manifested through varying practices of undressing depending on the social context. Some hammams allow women to remain in their undergarments, providing them with a sense of privacy and psychological comfort. This form of liberation is more common in

hammams catering to middle- and lower-class women, where boundaries shaped by patriarchal cultural values and personal modesty are respected. Additionally, in many hammams in Sharqia, Assiut, and North Sinai, services are offered within a woman's private home, where female clients seek treatments such as body cleansing, whitening through the so-called "Moroccan bath," and hair removal, as well as relaxation rituals. Women who frequent these home-based hammams perceive them as *"safer and more comfortable"* for maintaining their reputation, believing that such spaces demand a high level of privacy and that it is preferable to visit a private home for these rituals.

In contrast, in hammams located in wealthier or middle-class areas, particularly in Cairo and Alexandria, these practices take on a different character. Here, full undressing is the norm, with designated private rooms allowing women to disrobe individually and enjoy these services in solitude. In these settings, complete nudity is considered an integral part of the deep cleansing experience for both the body and spirit, allowing women to shed social constraints tied to their bodies, creating a sense of freedom within this micro-community.

In beauty salons, the concept of liberation manifests in a different way, as women reveal parts of their bodies that are subject to societal scrutiny in both public and private spheres. The act of uncovering one's hair and removing the hijab[19] within the confines of a salon is a clear expression of female liberation in a women-only space. Here, women feel they can exist freely, unburdened by societal judgments or the intrusive male gaze. This sense of liberation was especially emphasized by women I interviewed in North Sinai, where every woman over the age of 18 wears

[19] . Particularly significant given that between 90-95% of Muslim women in Egypt wear the hijab (Slackman, 2007)—or the niqab—worn by approximately 17% of Egypt's 46 million women (Dzuhayatin, 2020).

either the hijab or niqab, making beauty salons one of the only places where they can remove them without scrutiny.

Hair removal practices further illustrate varying levels of bodily exposure among women. Some prefer to keep certain areas covered—referred to in these spaces as the *"bikini area"* or *"sensitive areas"* (including the underarms, genital region, and buttocks)—when undergoing hair removal, preserving their sense of privacy. Others, however, choose to undergo complete body hair removal without covering any areas, seeing this as an explicit expression of their liberation from bodily restrictions and a way of reclaiming autonomy over what they choose to reveal or conceal. Women have explicitly expressed this to me, as they see themselves as imprisoned within the clothing imposed on them—whether the hijab or the niqab—by their father, brother, husband, or even son. The moment they uncover these areas of their bodies, they feel as if they can see themselves again, shaping their sense of femininity within these spaces.

However, this act can also be seen as influenced by patriarchal standards imposed on women's bodies, particularly in the expectation of complete hair removal. This process subjects them to the pain of hair removal—whether through sugaring (sweet) or waxing (wax)—which can be so intense that it leads to screaming. The pain often lasts for an entire day, prompting some women to apply moisturizing creams to soothe the discomfort. Additionally, there is a financial burden associated with this practice. The cost of full-body hair removal is approximately 3,500 Egyptian pounds, while partial removal costs 2 thousand Egyptian pounds, making it a significant expense. The process is also time-consuming, often taking around an hour or more, depending on the density of body hair.

Storytelling within these spaces plays a crucial role in reinforcing this temporary bodily liberation. Women share personal experiences about overcoming social restrictions on their bodies, fostering

an environment of empathy and mutual support. They exchange affirmations such as *"Don't be afraid," "You are beautiful as you are,"* and *"Don't worry about excess hair in sensitive areas; I'll remove it, and you'll look more beautiful and confident."* These expressions enhance women's psychological comfort, making hammams and beauty salons spaces for both physical and emotional liberation, away from the rigid societal gaze. Even when women conform to norms such as mandatory body hair removal, they do so with a personal conviction that it is part of personal hygiene and aligned with Islamic and Christian teachings that emphasize bodily cleanliness. At the same time, they conform to patriarchal beauty standards imposed on their bodies. However, the act of undressing, seeing their bodies in these spaces, and exchanging solidarity-based phrases gives them a fleeting sense of "being good enough and temporarily liberated"—away from both the public and private spheres to which they belong.

4.3.2 The Emotional and Bodily Politics of Women:

Women's feelings in hammams and beauty salons vary significantly depending on their experiences and how frequently they visit these spaces. Initially, during their first visit or experience, women often feel fear or anxiety due to their unfamiliarity with what will happen or concerns about being judged by other women. This was reported by ten interviewees who described their first time entering these spaces and revealing parts of their bodies, which have long been controlled by patriarchal norms through clothing and Islamic dress codes. This anxiety can be heightened when they are required to remove certain garments or expose parts of their bodies, leading to feelings of discomfort and fear of scrutiny or comments, similar to what they experience in both private and public spaces.

Over time, this fear gradually transforms into a sense of comfort. The enclosed, women-only environment within these spaces allows them to free themselves from the anxiety associated with the male gaze. The hammam or beauty salon becomes a place associated with personal hygiene and self-care, reinforcing a sense of physical and psychological ease.

Religion intersects with these experiences in various ways. Some women link religious teachings to the services provided, perceiving practices such as eyebrow grooming or exposing sensitive areas as *"forbidden"*, leading to feelings of guilt or internal conflict. However, other women focus on the psychological and practical benefits of these services, viewing them as a means to enhance their self-confidence regardless of religious interpretations. Non-surgical beauty procedures offered in beauty salons, such as eyelash extensions, wigs, semi-permanent makeup, lip and cheek fillers, or eyebrow tattooing, are perceived as ways to restore self-confidence without resorting to surgical interventions or the need for frequent salon visits.

In terms of safe spaces, both workers and clients frequently highlighted how hammams and beauty salons provide an environment where women can freely smoke cigarettes or shisha without fear of criticism or social surveillance. This form of liberation allows them to express themselves beyond the constraints of traditional societal norms.

All these narratives illustrate that hammams and beauty salons function as sites of everyday resistance for women in the Egyptian context, where bodily liberation is enacted both through physical practices—such as removing the hijab, niqab, or clothing—and through the *feeling* of liberation itself. These spaces challenge gender roles and societal restrictions on women's bodies. This resistance is not necessarily direct or overt but is embedded in the everyday actions women perform within these spaces, as they renegotiate bodily exposure, privacy, and femininity beyond male control.

Within hammams, the gradual undressing process and the removal of physical barriers between women become an implicit form of resistance against notions of shame and modesty that have been ingrained in them since childhood. The decision of some women to keep their undergarments on while others choose full nudity represents an ongoing negotiation over the meaning of bodily liberation in a society that strictly regulates women's bodies. In the Egyptian context, where a woman's body and attire are often seen as a reflection of family honor, the existence of spaces such as hammams—where women can control how much of their bodies they expose and temporarily free themselves from clothing—constitutes an opportunity for agency beyond male judgment. In rural areas, Upper Egypt, and North Sinai, women's preference for home-based hammams instead of public ones is not merely an individual choice but reflects an adaptation to societal surveillance, demonstrating that resistance is not always about confrontation but can also manifest through redirecting practices in ways that align with specific social contexts.

In beauty salons, removing the hijab or niqab within a women-only space is not just a routine action but carries deeper meanings regarding women's ownership of their bodies. In Egypt, where the hijab is a fundamental aspect of religious and social identity, the moments when women uncover their hair in front of one another reshape their relationship with their bodies, away from male scrutiny. This seemingly simple act signifies a form of freedom that is not available to them in public spaces. Even body hair removal, which may appear to be a mere beauty practice, can be interpreted as a way for women to redefine femininity on their own terms—whether by rejecting full hair removal or adopting grooming practices that give them a sense of control over their appearance.

Moreover, these spaces provide women with an increased sense of confidence in their outward appearance. Engaging in the latest relaxation treatments in hammams or adopting the newest

fashion trends in beauty salons strengthens their feeling of being modern and in control of their bodies, allowing them to access these services without external oversight. Positive feedback from other women reassures them that they have become more beautiful or attractive, reinforcing their social confidence and enhancing their self-satisfaction. Ultimately, these spaces create a network of psychological and social support that helps women overcome insecurities and strengthens their sense of empowerment and bodily autonomy.

Experiences in hammams and beauty salons contribute to the construction of femininity and womanhood through bodily interactions and the lived experience of being female. The gradual removal of clothing in hammams or the unveiling of hair in beauty salons reflects women's ability to reclaim control over their bodies. These practices provide a space for women to see themselves outside the boundaries of societal and patriarchal surveillance, deepening their awareness of their bodies as integral to their female identity.

Personal hygiene and attention to physical appearance are central elements in shaping the modern societal concept of femininity for Egyptian women. The emphasis on cleanliness and beauty in these spaces is not merely viewed as a social obligation but becomes a cultural practice that embodies the idealized notion of femininity and womanhood. These practices are associated with health, hygiene, and moral behavior, reinforcing the social role of femininity as synonymous with refinement and respectability. These practices are closely linked to health, hygiene, and moral behavior, reinforcing the social role of femininity as synonymous with elegance and respectability—qualities expected by society from the "*ideal woman"* in her appearance. A well-groomed and modest outfit, along with a hair-free body, is perceived not only as a sign of femininity but also as an indicator of modernity and social class status, positioning a woman for higher social recognition (Russell, 2010).

These spaces also serve as nurturing environments for boosting self-confidence and fostering a positive self-image. The services provided in hammams and beauty salons contribute to shaping a sense of femininity based on self-acceptance and personal comfort. Non-surgical cosmetic procedures, such as hair extensions, makeup application, or facial fillers, offer another means for women to redefine their femininity according to their personal desires. These practices allow women to alter their appearance in ways that align with their aspirations for their bodies, helping them regain confidence in their external image and reinforcing their sense of empowerment.

Ultimately, hammams and beauty salons function as social spaces that reinforce femininity and womanhood beyond traditional perceptions. Through conversations, mutual psychological support, or even smoking cigarettes or shisha within these spaces, the concept of womanhood is reshaped as a dynamic identity. These experiences reveal that femininity and womanhood are not a fixed or monolithic state but rather a constantly evolving construct, reaffirmed and expanded through women's daily interactions and shared experiences in resisting the constraints imposed on them in both public and private spheres.

4.3.3 Feeling the Body Again Between Fatigue and Sensory Reconnection:

One woman (T.) spoke about the constant physical exhaustion she faced due to her household responsibilities, as she bore the burden of cleaning the house, caring for her three children, and looking after her ailing mother-in-law. *"When I enter the public hammam, I feel like I leave everything behind. The hot water melts the pain from my back and shoulders, and I feel like my body regains its freedom, even if just for a while."* These brief moments of relaxation gave her the strength to carry on with her day without losing her temper or breaking down from exhaustion.

Another woman (Y.M.) described the psychological and physical toll of sexual relations with her husband. *"In the hammam, I feel like I own my body again. No one is asking for anything, and no one is waiting for me to provide a service. This is my space, and here I can breathe freely."* These moments highlighted women's need to reclaim control over their bodies, particularly in the context of traditional roles that demand they constantly cater to their families' needs.

In beauty salons, a woman (M.N.) spoke about the exhaustion from working long hours without adequate breaks. *"When I sit down to wash my hair, I feel lighter. I let the shampoo rinse away with the water as if it's washing off all the dust and fatigue from my body."* This simple act of self-care was not merely a luxury but a form of physical and psychological liberation from daily burdens. Similarly, another working woman (D.A.) noted that visiting the beauty salon was her only escape from the monotony of work. *"When I see myself in the mirror afterward, I feel like a new person. I wear my made-up face like armor, shielding myself from the exhaustion I face daily."* This simple experience gave her a sense of confidence, and the new look reflected her inner ambition and a physical liberation from the constraints of work.

A housewife (Y.S.) from a village in Sharqia spoke about the constant exhaustion of raising five children without sufficient support. *"When I go to the hammam, I cry freely and feel like the water washes away my tears and pain. Then I leave, and the weight feels a little lighter."* This personal ritual served as a form of cleansing for both her body and soul from the overwhelming pressures of daily life.

Speaking about her mother-in-law, with whom she lived, she said, *"Taking care of her is exhausting, especially since I don't have any time for myself."* However, she found solace in the hammam, where she could relax without guilt or the obligation to meet others' demands. *"The hour I spend here is the only time I feel like I can breathe."*

These stories illustrate the therapeutic and liberating role of these spaces in helping women relieve the physical and emotional stress associated with unpaid domestic labor or paid employment. Whether through expressing their emotions or reclaiming their bodies from the constant demands of others, these spaces provide a starting point for rebuilding the self and experiencing a sense of bodily freedom and independence.

Hammams and beauty salons serve as everyday sites of resistance and as sanctuaries for escaping the gendered burdens imposed on women, whether domestic, social, or economic. Women who speak about the physical exhaustion caused by unpaid domestic labor—such as housework, childcare, and family care—express a continuous sense of depletion, as do those engaged in wage labor and economic survival. Visiting hammams or beauty salons offers them an opportunity to step away from these responsibilities, shedding social and religious constraints on their bodies through undressing or engaging in personal care rituals that restore their sense of cleanliness and bodily control.

The narratives exchanged in these spaces add another dimension to this resistance, as hammams and beauty salons become sites for producing invisible forms of women's knowledge. By sharing experiences about marriage, childbirth, and social expectations, these conversations provide an alternative to dominant male-centered discourses on femininity and the female body. In a society that prescribes rigid roles for women, simply discussing exhaustion—both emotional and physical—is an act of resistance, as it acknowledges the weight of both unpaid domestic labor and paid work. When women express that the hammam is *"the only space where they can breathe,"* they reveal the severity of the gendered roles imposed upon them and reframe rest as a right rather than a privilege.

Even smoking in these spaces can be interpreted as a form of everyday resistance, as women smoking in public remains a social taboo in Egypt. Within hammams and beauty salons, women find a rare opportunity to engage in this act without societal scrutiny, demonstrating how private spaces can be used to challenge prohibitions imposed on women in both public and private domains.

4.4 Sexual Knowledge in These Spaces:

Sexual knowledge is commonly exchanged in Egyptian social events such as weddings and Islamic and Christian holidays, including New Year's celebrations, where visiting beauty salons and hammams is considered an essential ritual for preparing for and celebrating these occasions. As a result, discussions about sexuality often emerge within these spaces. In these women-only environments, such as beauty salons and hammams, sexual knowledge is informally shared as an alternative to the lack of sex education in traditional educational institutions. For many women, these spaces serve as refuges for acquiring the information that schools, universities, or families were expected to provide but failed to do so due to patriarchal cultural and social taboos that frame discussions on these topics as forbidden (Bader, 2020).

4.4.1 Premarital Sex Education:

Many women openly discuss their initial sexual experiences across all the governorates I visited, particularly regarding the wedding night, which is often filled with fear and anxiety due to a lack of prior knowledge. Common questions include *"What should the husband do on the wedding night?"* Older women frequently provide advice based on their personal experiences or stories they have heard, as well as guidance from workers in hammams and beauty salons. These

recommendations include instructions on how to behave, how to set the right atmosphere at home for the husband to engage in sexual relations, such as being gentle and accommodating toward him, hiding any personal troubles from him, and ensuring a peaceful environment in the household. Women also discuss strategies for managing the psychological and physical anxieties of the bride regarding this topic.

Advice on how to sexually arouse a husband is also discussed openly in these spaces, covering suggestions about seductive clothing, body movements, alluring gestures, and the use of makeup to enhance attractiveness. There is also a strong emphasis on full-body hair removal, which is perceived as a ritual associated with cleanliness and sexual desirability. Some advice, however, takes a more problematic turn, promoting the idea of absolute obedience to the husband's sexual desires, even if these desires are considered religiously or personally objectionable by some women, such as engaging in certain sexual positions, including oral or anal sex.

These spaces also sometimes serve as venues for showcasing lingerie or recommending the best shops to purchase intimate wear. Women who visit beauty salons or hammams before major events, such as weddings or holidays, receive special attention from workers, who often provide guidance on enhancing their appeal and desirability.

Advice is also offered regarding food and home atmosphere, including preparing specific meals believed to enhance male sexual performance and creating a relaxing and intimate home setting. Statements such as *"We are pampering you today because you'll have an intimate night with your husband"* are shared in a spirit of female solidarity and support, where beauty salon and hammam workers become partners in preparing women for these intimate moments.

The exchange of sexual knowledge in hammams and beauty salons reflects practices of female solidarity that aim to bridge the knowledge gap caused by societal restrictions. These practices also highlight how women create alternative educational spaces that support their experiences and alleviate the anxiety associated with societal expectations surrounding sex and marriage.

4.4.2 Hymen Rupture and Localized Defloration Ceremony:

In some rural and impoverished areas of Egypt, particularly in Sharqia, the traditional *dakhla baladi* (localized defloration)[20] ritual is performed in female-centered spaces such as hammams or beauty salons. This practice involves experienced women assisting the bride in a process viewed as a confirmation of her virginity and a source of family pride. These spaces are considered safe for the bride, as she is surrounded by a supportive female community that includes mothers, relatives, friends, and workers from the beauty salon or hammam. These women provide guidance and instructions to ensure the successful execution of the ritual, which aligns with traditional societal expectations linking a bride's virginity to family honor.

This practice reveals the social pressures exerted on women to uphold the notion of virginity as a marker of honor. While these rituals reinforce patriarchal control and societal expectations over women's bodies, the women-only spaces in which they occur offer a certain level of psychological and emotional support, as expressed by both interviewees and beauty salon workers. Older women

[20] . "*Dakhla Baladi"* (Traditional Defloration), "Honor Handkerchief," or "The Mark" is the name of a custom practiced in some Arab and Muslim countries, including Egypt, associated with the wedding night (*Leilat El-Dokhla*). In this practice, instead of penile penetration, the groom, a female relative, or a midwife manually ruptures the bride's hymen using a finger wrapped in a white handkerchief. Some families do not settle for merely seeing the stained handkerchief but insist on witnessing the act of hymen rupture themselves. Representatives from both families—often the groom's mother and sister—may be present, and in some cases, one of them may perform the defloration herself. The groom or the witnesses then present the handkerchief, now stained with blood, and raise it before the assembled guests, prompting *ululations* (*zaghareet*). In this context, the bloodstains on the handkerchief serve as proof of the woman's honor (Raseef22, 2020, February 4).

who assist in the process offer reassuring phrases such as *"It's a simple matter; I've done it for all the girls in the village,"* demonstrating a form of female solidarity within the constraints of cultural norms. Some women even described this practice as *"a better alternative when performed by women for the bride, rather than enduring the harsh experience of the husband forcefully breaking the hymen with his finger or another object and then displaying the evidence to the village to prove the bride's honor."*

4.4.3 The Pursuit of Sexual Pleasure:

Beauty salons and hammams also serve as spaces where women freely exchange their sexual experiences, including discussions about female sexual pleasure as something natural, permissible, and necessary to talk about. Women begin to learn that sexual pleasure is not an exclusive right for men, as traditionally promoted by patriarchal culture.

Women, especially those who have not received formal sex education or guidance from their mothers, share their first experiences with their husbands and their discoveries regarding sexual pleasure. In some cases, these conversations are the first time a woman realizes that she has the right to seek and experience pleasure with her partner. One interviewee (Sh.) stated, *"After seven years of marriage, I had no idea what an orgasm meant. I thought it was a privilege God had created solely for men. By coincidence, I was at a beauty salon one day, and a woman sitting next to me, waiting for her turn, asked me why I looked unhappy. I told her about my experience in my marriage, how I constantly felt violated, and how I had no emotional connection to sex. She explained to me that I was supposed to feel pleasure. When I asked the salon worker, she confirmed the same thing."*

These conversations are also used to share knowledge about sensitive areas, which was named to me as sexually stimulating foreplay before penetration, such as touching and caressing one's breasts, vaginal stimulation with a finger, or masturbation, that stimulate pleasure and how to communicate with one's husband to achieve a satisfying sexual experience for both partners. A 49-year-old woman (S.F.) recounted that she only became aware of these aspects five years ago after visiting a hammam, where she engaged in a discussion about sexuality with other women.

Sexual knowledge is exchanged through conversations among women, as they feel comfortable sharing their personal—especially sexual—stories with one another. These are stories often considered taboo, and many of the women I interviewed expressed fear of speaking about them openly, whether in public or even within their private spaces. They also mentioned that they do not share this kind of knowledge with their families—particularly female relatives—due to the complex relationships they have with them, which are often marked by fear, discomfort, and a general inability to express or even acknowledge their emotional and especially sexual feelings. These feelings are frequently dismissed or silenced, as they are seen as "*haram"* (forbidden).

What was particularly striking during the interviews was the variation in local terminology used to describe sexual and genital body parts. This came up when the women shared with me their experiences of how sexual knowledge is passed on in hammams and beauty salons. As noted earlier, I did not record most of these terms because the women asked me not to. However, it became clear that the choice of words used to describe their genitalia and sexual organs was deeply classed.

Women from lower-income backgrounds often used more direct or popular expressions. For instance, the breast was referred to as "*bizzaaz"* (boobs) rather than the more neutral *"sadr"* (chest/breast), and the vagina was commonly called "*kiss"* (pussy) —a raw and colloquial term. In

contrast, women from middle and upper classes tended to avoid such local terms. They would instead use euphemisms such as "*el-mant'a di"* ("*that area"), "el-mant'a el-taht" ("the area down there"), or "el-mant'a elli ma-bena'oolhash" / "elli benemlekha kestat" ("the area we don't mention" or "the one we women possess").* When referring to the breast, they often used the classical Arabic word *"thady"* (chest/breast). A few of the upper-class participants preferred to use English terms altogether, as a way of signaling their educational and social status. They also mentioned that using English made it easier and less emotionally charged to speak about these intimate topics, compared to saying them in Arabic.

This linguistic distancing reflects a form of estrangement from the body, wherein the sexual self becomes unspeakable in Arabic, the language of intimacy and culture. Instead, it is rendered tolerable only through foreign, seemingly neutral terms. These echoes describe as the internalization of patriarchal surveillance, where women come to regulate their expressions in line with classed expectations of modesty and propriety. The shift in terminology, therefore, is not simply a matter of vocabulary but a reflection of who is allowed to name the body, how, and under what conditions (Bartky, 1990). While the avoidance of direct naming may appear polite or respectable, it also signals a submission to a classed and gendered regime of respectability that renders female desire invisible and shameful. At the same time, the more explicit language used by lower-class women—particularly in semi- public - private spaces like hammams and beauty salons—can be read not only as a reflection of socio-linguistic norms but also as subtle forms of resistance to the silencing of sexual knowledge. In this sense, language operates both as a tool of patriarchal and class control and as a possible site of resistance, negotiation, and the re-embodiment of female sexual subjectivity (Ahmed, 2006; Foucault, 1978).

Moreover, these discussions are not limited to a single moment; they often extend into ongoing conversations where women check in on each other and continue discussing their experiences. One of the narratives shared by salon workers revealed that a woman decided to divorce her husband after learning about sexual pleasure and realizing that he completely refused to listen to or respond to her needs. She cited this as the primary reason for ending the marriage. Additionally, a salon worker in Sharqia mentioned two women who, upon realizing that sexual pleasure was their right, turned to sex work after their husbands refused to satisfy them. They sought not only continuous access to sexual fulfillment but also the financial benefits that could improve their lives. On the other hand, some women reported that their marital relationships improved due to mutual understanding after exchanging advice and guidance within these spaces.

For women who have undergone female genital mutilation (FGM)—which affects *86% of women in Egypt as of 2021 (United Nations, 2023)*—these spaces provide an opportunity for bold and open discussions about coping with the physical and psychological consequences of the practice and exploring alternative ways to experience sexual pleasure. Many women ask each other and salon workers questions such as *"How can I feel pleasure? How can I reach orgasm?"* These conversations occur in an atmosphere of support and solidarity, reinforcing their self-awareness and bodily autonomy. Women who have been affected by FGM seek not to remain victims but rather to reclaim their sexuality as survivors of this harmful practice. As (B.) said: *"At first, I didn't understand what had happened to my body, but when I heard other women talking about it, I wondered why I couldn't feel what they were describing. Then, I realized that it was my mother who had killed my sexual life because of FGM. But I searched for ways to compensate for that. When I brought up this issue at the beauty salon, many women gave me advice, like engaging in*

sexual foreplay. I asked my husband for it, and at other times, I do it myself so that I can feel like I am like the others."

I noticed the look in her eyes as if she were telling me a story of survival from FGM, and others (five respondents) shared similar stories with me, but they did not want them to be documented, considering them a past event that should be overcome rather than recorded. In contrast to some other women who do not see themselves as victims of the practice. Instead, they view it as an obligation—a practice they had to undergo. For them, discussing sexual pleasure is a right that was taken away from them, not by the act of FGM itself, but by men who fail to engage in foreplay and proceed directly to penetration.

Furthermore, discussions about male sexual performance are commonly exchanged in these spaces. Women talk openly about their sexual issues and receive support from their peers. Some women consider sexual compatibility a cornerstone of a happy marriage, while others express frustration over their husbands' failure to meet their needs, which sometimes leads to worsening marital problems or even divorce. In some cases, these conversations include women joking or sarcastically critiquing their husbands' sexual abilities as a coping mechanism for what they describe as a *"painful"* reality.

These discussions highlight women's everyday resistance through advice, conversations, and humor, gradually breaking the silence that patriarchal norms impose on their sexual experiences. Through these spaces, women redefine their relationship with their bodies as entities with rights and desires, promoting personal empowerment, self-awareness, and ownership of their bodies and sexual lives. While these discussions do not eliminate cultural challenges related to gender, they contribute to building supportive and empowered female communities on the path toward bodily and psychological liberation.

4.4.4 The Presence of Sex Work:

In some hammams and beauty salons, these spaces are also sometimes used for sex work or providing various sexual services. This phenomenon varies across different cities and regions, depending on the social and cultural dynamics of each area.

In Alexandria, there is a strong emphasis on ensuring complete privacy for women engaged in sex work. Many hammams and beauty salons refused to grant interviews. Field investigations through informal questions with local residents and Alexandrians revealed that some workers in these hammams and beauty salons provide sexual services, either openly or through discreet networks.

In Cairo, particularly in beauty salons and hammams located in luxury hotels, tourist areas, or streets known for prostitution, sexual services are offered at set prices. These services range from erotic massages and physical stimulation to more intimate services, including intercourse and orgasm-related experiences. Prices are often determined by the duration or type of service, reflecting the commodification of sex within these settings, with rates starting at 8,000 Egyptian pounds and above. These services were traditionally provided between one gender and the other, meaning from a man to a woman and vice versa, as respondents stated. However, when asked about same-gender relaxation services, particularly whether women provide these services to other women, respondents—especially those from governorates such as Sharqia, Assiut, and North Sinai—expressed strong discomfort. They refused to answer, considering the question religiously inappropriate, and insisted that there are no queer communities within these spaces.

In contrast, in Cairo and Alexandria, responses varied depending on social class. Women from upper-class backgrounds were hesitant but eventually acknowledged the existence of such practices. At the same time, I observed that a luxury international hotel in Cairo houses a

hammam that serves as a safe space for sexual encounters among lesbian groups, though they pay extremely high fees for access more than 10 thousand Egyptian pounds and above. This space functions as an escape from societal restrictions on non-heteronormative sexual identities, which continue to face challenges on multiple social and legal levels[21]. While middle- and lower-class individuals face surveillance, stigma, and repression, wealthier individuals can afford to carve out protected spaces, demonstrating how class privilege grants access to forms of freedom that remain inaccessible to the majority.

Meanwhile, middle- and lower-class respondents from Cairo and Alexandria were divided, alternating between yes and no while avoiding further clarification, often asking me to move on to another question. This reluctance highlights the policing and securitization of public and political discourse around non-normative sexualities. The fear surrounding this topic stems from severe societal, class and legal repercussions, including harassment, imprisonment, and even death, making discussions about gender and sexuality highly sensitive and restricted.

[21] . As well as, LGBTQ+ individuals in Egypt face severe violations on legal, security, social, and economic levels, often targeted by both the state and society. Legally, although homosexuality is not explicitly criminalized, authorities use laws against "debauchery" and "inciting immorality" to arrest queer individuals, often through targeted spaces like hotels, hammams and beauty salons or online entrapment on dating apps like Grindr and Tinder (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Detainees frequently endure torture, physical abuse, and forced anal examinations in police custody, a practice condemned by international human rights organizations (Amnesty International, 2021). Sentences for those convicted can range from three to six years in prison under fabricated charges of promoting immoral behavior (ILGA, 2023).

Socially, LGBTQ+ individuals face family violence, forced marriages, and honor crimes when their identities are discovered (OutRight Action International, 2022). Many are expelled from their homes, denied employment, or bullied in educational institutions, reinforcing their marginalization. Some families force them into conversion therapy, which includes religious coercion and electroshock treatments, despite global condemnation of such practices (United Nations, 2020). Public violence against queer individuals is also common. Physical and sexual assaults in public spaces, including harassment in cafes and workplaces, remain widespread (Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, 2023). Additionally, digital surveillance and censorship are intensifying, with Egyptian authorities actively monitoring social media, leading to the arrest and prosecution of activists advocating for LGBTQ+ rights (Freedom House, 2023). Economically, discrimination prevents many LGBTQ+ individuals from maintaining stable employment. Job terminations due to suspected queerness are routine, while legal protections remain absent (ILGA, 2023). Due to these violations, many seek asylum abroad, though restrictive visa policies and the difficulty of proving persecution make this process challenging (UNHCR, 2022).

In rural areas of Sharqia, these prostitution and sexual practices from women to men and vice versa are not limited to specific social classes. Cases of such activities have been observed across different class backgrounds, though they are sometimes conducted with extreme secrecy to avoid stigma or social scandal. In Assiut and North Sinai, however, there is almost complete silence surrounding these topics due to the deeply conservative cultural environment and the heightened security conditions in North Sinai, given its status as a border and military zone that has faced ISIS presence since 2013 (Human Rights Watch, 2021). This makes it particularly difficult to obtain accurate information or personal testimonies regarding such practices, as interviewees refrained from sharing any details on the subject.

These practices are not only about temporary bodily liberation or spaces for the exchange of knowledge but also serve as places for engaging in sexual activity itself. However, it is crucial to view sex work and prostitution within the broader context of women's economic and sexual oppression. Some women may resort to sex work due to harsh living conditions or a lack of alternative economic opportunities, making these spaces sites of both bodily and economic exploitation (Biancani, 2018).

4.5 Conclusion:

I argue hammams and beauty salons are multidimensional spaces that go beyond mere service locations to become arenas for self-expression, solidarity, temporary bodily liberation, sexual learning, and feminist everyday resistance. These spaces serve as gendered sites where femininity and womanhood are shaped and patriarchal dominance is challenged through storytelling, confession, and collective reflection.

Women use these spaces as expressions of everyday resistance against the social constraints imposed on them. When they discuss their family and marital struggles, the pressures of virginity, or economic exploitation, they break the silence enforced by patriarchal culture. This act of sharing represents a form of everyday resistance, where women are encouraged to express their experiences and free themselves from isolation and shame. Words commonly exchanged in these spaces, such as *"Don't be afraid"* and *"I am here for you,"* reinforce emotional solidarity, which can evolve into psychological or even practical support.

Hammams and beauty salons also provide a space for emotional release and self-redefinition. Crying, embracing, and even openly discussing sexual issues without fear of judgment become acts of liberation from social restrictions that typically forbid women from speaking openly about their private lives. Through these spaces, women create a parallel reality where they renegotiate their social roles and break psychological and cultural barriers.

Femininity and womanhood are constructed within these spaces in complex ways, oscillating between conforming to societal expectations and challenging them. Through daily rituals such as hair care, body hair removal, virginity-related practices, and other beauty treatments, women reshape their individual and collective perceptions of femininity. In some cases, removing the hijab or niqab within these spaces is an act of bodily freedom, allowing women to express themselves more freely in closed, women-only environments. These actions can be interpreted as expressions of self-control over their bodies, in defiance of conflicting societal expectations regarding the ideal female appearance.

Regarding sexual relationships and informal sex education, these spaces function as alternative schools where women learn about their sexual rights and emotional needs. By exchanging experiences and advice about the wedding night, methods of arousal, and pleasure, they break

traditional taboos imposed by conservative culture. In some cases, women move beyond ideas of absolute obedience or self-sacrifice, leading them to make significant decisions such as divorce, leaving an unsatisfying relationship, engaging in sex work, or exploring same-sex relationships.

Beauty salon and hammam workers play a dual role, offering beauty services while also supporting women emotionally, regardless of their financial capabilities. Asking about a customer's financial situation is not necessarily an exclusionary act but can sometimes serve as an attempt to help women enhance their self-image even when they lack financial means. These dynamics reinforce the notion that women have the power to transform and take control of their identities and destinies, regardless of class or economic status.

Within these spaces, women redefine their relationship with their bodies, femininity and womanhood. Whether through removing their clothes completely in hammams, undergoing body hair removal without shame, discussing the impact of FGM on pleasure, or engaging in sexual activity, women are given an opportunity to explore their bodies in new ways. These practices are not merely beauty rituals; they are expressions of reclaiming control over the body in opposition to a society that dictates rigid standards of beauty and chastity.

Ultimately, these spaces function as more than just places for body care—they are female and feminist resistance spaces where women redefine gender, power, resistance, and class within their everyday lives.

Chapter Four: Conclusion

5.1 Summary of key argument and its implications:

In this thesis, I argued that hammams and beauty salons in Egypt are not marginal or apolitical spaces, but rather central arenas where womanhood is constructed, practiced and constantly negotiated through everyday practices. I critically engaged with Western, Arab, and Egyptian studies on bodily, emotional, and spatial experiences that challenge the strict division between the public and private spheres and the emergence of these spaces as semi-spaces. However, I went beyond these approaches by integrating the sensory and lived field experience of women in Egypt, and analyzing how patriarchal control and everyday resistance are entangled within spaces. In doing so, I contributed to highly complex political, social, economic, and religious contexts, and by tracing everyday practices of resisting power that are often not captured through discursive or institutional analysis alone.

My main argument also challenges the notion that womanhood in these spaces is a fixed identity; rather, it is a dynamic socio-political project shaped by power, discipline, and class norms. It was important to distinguish between femininity and womanhood: while femininity reflects how a woman is positioned and the behavior expected of her within broader systems of power, womanhood refers to the performed, felt, and aesthetic practices that women enact, adopt, resist, or reshape within hammams and beauty salons. These spaces emerge as places where womanhood is both imposed and undermined—practiced within a context of surveillance, moral judgment, and class-based beauty standards—but also reimagined through intimacy, storytelling, and sensory liberation. Through fieldwork in five governorates, I showed how working\low income -class

women suffer from intensified regulation, symbolic violence, and economic exclusion, while middle- and upper-class women face different forms of beauty pressure. Nevertheless, they all engage in effective strategies of negotiation and adaptation that reflect their social positions.

I based my arguments on the intersection of theoretical and methodological frameworks with an expanded contextual analysis, combining intersectionality, gender performance theory, biopolitical analyses, postcolonial critique, and studies of everyday resistance. Yet, I went beyond these tools and the studies that traditionally address these spaces by incorporating field analysis rooted in the Egyptian context, and by engaging with women's everyday lives as a fully political and feminist terrain. In this context, I presented a contribution about the formation of womanhood within hammams and beauty salons in Egypt, not as heritage or beauty spaces but as sites of patriarchal control akin to the public and private spheres in Egypt—and also as spaces of women's and feminist everyday resistance.

This was grounded in historical, sociopolitical, class-based, ethnographic, and field analysis of these places, and the conclusion that womanhood in these spaces is socially and culturally produced through complex relations of gender, power, religion, surveillance, performance, class belonging, and the colonial history of the emergence and evolution of these spaces. I argued that the constructing of womanhood in these spaces was historically rooted in practices of cleanliness and purity initially associated with religious and social traditions during the Mamluk and Ottoman periods, then transformed through the rise of modernity, colonialism, the nation-state, and globalization into aesthetic norms linked to capitalism, consumption, and control of the female body.

This was the primary reason behind choosing semi-public and semi-private spaces like hammams and beauty salons, as women consider them alternative spaces made by women for women, not in the service of men, and consciously see them as spaces they belong to and through which they resist in their daily lives. However, these spaces, which studies have regarded as women-only areas, are in my argument not devoid of patriarchal manifestations symbolically imposed on women. My ability to understand their resistant space in these settings, what they resist, negotiate, and need using their own tools, positioned my contributions—through my research methodology and academic inquiry—around these spaces as domains of disciplined, idealized, and classed femininity governed by patriarchal beauty standards, which are at times imposed by women on women. The male gaze and domination even infiltrate these spaces despite the absence of men, appearing in women's conversations, beauty practices, pricing, and even female circumcision inside these spaces. Womanhood becomes a continuous project of fabrication, monitored and evaluated through masculine, societal, moral, and class-based standards, leading to the social stigma experienced by women who frequent or work in these spaces.

At the same time, these very sites of discipline become theaters for everyday resistance, where women renegotiate body image and appearance and express their non-compliance with imposed standards by adapting to public and private domains and carving alternative spaces for themselves within hammams and beauty salons. This is reflected in my arguments on women's daily resistance in these spaces through sensual practice, bodily experience, storytelling, and intimacy. Through mechanisms of solidarity and self-expression, women share stories, secrets, and problems from various areas of life in these spaces, and mutual trust is formed between strangers but are united by the hammam or salon space. They also express a sense of bodily liberation from clothes and their roles in unpaid domestic and caregiving work in the public and private spheres, even

considering these spaces as sites of sex education, the pursuit of sexual pleasure, and its practice by multiple gender identities.

Womanhood is not only shaped by what is expected of women, but also by what women say to each other and what their bodies do when not under direct male surveillance. Here, womanhood emerges as a field of negotiation a daily social, political act and self-formation—transcending imposed societal norms into more fluid and diverse expressions created and exchanged among women.

5.2 Future Avenues for Research:

This thesis opens new avenues for research into how womanhood is produced in "ordinary" and informal spaces in Egypt in particular, and the region more broadly, with careful attention to the specificities of each country. Future research can explore how beauty, intimacy, politics, and class intersect in similar semi-public and private spaces such as hammams and beauty salons. Each chapter revealed how power operates in every aspect of daily life, but also how it produces everyday resistance—through storytelling, bodily practices, cross-class solidarity, and sexual education and practice.

Thus, there is a pressing need to develop theoretical frameworks that move beyond seeing everyday resistance as merely hidden or circumstantial acts by marginalized groups, including women. Instead, research should analyze how such practices may form the nucleus of transformative resistance—redefining the self, reshaping social relations, and reimagining the horizons of political and cultural change. This requires a level of awareness among women—an awareness that was clearly present during my fieldwork, as many women expressed a conscious

understanding that their acts were forms of resistance and that these spaces were for women only, not for men. They served themselves and each other, even when they were strangers.

Everyday resistance through redefining the body, breaking taboos, or forming informal networks of solidarity is not merely a series of individual reactions; it accumulates into moments that pave the way for radical shifts in how femininity, power, and society are conceived. From this perspective, these spaces—despite their limitations—can be vital arenas for reimagining feminism and for expanding the concept of "political action" beyond institutional or protest-based frameworks, which are often tightly controlled by authoritarian regimes. This expansion includes the intimate, the everyday, and the sensory as legitimate arenas of struggle and transformation. Resistance does not happen only in the streets or in organizations—it also unfolds in a beauty salon or a hammam room, where women reshape themselves, their bodies, and their relationships, building from these individual moments collective liberatory projects.

Therefore, this thesis suggests that future research should analyze the dynamics of transition from the everyday to the collective and transformative—from bodily practice to political discourse—in order to trace how women convert their personal experiences in "intimate" spaces into tools of critique, and sometimes into emerging feminist social projects and transformative resistance.

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Appendix A

A.1 Interview's Questions:

A.1.1 For Bathhouses\ hammams and beauty salons owners and workers:

1. When did you decide to open this hammam or beauty salon? What motivated you to open, manage, or work in this space?
2. Could you describe the overall environment of your beauty salon or hammam? How do you think the design and atmosphere impact how women feel when they enter? And how do you want them to feel?
3. What rules or customs do you observe within your space? How do these contribute to the overall experience of your customers?
4. What timing patterns do you notice for women's visits? Are there specific days or times that feel more popular, and do you see different behaviors during these times? Why? Can you reflect on why?
5. What unique aspects does this space offer to your clients? What makes it different from other places they might visit?
6. Do you have regular clients? Why do you think they keep coming back here specifically? How do you perceive your relationship with them and its impact on the general atmosphere of the space?
7. How would you describe your relationship with customers? Do you feel these relationships create a particular atmosphere in the space?
8. What topics do women commonly discuss here? How do you think these conversations affect the overall mood and dynamics among customers?
9. How does your role impact the experience of women here? Are there specific ways in which your presence or actions help women feel more at ease or able to express themselves?
10. What challenges do you face in running this business? Are there specific difficulties related to the local community or broader economic conditions?
11. How do you decide on your pricing? Do you find yourself adjusting prices to attract a particular type of customer or to stay competitive?
12. Do you offer different services or packages to cater to customers from varying economic backgrounds? How do these decisions affect your business success and relationships with clients?
13. What strategies do you use to maintain or grow your customer base? How do class differences among your clients influence these strategies?

A.1.2 For women inside bathhouses\hammams and beauty salons:

1. How do you feel when you enter these spaces? Do you notice any unique emotional shifts compared to being in other public or private spaces?
2. How often do you visit, and why? What keeps drawing you back to these spaces?
3. Does the increase or decrease in the prices of services influence your decision to visit and choose these spaces?
4. Do you remember the first time you entered a hammam or beauty salon? Why did you go, and do you recall the occasion?
5. Do you recall a memorable experience or feeling in this place? What was its nature?
6. Are there any practices or rituals here that make you feel connected with your body? How do they influence your perception of beauty or self-acceptance or ugliness?
7. How would you describe your interactions with the workers and other women in these spaces? Are these interactions limited to the service provided, or do they extend beyond the space, such as into personal connections?
8. How frequently do you interact, and do you feel these connections are meaningful to you? Does this affect how often you visit these spaces or any other similar spaces?
9. Do you find yourself discussing topics here that you might avoid elsewhere? How does this impact your connection to the space or to other women?
10. Are there particular beauty standards that feel promoted here? How do these affect your self-image or understanding of beauty?
11. How do these discussions unfold? How does this affect your understanding of the surrounding society or your personal life?