Marriage Transnational Style: A Case Study from Egypt
Yasmine M. Ahmed
American University in Cairo, Egypt

DRAFT
PLEASE DO NOT QUOTE OR CIRCULATE
WITHOUT THE AUTHOR’S PERMISSION

Paper presented at
Diaspora and Transnationalism
Conceptual, Theoretical and Methodological Challenges

A joint conference of the IMISCOE network of excellence and
the European University Institute, Florence.

10-11 April 2008
European University Institute
Badia Fiesolana, Sala Teatro
Via dei Roccettini 9 - San Domenico di Fiesole
Introduction

The last 30 years witnessed massive movements of Egyptians to diverse countries across the globe, ranging from Kuwait to Italy, Germany and the U.S. Migration has become a quintessential component of the social history of Egyptian families, standing out as a common desire among the Egyptian middle class. Statistical data of the year 2006 indicate that 720,000 Egyptians were classified as permanent immigrants in Western Europe, the U.S., Canada, and Australia, equally significant is the revelation that 80 percent of Egyptian educated youth queue daily in front of the gates of Western embassies hoping to be granted a visa, with no intention for return (al-Masry al-Youm August 12, 2006). Of these, 38 percent are in the United States of America (Zohry 2003). Egyptian movies and soap operas best depict journeys of migration and desire of the less-privileged Egyptian middle class to the U.S. Most of these artifacts stimulate feelings of bitterness, desperation, and nostalgia where the U.S. is depicted as the land of opportunities and social mobility, in contrast to Egypt, which is produced as the original land where they really belong but leave in search of a decent, prosperous, "free" and modern life.

In this paper, I tackle how capital globalisation and neoliberalism has produced a transnational marriage phenomenon between Egyptian migrant men and less-privileged Egyptian middle class women. Since the early 1990s, an increasing number of women from different parts of Egypt marry into Egyptian migrant workers in the U.S. through matchmakers who are often family members. Based on a multi-sited ethnography in New York City and the Egyptian village of Kafr al-Dawar, I argue that on the macro level, the structural transformations of the two states since the late 1970s, which intensified in the 1990s, resulted in an increasing transnational marriage between "successful" male migrant workers in the U.S. and less-privileged middle-class women seeking comfortable marriage settings in Kafr al-Dawar. At the micro level, on the one hand, this marriage enables Egyptian migrant workers to marry by their economic advantage, to improve their social status at home by virtue of fulfilling marriage requirements, to escape US racialization, and to reconnect with home. On the other hand, it drives less-privileged middle class women to marry migrant workers in an attempt at bettering their lives and securing their futures. I show how migrants are not inherently transnational, yet become engaged in transnational practices, specifically marriage. In that case, marriage is a transnational social institution whereas transnational households and families are complex social institutions that are stretched across nation-states and that variably respond to social, economic, political and cultural pressures in Egypt and in the U.S. Marriage practices associated with the construction with Egypt as home are shaped by several factors including, material needs, class positions, ideological norms, cultural and religious beliefs, as well as collective and individual interests. These formations and arrangements entail a negotiation of everyday practices and of short and long-term plans.
This study contributes to the literature of Egyptian international migration and debate on transnationalism in a number of ways. First, it highlights the need to employ the concept of transnational social fields and processes not only as they occur from 'above' and 'below,' within the borders and under the regulations of nation-states but also in fields of financial, political and cultural domination, which allow this type of transnational marriage to blossom. Second, it conceptualizes marriages between Egyptian male migrant workers and female women residing in Kafr al-Dawar within the frameworks of globalization, transnationalism, and neoliberalism in Egypt and in the U.S. Third, it provides a historically situated analysis on marriage cases that take macro-, intermediate-, and micro-levels of analysis, structure and agency, as well as layered subjectivities as key foci of this paper. In so doing, this paper defies simple confinement into macro/micro categories, structure/agency or individual/collective dichotomies. Fourth, I link my experience as a global south academic to Marcus' insight on the richness of multi-sited ethnographies in understanding today's world system. In fact my position in the world system-manifested in my historically situated citizenship\(^1\) taught me that the global world order is not only about the position of migrant workers whom we write about in academic papers but also about the political economy of knowledge or the geopolitics of academic in which we are situated. Anthropologists have been critically reflecting on their positions in the fields (i.e. Narayan 1993), however, they often neglect discussing the structural factors that shape the different options available for academics who vary in terms of their citizenship as well as accessibility to resources as they work in and move between unequal geographies.

I focus on the U.S. for its being the most popular destination of Egyptian immigrants to Western countries, despite its high demand of resource mobilization (Zohry 2003). Remittances from Egyptians working in the U.S. represent the largest sum by far in comparison to all other countries where Egyptian workers reside, constituting 34.5 percent of the total amount of remittances from all identified emigrant countries (Ibid). Furthermore, unlike other Egyptian migration streams, the movement of Egyptian workers to the U.S. is hardly monitored and/or regulated by the Ministry of Manpower and Emigration of the Egyptian government and/or private agencies for migration or the US Immigration and Naturalization Services.\(^2\) Yet both states lax migration and emigration laws to enable such movements. As such, it is a blatant example of migration and emigration streams. Also, in the post-9/11 era, Arab-Middle Eastern-Muslims in the U.S. whose bodies, names, dress, citizenship, or other identities mark Arabness and/or Muslimness have been exposed to racialized and gendered acts of violence, particularly the working class (Bryan 2005; Das Guptas 2005; Jamal and Naber 2007).

Why New York City? Like many other immigrants, Egyptians have clustered in a few states, with New York and New Jersey far in the lead. According to the Arab American Institute (2000), Egyptians are estimated to be the second largest Arab population in New York City after the Lebanese. During the 1990s, there was also a numerical increase in the Egyptian population, exceeding the rate of growth of other groups. They increased by almost 82 percent; from 79,000 in 1990 to 143,000 in 2000. Those figures, however, exclude undocumented Egyptian migrant workers. Therefore, I do not perceive them as precise, but rather as trends for the marked

---

1 I historically situated myself as an Arab-Middle-Eastern Muslim conducting research in the U.S. in the post-9/11 era.
2 The Egyptian Ministry of Manpower and Emigration, the International Organization for Migration as well as a number of embassies such as Saudi Arabia’s have initiated electronic databases, where those who wish to migrate may apply on-line for jobs and work permits. See [www.emigration.gov.eg](http://www.emigration.gov.eg).
growth of the Egyptian migrant population in the U.S. generally, and in New York particularly. Lastly, the concentration of Egyptians in New York City speaks to the literature on post-1965 imm immigrants, which has documented that New York City has been the locus of exposure to key values, desires and institutions associated with the "American" culture (Foner 2001).

Methodology

This paper is based on a multi-sited ethnography that took place during 2005-2006 in New York City, the U.S. and Kafr al-Dawar, Egypt. This approach matched my research questions as well as my multileveled analytical framework as it offered a broad understanding of transnational processes, linking marco- to intermediate- to micro-perspectives. Moreover, it enabled me to understand how couples engaged in transnational marriage settings are positioned as agents, actors, and subjects in a world system that is compressed in time and space. By understanding their positions as such, I was able to understand how that transnational marriage between both groups is situated in a transnational world system that is taking place in the post-1990s neo-liberal moment. For instance, I examined the circulation of low-wage/low-status Egyptian migrant workers, their families, their resources, as well as foreign currency between Kafr al-Dawar and New York City. In addition, I learned how migrants, differentiated by class, gender, marital status, family arrangements, religion and strength of religiosity, live their transnational marriage experiences between cities. Moreover, doing research in Egypt allowed me to observe how migration and transnational marriage contribute to the formation of urban localities in Egypt (Ghannam 2006). Furthermore, talking with migrants' core family members in Kafr al-Dawar provided me with insight on how cultural and material meanings and symbols on labor migration to the West, particularly the U.S., are constructed and reproduced among the Egyptian middle class, particularly in marriage settings. I also learned how class structure and notions such as "families" and "households" are reworked in specific locations. For instance, in Kafr al-Dawar, nuclear and extended migrant workers have witnessed an unprecedented social and financial mobility, thanks to the remittances of migrant workers in the U.S., Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. This mobility, however, took place selectively not only in the same neighborhood but also within the same family (Ghannam 2006). Conducting a multi-sited ethnography also taught me that transnational social fields among academics have limits in today's world system. As I moved between cities, I was often confronted with issues of visas, citizenship, as well as gender and class politics in airports, airplanes, embassies, streets, restaurants, homes, living rooms and kitchens. I ended up divided into three main parts: from October 2005 until March 2006 and from the beginning until the end of April 2007 in New York City; and from the beginning of May till the end of June 2007 in Cairo, Alexandria and Kafr al-Dawar.

Research Locales

New York: Astoria's "Little Egypt"

Located at the north-eastern shore of the city of New York, the Queens neighborhood of Astoria is a destination for many pre- and post-1965 immigrant groups (Foner 2001:96).
In fact, Astoria is described as the most ethnically diverse neighborhood in New York City. A look at its demographic profile reveals that it hosts 41.9% white, 10.2% Black/African American, 0.2% Native American and Native Alaskan, 12.9% Asian, 0.1% Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander, 1.5% some other race, 5.9% two or more non-Hispanic races and 27.3% Hispanic. Statistical data also shows that 46.2% of the residents are foreign born. Moreover, 50.8% of the total population does not speak English very well (New York City Department of Planning 2000). Immigrant groups in Astoria include Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, Egyptians, Moroccans, Dominicans, Brazilians, Ecuadorians, Koreans, etc. A short walk in Astoria shows the traces of immigrant communities that have inhabited the area over the last decades. The streets of Astoria are lined with Brazilian mini-markets (mini-mercado Brasileiro), Egyptian coffee shops, Arab delis, groceries and patisseries, yoga and dance studios, Moroccan couscous places, Mexican taquerias, Irish bars, Greek gyros, a mosque, 99 cent stores, as well as outdoor and indoor outlets.

In Steinway Street and its cross-cutting avenues, there are mixed styles of buildings and brick houses. There are a considerable number of family houses consisting of one to three floors. Many are brick tenements without any distinctive characteristics, while some others are fragile wooden houses of different colors. In addition to family houses, Astoria has several four to six floor buildings, few of them have names on their doors such as Georgian or Colonial, some of which are walk-ups with fire escapes.

Egyptians and their diaspora outside of the homeland fondly and nostalgically describe Steinway Street between 25\textsuperscript{th} and 28\textsuperscript{th} Avenues, as “Little Egypt.” Immigrants who have long resided in the neighborhood mentioned that this area became predominantly Egyptian during the middle of the 1990s with the influx of Egyptian migrant workers. Astoria has several immigrant lawyers’ offices, real estate agencies, a remittance agency, mosques, Arab delis that sell long distance calling cards with the maximum number of minutes to call the Middle East, Arab restaurants and cafés that serve shisha or huka, as well as male barber shops. The Egyptian population in Astoria is predominantly Muslim. Many types of immigrants live in Astoria including: single men and women, young couples, and families with children.

Migrant workers mentioned that they choose Astoria for residency and work for several reasons. These include: the existence of fellow immigrants in the neighborhood, class, religiosity, and marital status. The established presence of an Egyptian immigrant group has mobilized further immigration. It has been observed in the literature of migration that pioneer settlers in certain areas guide new arrivals to choose their destinations (Portes and Rumbaut 1996). Moreover, network connections established through the already-existing of immigrants lower the costs, raise the benefits, and reduce the risks of international migration (Foner 2001). Indeed, most of the research participants had at least a friend, a cousin, a brother, or a neighbor in Astoria before migrating. For instance, Fouad initially applied for the visa because he had a brother in Astoria. He said that life in the U.S. otherwise would have been unbearable due to both financial and personal reasons. He stayed with his brother for few months before moving to another apartment.

Astoria is also home to many Egyptian migrant workers (both men and women) who are searching for employment but lack English proficiency and knowledge of the US labor market. With regard to language skills, many research participants did not have any knowledge of English before arriving in the U.S., whereas others knew basic English but not enough to get by. A lack of understanding of the US labor market is another problem expressed by people I met.
Many Arab observant Muslim migrant workers mentioned that they chose Astoria because it is a place where they can perform Islamic rituals collectively. They are trying to form a Muslim community through collecting donations for the establishment of Islamic schools, doing their errands in Halal meat stores, and participating in religious congregations, etc. Parents of Muslim children also favored Astoria for their children because they can socialize with other Muslim children. Interestingly, many of them perceive the world of Manhattan as loose as opposed to the conservative world of Astoria.

**Egypt: Kafr al-Dawar**

My fieldwork in Kafr al-Dawar was mainly conducted in new areas that were developed thanks to the remittances of migrants in the Gulf, the U.S. and Europe. Houses that I visited are located on unpaved streets with sets of crossroads and alleys running through rows of four- to six- terraced narrow cement family houses with balconies, and roofs where satellite dishes are installed. Research participants mentioned that building a house after several consecutive years of migration is a material manifestation of the migrant man's success and woman's patience. It is a visible site for the married migrant and his family for expressing upward social and financial mobility, and for the unmarried, proof that he fulfills marriage requirements.

Apartment and the type and quality of furniture are central markers of social status in Kafr al-Dawar. As a result, a number of participants mentioned that migrants and their families invest money and effort in improving housing units. Improvements such as furnishing, painting and decorating, as Ghannam argues, are "signs of distinction and manifestations of the material and symbolic capital of its inhabitants" (2006:260). Most of the migrant's apartments I visited consisted of two bedrooms, a fancy dining room with a niche, a living space to receive guests, a luxurious bathroom with colored ceramic tiles and a kitchen. As most of these apartments were left locked due to the absence of the husband, chairs were covered with white blankets. The value of gold that the wife wears is another marker that the migrant was able to make it. Hassan's wife, for instance, wears gold that value five thousand Egyptian pounds; however, she mentioned that this is considered the minimum and that the standard is twenty thousand Egyptian pounds.

Men are notably absent in these houses and wives, in-laws, and children are the main actors. Most women did not work for wages, and their lives revolve around managing remittances, budgeting, taking care of the house and the children, matching brides with single friends of their husbands in the U.S., and visiting families and friends. Migrant workers "with papers" or legal documents such as those who enter the U.S. through the Diversity Lottery or sponsorship programs visit their families at least once a year, usually during the summer whereas those "without papers," especially those who break the visa and stay more than six months in the U.S. come home once and for all as they are forbidden to enter the U.S. once they leave. However, one strategy that migrant workers use is to leave right before the six months allowance period. In these cases, migrants leave every five months, stay in Egypt for a couple of months and then return again. Wives of migrant workers "without papers" are only connected to their husbands through telephones, e-mails and other means of communication. For instance, Mona did not see her husband Ahmed for the last ten years. Ahmed overstayed in the U.S. and is considered illegal. If he decides to return he will not be able to go back. Mona's story is similar to that of many women who are trapped between the pain of physical separation and the dependence on the material rewards generated by this separation.
Research Methods

For this study, I employed a methodological tool kit that consists of quantitative and qualitative research methods. I also used a variety of sources, to include: statistical reports, literary works, movies, newspaper articles, in addition to my interview schedules and observations.

With regards to quantitative data, I reviewed statistics from the U.S. Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) and other relevant sources. The USCIS data enabled me to learn about the number of Egyptian immigrants who enter the U.S. legally every year, as well as the formal venues they employ, such as applying to the Diversity Lottery and getting sponsorship from a spouse. Statistical data on relevant websites such as the Arab-American Institute (AAI) were reviewed as they provide some information on the number of the Egyptian population in each state, as well as their occupational achievements. This data provided an overview on documented Egyptian immigrants and thus was used as baseline data on this population.

As for the qualitative methods, I employed a variety of techniques, including participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Participant observation in the community has been a main research method for the proposed study. I repeatedly studied my surroundings through the lens of my research questions, which were involved around themes of desire vis-à-vis migration, marriage, mobility as well as the construction of meanings of homes. Participant observation consisted of three phases. The first phase took place in the Queens neighborhood of Astoria, particularly Little Egypt, during the period of October 2005 to March 2006. Almost six months of fieldwork gave me ample time to conduct a pilot ethnography where I collected open-ended interviews with forty Egyptian labor migrants, 25 men in New York and later 15 selected brides in Kafr al-Dawar and to participate in communal activities in both sites. Questions were open-ended, as I wanted to have the data-gathering process flexible enough to give space for research participants to narrate their stories. In the communities where I worked and spent considerable amounts of time, I was interested not only in the specific experiences of transnational marriage, but also in how people live, how they make arrangements in New York City and in Egypt, what they earned, and how they related to neighbors, siblings and kin in various sites. In addition, through informal discussion with them, I came to learn how they conceive and reproduce ideas and values about migration, marriage, work and family. Interviews were conducted in Arabic, and transcription was followed by an English translation.

Themes that emerged during the first round of interviews were extracted in a list that I later used as a guide for the second round of interview schedules, which I conducted during the month of March 2007 in New York and later in Kafr al-Dawar order to fill in gaps in data collected earlier. During this period, I used chain or snowball referrals to select a non-probability sample of ten men in NYC and their female partners in Egypt.

Review of Relevant Literature

In this project I synthesize two bodies of literature, namely analyses of Egyptian international migration and of Arabs and Arab-Americans experiences in the U.S. The first body of literature provides the larger context against which I analyze the case of transnational marriage between Egyptian workers in New York City and their brides from Kafr al-Dawar. The second body of literature, on the other hand, places Egyptian
service workers in conversation with pre- and post-9/11 discourses on the racialization of Arab-Middle Eastern-Muslims in the United States.\(^4\)

**Egyptian International Migration**

At the dawn of the 1970s, Egypt began witnessing large and far-reaching outflows of Egyptian labor migrants and their entrance into various sectors of international labor markets.\(^5\) As a result of multiple interrelated causes in Egypt and receiving countries, each year, thousands of Egyptians leave their country in search of social, cultural and economic capital. Given the sheer scale of migration, Egyptian migrant workers have been the subject of much scholarship, (cf. Amin 2000; Ayubi 1983; Fergany 1987; Hadley 1977; Saleh 1983; Sell 1988). Scholarship on contemporary Egyptian labor migration mainly tackles its economic aspects and focuses on migration streams to oil-rich Arab countries across socioeconomic classes, including professionals and low-skilled migrants (Ayubi 1983; Saleh 1983; Sell 1988). Its main explanatory model relies on individual choices and motivations, and its basic variables include a set of push and pull factors that capture economic disparities as well as cultural similarities between sending and receiving countries. This body of literature suffers from two major pitfalls. First, it has been dominated by a neo-classical discourse that is built upon the consideration of push factors and pull factors, separating structure from agency, and the economic from the cultural and the social. Second, it evokes several stereotypical images that distinguish between "migrant" workers and "immigrants." Such a delineation bespeaks the assumption that underlie migration paradigms that, as Basch et al. (1994:4) note, deal with the two categories as mutually exclusive, a practice which does not reflect the realities of (im)migrants at present. These images include three categorical profiles of (im)migrants: a contracted low-skilled faithful man usually in his 40s working in an oil-rich Arab country who visits his family every once in a while carrying material goods such as: a television, a video and a tape recorder, all in a packed box; an illegal young urban middle class man who migrates to follow his global desires, and who, at worst, dies at or before reaching the shores\(^6\) or, at best, fulfills his desire through marrying an (older) Western woman and thus remains in the West; a flexible professional, usually a dual passport holder, who moves between cities to fill in high-end occupations in the global labor market, a lifestyle far from achievable for the former two types of migrant workers. Studies on the latter, however, are yet to be written.

Influenced by neoclassical and latter neoliberal paradigms, the topic of Egyptian international migration in the academic and popular realms has been sending one clear message to the Egyptian middle class: fulfilling desires through migration is an outcome of intrinsic merits and abilities among individuals who are living in enabling nation-states.\(^7\) Moreover, the unprecedented upward social and economic mobility among the Egyptian middle class, with at least one family member working abroad as

---

\(^4\) I adopt Volpp’s conceptualization of “Arab-Middle Eastern- Muslim” as an identity represented as enemies of the West, particularly post 9/11. However, it is important to bear in mind that these identities are constantly produced due to large and complex histories of representations, interpretations, inclusions and exclusions (See Volpp 2003; Jamal and Naber 2007).

\(^5\) While systematic and organized migration of Egyptians dates back to the 1930s, with students traveling to Europe, it was not until the 1970s that permanent and temporary migration has been occurring at such unprecedented rates, particularly after the 1973 and the 1979 booms in oil prices. This has been partially due to changes in Egyptian emigration laws, which restricted the emigration of Egyptians before 1973 (Zohry 2003).

\(^6\) Cases of Egyptian workers who die at the European shores are well documented in the Egyptian media. A recent incident took place at the end of October 2007 when more than hundred of Egyptian workers died tragically due to boat accidents when they were crossing the sea borders to Italy.

\(^7\) Economic welfare has been measured by the Gross National Product (GNP), which is according to this theory the main identifier for individual migration (Sassen 1998).
well as the emergence of new patterns of consumption in Egypt, underscore the centrality of international migration (see Amin 2001). Such narratives, however, proclaim that every Egyptian who fails to maintain a middle-class status in Egypt is free to migrate in order to accumulate capital. As such it ignores other structural factors that affect the direction, types and patterns of migration streams and transnational processes.

Early studies on Egyptian migration focus on neighboring Arab countries, particularly those that are oil producing, as they have been major destinations of Egyptian labor migrants, both skilled and unskilled. However, this flow has noticeably decreased since the early 1990s. Scholars and policy makers attribute this decrease to two main factors. First, the political turbulences and instability characterizing the region, particularly after the 1991 Iraq-Kuwait war, discouraged labor migrants from taking the risks of migration (Bakalian and Bozorgmehr 2005). Second, the skills of graduates from Egyptian institutions “have not progressed in line with modern technologies used in industries and services” in the Gulf (Egypt Human Development Report 2005:103). The effect of shrinking migration streams to the Gulf on the increasing migration to the West is debated in the literature; some scholars argue that migration to the West accelerated after the 1991 Kuwait-Iraq war, while others claim that it is not a new phenomenon, but rather came into the spotlight due to the political agendas of receiving countries, particularly members of the European Union (Saad 2005).

While reasons and consequences of this decrease are yet to be explored, it has been observed that a large number of Egyptians choose non-Arab Western countries for temporary, semi-permanent and permanent settlement (Zohry 2003; Saad 2005). These countries include the United States of America, Canada, Australia as well as a number of Western European countries, such as Italy (IOM 2003). With the support of governments and international organizations, scholars such as Zohry (2003) and Talani (2003) started to explore the history, patterns, and causes of Egyptian international migration to the West with the aim of tracking, regulating, and “supporting” labor migrants, particularly to Western European countries and the United Kingdom. This body of literature added to our understanding of migration as it highlighted that Egyptian international migration to the West is highly clandestine, network-driven, and regulated by the nation-states involved. As such, it pinpointed structural factors such as the economic, historical, and political conditions of sending and receiving countries that direct migration streams as well as transnational practices and social fields produced among migrant workers, though while still analyzing migration within a push-pull model. One significant contribution is the realization that the circulation of Egyptian labor migrants may be perceived as a supply of low wage/low-cost illegal laborers from less to economically more advanced nation-states in the global capitalist economy.

One problem with this approach, however, is that it restricts the profile of the Egyptian migrant to a young, male, with high educational credentials, originating from Greater Cairo or Upper Egypt. This study confirms the high educational credentials of migrant workers. However, it challenges their homogeneity by emphasizing the variations among migrant workers by age, religiosity and city of origin and by disrupting the gender blind discussion that dominate migration literature (Al-Ali and Koser 2001). In fact women are notably absent from the literature, and when included they are portrayed as abandoned mothers, housewives and daughters who are left behind back home. The image of "the village without men" is a recurrent image in migration paradigms. This speaks to the literature of migration, which since
Ahmed: Marriage Transnational Style

its emergence connotes a male bias and an absence of gender analysis (Pessar 1999). Moreover, when tackled, gender has been used interchangeably with women, as if men’s migration is genderless (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). Being aware of this theoretical discrepancy in migration scholarship, feminists of color have advanced gender as a constituent of social relations in migration (Pessar 1999; Parrenas 2001), i.e. as “a key relational dimension of human activity informed by cultural and individual notions of men and women having consequences for their social and cultural positioning and the ways in which they experience and live their lives” (Indra 1999:2), and “an analytical tool equally relevant to our understanding of men’s migration as it is to our understanding of women’s migration” (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). They have argued that gender organizes, shapes, and distinguishes the migration experiences of men and women. Among these scholars’ major contributions is their emphasis on disrupting the conceptualization of “patriarchy as an independent system of domination rooted in the division of labor and predating capitalism,” and rather pinpointing multiple axes of domination and resistance, developed by black feminists, to include: gender, race, class, legal status (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994: 3) and religion, as noted in the literature of Arab-Americans that I will discuss in the following section. In this scholarship, contributions include: gender-segmented labor markets (Parrenas 2001; Sassen 1996a), the correlation between migration and gender equality (or inequality) (Grasmuck and Pessar 1991), and the gendered construction of transnational family arrangements (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). This research aims to demonstrate the role of women in Egyptian migration and transnationalism through highlighting that the several experiences of women in leaving, living transitionally and underscoring their roles in creating, constructing and moving homes in transnational marriage settings.

As noted earlier, another flaw of this scholarship is that it reinforces the division between migrants and immigrants where the former is a young illegal migrant who pollutes the image of Egypt, and the latter is a middle age male professional, such as physicians, who either is a brain drained or an asset that contributes to the country's development. Accordingly, it still makes a distinction between "skilled" and "unskilled" labor despite the fact that migrant workers can actually be skilled at home but leave to occupy unskilled jobs abroad. This study attempts to show that the use of the term "skilled" should be revisited as "skilled" migrants are the ones able to strategize resources for migration due to their high exposure to global and neoliberal percepts. However, they fill out what they perceive as "unskilled" occupations such as working in restaurants, driving limousine or working in hotdog/kebab stands.

Contributing to the debate respecting the study of Egyptian migrant workers, Saad (2005) advances the transnational experiences of Egyptian labor migrants in Paris while highlighting the role of social networks in migration, through the use of visual media. By looking at the clandestine labor migration of Egyptian workers originating from Mit-Badr Halawa, an upper Egyptian village, to Paris, Saad argues that this group has special and unique characteristics, as they form a mini-tribe or clan in the Egyptian labor workforce in France; however, they share a lot with other groups of immigrant workers living under the same circumstances. One problem with this research lies in its focus on a single sited-ethnography despite its transnational approach as it studies transnational practices from the migrant workers' view,
Ahmed: Marriage Transnational Style

undermining what takes place in the original village. In other words, as Saad notes, narrating "only one side of the story" (2005: 19).

In brief, the literature on Egyptian international migration has advanced for the last five years through highlighting structural factors affecting migration streams as well as transnational practices among migrants. However, it is still dominated by a migration discourse with some transnational perspective. Seldom is there a study that adopts transnationalism as an analytical framework.

Arabs and Arab-Americans in the U.S.

Scholarly works on Arab-Americans focus on the history of Arab immigrants to the U.S. generally (Naff 1985; Shakir 1997; Suleiman 1999), and on Muslims particularly, including Arabs, South Asians, and African-Americans (Aswad and Bilge 1996; Jamal 2005). Tracing the history of Arab-Middle Eastern-Muslims in the U.S., scholars note that it can be divided into three major waves, from the 1880s until World War II, from World War II to the 1960s, and from post-1965 to the present. In this section, I focus on the post-1965 era as it is the period that witnessed the largest influx of Egyptian migrant population (Bryan 2005), while touching upon some aspects of early Arab immigrants that played a role in shaping the Egyptian (im)migrant population today, specifically their "racial" categorization in the U.S.

Prejudices and stereotypes against early Arab immigrants have been reflected in public as well as official discourses. In 1910, the U.S. Census Bureau made them ineligible for citizenship through classifying Middle Easterners, including Arabs, as "Turks in Asia." As a result, internalizing colonizers' discourse of whiteness, several cases came before the courts across the U.S. to argue that the Syrian/Lebanese, Armenians, and other immigrants from Middle Eastern background were Caucasians. Therefore, people of Middle Eastern ancestry, including Egyptians, are now officially classified as “white” and thus, are officially invisible in a sea of the white majority (Samhan 1999). However, as I will note later, this invisibility has been substituted by racialization in the post-9/11 era.

The post-1965 era witnessed a rapid influx of religiously and geographically diverse Arab immigrant groups as a result of the 1965 amendment to the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Act, followed by the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act. Fueled by the Pan-Arab nationalism of the era and the bitterness of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, this group is distinct from their predecessors in terms of their stronger sense of nationalism, their criticism of US foreign policy, and their weak civic identification with the U.S. (Samhan 1999). They built alliances with others, including supporters of political Islam, who oppose Western imperialism, and were in political tension with their American born “co-ethnics,” particularly those who belong to the first wave (Naber 2000:40). It has been further argued that post-1965 Arab immigrants in the U.S. have witnessed a unique and contradictory process of gendered and religious-based racialization and negative ethnic typification; they are "white" in official records but “not quite white” in the U.S. racializing system, reinforced by the U.S. media and government discourses (Ibid). The racialization process of Arab-Middle-Eastern Muslims has been exacerbating post-9/11, in addition to connoting a class division. Based on ethnographies in New York and New Jersey areas, Bryan (2005) and Das Gupta (2005) argue that privileges of citizenship, language and appearances saved upper-middle class Arab-Middle Eastern-Muslims in the U.S. and

---

9 For a discussion on the specific characteristics of different migration waves of Arab-Middle Eastern Muslim, see Naber (2000) and Suleiman (1999).
rendered the working class in vulnerable and disadvantaged positions. To date, with few exceptions, such as Ayubi (1983), Bryan (2005), Das Guptas (2005), El Badry and Poston (1990) and Jones (2000), scholars have generally neglected Egyptian migrants in the U.S., particularly those residing in New York.

Analytical Framework and Conceptualization

Egyptian migrant workers cross the borders of neoliberal nation-states in an increasingly globalized world, and engage in macro- and micro-transnational social fields that are structured by and structure institutions and agency. How can we develop an analytical framework that takes into account globalization as the stage, transnational social fields- in that case marriage- as processes and practices, and neoliberalism as the logic or mode of regulation? How can we consider macro-, intermediate- and micro-units of analysis together in this study? To answer these questions this study is informed by debates related to globalization, neoliberalism and transnationalism to show how they can be integrated for an analysis of marriage practices between Egyptian workers in New York City and their brides in Kafr al-Dawar and to conceptualize key terms that will be used throughout this paper.

Transnationalism

During the last decade, the study of various flows of peoples, objects, ideas, and capital inspired scholars across disciplines to formulate a transnational framework for the study of "capital, individuals, groups, organizations, corporations, social movements, states, identities, citizenship, cultural representations and ideas," and to "move beyond a methodological nationalism that conflates society and nation-states" (Schiller 2005: 439). This epistemological shift offered a new paradigm for the study of migrant workers (Schiller 2003: 100). Inspired by this framework and by the stories and histories of migrant workers, scholars have proposed that, “when migrants travel across national boundaries, they do not necessarily leave their homeland behind, but instead forge cultural, political, and economic relations that link together their home and host societies” (Inda and Rosaldo 2001:154), aiming to disrupt the long existing dichotomies between migrants and immigrants, and permanent settlers and sojourners. The stories of West Indians (Foner 2001), Grenadian and Vincentian (Basch et al. 1994), West Africans (Stoller 2002), and Mexicans (Smith 2006) in New York City are but few examples that describe the multiple ways in which (im)migrants are involved in the social, political, economic and cultural fabrics of both the U.S. and their countries of origin. From this body of literature, we have learned that transnational activities may include, but are not limited to, membership in transnational households, sending and/or receiving monetary and/or non-monetary objects, active participation in hometown social, cultural, and/or political organizations, as well as forging business alliances between country of origin and country of settlement. But why are migrant workers increasingly involved in transnational social fields?10 One argument is that transmigration has been shaped by the extent to which (im)migrants are politically and economically incorporated in their countries of settlement (Basch et al. 1994; Ong 1999). For example, based on empirical work on Caribbean and Filipino populations in New York metropolitan

---

10 According to Schiller (2003:107), transnational social fields “comprise observable social relationships and transactions. Multiple actors with very different kinds of power and locations of power interact across borders to create and sustain this field of relationship.”
Ahmed: Marriage Transnational Style

area, Basch et al. (1994:10) found that transnationalism has been “a creative response” to the social, economic and political vulnerability that (im)migrants face such as, U.S. racial categorization, the growth of nationalist projects at home, the changing size and composition of ethnic groups in New York, the forces of global capitalism and positions in the global racial order (ibid). But are transnational practices only grounded in material circumstances? Of course not, "transnational practices and social fields are also motivated by other historically specific social, cultural and ideological factors" (Al-Ali and Koser 2001:101). From Money Has No Smell (Stoller 2002), we have learned that migrant workers construct transnational networks between West Africa and North America, in an attempt to reproduce familial traditions. Similarly, Egyptian migrant workers are involved in transnational activities that are based on an amalgamation of social, economic and cultural factors, such as marrying from home and producing transnational households where family members establish and move between homes in Egypt and in the U.S.

But is transnationalism only a framework for understanding intermediate processes (Parrenas 2001), or what has been called "meso-level" (Smith and Guarnizo 1998). My answer is no as this conceptualization obscures transnational activities and social fields occurring at the level of nation-states. Advancing our understanding to transnationalism, scholars have realized that there is a need to make a distinction between transnationalism from "above" and transnationalism from "below", describing the former as "macrolevel structures and processes including mediascapes, technoscapes, and the "global cultural economy" and the latter as "the grassroots or everyday activities of migrants and their relations, to social movements and to coalitions" (Basch 2001:121). From this premise, transnational social fields have emerged as "networks that stretch across the borders of nation-states" and that are disciplined by Bourdieu's notion of social field which highlights the role of both structure and agency in regulating and being regulated by such fields (Schiller 2005). However, much of the transnational scholarship, as Glick Schiller notes, treat nation-states involved in such movements as if they enjoy equal sovereignty in the global terrain, resurrecting methodological nationalism "in a form of transnational methodological nationalism through maintaining a form of boundary-making through linking transnational practices to territorially based-nation states and their maintenance or construction" (2005:443). For example, to-be-migrants are not only engaged in transnational practices that are regulated, though at-a-distance by nation-states, but their choice of the U.S., as a destiny, is very much shaped by US transnational interventions in Egypt. In fact the United States has long played a key role, albeit contradictory, in Egypt’s economic and political spheres. On one hand, it has coordinated with Egypt’s presidents namely, Sadat and Mubarak on the Middle East peace process with the aim at ensuring a “regional stability” and at countering terrorism. On the other hand, the U.S. funds development and human rights organizations to reinforce “democracy” through monitoring the Egyptian government. Moreover, transnational capital, known as foreign aid, manifested in the World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) loans have been granted by the U.S. and other powerful states to Egypt. Furthermore, since 1975, USAID has allocated a total of $ 26 billion to the Egyptian government for promoting economic growth, education, health, democracy and governance, as well as environmental and infrastructural development.11 With regard to the cultural linkages, the U.S. enjoys many forms of cultural dominance over Egypt. As a matter of fact, Egyptians across

socioeconomic classes are exposed on a daily basis to the socially constructed baggage of the “American Dream” (De Koning 2005). This has been manifested in the rapid emergence of global modes of consumption and leisure culture that are often associated with the West, particularly the U. S. (Ibid). Moreover, flashy electronic and newspaper ads with titles such as, “immigration to America in 30 days” play a role in constructing the making of this dream as achievable.

For the purpose of this study, I specifically employ the concept transnational social fields as developed by Schiller (2005). Transnational processes take place in the case of Egyptian migrant workers in New York City, by occurring from 'above' and 'below.' They not only take place within the borders and under the regulations of nation-states but also in fields of financial, military and cultural domination. I make use of transnationalism as an overall analytical framework through which I aim to understand: 1) processes and connections between workers in New York City and their relatives in Cairo, Alexandria and Kafr al-Dawar; 2) the role of the Egyptian and the American states in shaping these transnational connections as well as social, cultural and economic transnational practices, specifically marriage; and 3) the unequal power allowing the U.S. to maintain an imperialist domination, represented in the extension of power of the U.S. regime over the political, economic, social and cultural life of Egypt today. In other words, I integrate arguments made earlier by migration system theorists who note that migration streams are driven and patterned by prior social, economic and cultural links between sending and receiving countries (Castles and Miller 1998:24-25) with the transnational perspective, as developed by Glick Schiller (2005), to understand how Egypt and the U.S. as "places-in-the-world....function in a wider categorical system and what this means for the way we understand an increasingly transnational political, economic and social "global order"" (Ferguson 2006:5). For instance, I highlight the key role that the U. S. plays in Egypt’s economic and political spheres without falling into global-local dichotomy, or the first world/third word divides, but rather acknowledging the interaction between the US imperialist interventions as well as Egypt's role in not only allowing but also producing such interventions and other transnational practices.

Moreover, I use several conceptual definitions that have emerged from transnational scholarship that I find useful not only in deepening but also specifying our understanding to the experiences of Egyptian migrant workers in New York City and their families in Egypt. These concepts include: transnational practices and transnational families/households. Transnational practices defined as "the processes by which migrants forge and sustain multistranded social relations that link together lines of family, economic, and political relations" (Basch 2001:118). Among Egyptian migrant workers, transnational practices occur between migrants and prospective migrants, their social networks in Egypt and in the U.S., as well as their families. Transnational families, on the other hand, are defined as,

Both nuclear and extended, [that] are dispersed across international borders, and their members tend to spend considerable periods of time in one or the other country and for periods of time in one or the other country and for a variety of reasons. They consist of children, parents, siblings, brother-in-law, uncles, nephews, god fathers and god mothers on both sides of the borders. Their geographical location is fluid. They come and go on vacation and

---

12 Ferguson (2006) differentiates between globe in globalization which is equal to world and globalization in the neo-liberal order.
may stay for periods that are not previously determined. They may have properties and businesses some times on both sides of the border and more importantly they develop their work trajectories and projects in each of the two countries (Lima 2001: 78).

Most of the migrants I met have nuclear and extended families that are stretched across borders and thus fit into the definition of transnational families. In fact, transnational families constitute one significant context where transnational practices take place. Migrants, who follow the footsteps of members of their families, and of course with their assistance, provide a perfect example of this dictum. However, most of the literature on transnational families do not make a clear distinction between transnational families and transnational households whereas throughout my fieldwork migrant workers make such distinction where the former includes in-laws and even neighbors, and the latter consists of their nuclear family members such as wives and children. This is not to say that transnational households and families are mutually exclusive. The stories of migrant workers also taught me that families and households may overlap. In other words, a restructuring of the notions of families and households is taking place. A perfect example, is when a man working in the U.S. leaves his wife and children minded by in-laws back home, their transnational households, represented by children, are fused with their transnational families, by which I mean in-laws, siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles.

Globalization, Neoliberalism and the Transnationalization of Labor

There is no doubt that the use of globalization as a theoretical framework for understanding transnational migration is en vogue. During the past decade, a flourishing body of literature emerged to focus on the impact of globalization and neoliberalism on the transnationalization of labor (Basch et al. 1994; Ong 1999; Parrenas 2001; Sassen 2001). Globalization explains mechanisms that shape transnational movements of capital, people and cultural ideas and practices and that regulate state institutions administrating such movements (Basch et al. 1994). In other words, globalization is the umbrella where transnational movements from both 'above' and 'below' take place. This conceptualization, however, deals with globalization as an all-encompassing umbrella that operates on a global level in a timeless and ahistorical manner, tackling social, cultural, economic and political movements, without delving into questions such as "the limits of interconnection,… the areas where capital cannot go, and… the specificity of the structures necessary to make connections work" (Cooper 2001:189) and/or synonymously with an action that takes place in an unbounded globe (Ferguson 2006). In order to specify my understanding and use of the concept of globalization, I view globalization processes as they occur somewhere (Ferguson 2006). In other words, I here look at globalization and its corresponding macro- and micro-processes, as they operate in specific institutional, historical and geographic contexts, shaping and being shaped by institutions, structures and agency. As such, I understand globalization as an economic, social, cultural and political stage where the subject formation of Egyptian labor migrants vis-à-vis their positions in global capitalism, family, nation-state and labor regimes is constituted, produced and negotiated from the early 1990s to date. For instance, one macro-process of economic globalization in late capitalism is that it maintains a hierarchal world-system that organizes unequal relations and forges structural linkages between sending and receiving countries. The exploitative circulation of
migrant labor between a dominant core (receiving country) and a dependent periphery (sending country) is part of these ongoing unequal circulations (Castles and Miller 1998; Harvey 1985; Sassen 2001; Wallerstein 1979). Since the mid-1970s, Egypt has been supplying low-wage/low-status Egyptian laborers to Western Europe, North America, and the Middle East (Talani 2003). Thus, Egyptian labor migrants may be perceived as a labor supply from economically less to more advanced nation-states in the global capitalist economy.

But what is the logic according to which the global stage is set at this historical moment in Egypt and in the U.S.? The answer is neoliberalism. Neoliberalism refers to a theory of political economic practices that advocates the dismantling the welfare state and the deregulation of labor relations in the name of a "free" market society against a "patronizing" bureaucratic state. Neoliberal theory claims to promote "individual freedom" and "human dignity." It argues that such notions can be best advanced by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. Under the neoliberal order, market exchange is an ethic in itself that should guide all human actions without questions. It aims to bring all human actions into the domain of the market, which is believed to have an almost magical power to deliver the best outcomes in any situation. As such the market can solve every problem, while the state should have no role other than the protection of private property, free markets and free trade (Harvey 2005). Accordingly, neoliberalism constitutes the mode of regulation that disciplines the globalization stage. The question now is what are the features of economic and cultural globalization as a stage where transnational social fields take place in the post-1990s neoliberal world order in? While the answer of this question could be a study on its own, I here briefly examine some of the most relevant features to the cases of Egypt and the U.S. First, neoliberalism has restructured class hierarchy, enabling few ruling elites to monopolize the market and the political sphere. Second, it has erased any notion of entitlement for the people through decreasing welfare and subsidies, leaving the private as the prime agent for development. And third, it resulted in a radical polarization between the rich and the poor, and a tremendous shrinking of the middle class. These changes took place in Egypt (Mitchell 2002) and in the U.S. (Harvey 2005). Second, freeing the market from state regulation has led to the movement of finance capital, manifested in the increasing emergence of transnational financial institutions, which have emerged in developing countries since the late 1970s, as part of the deal concerning the management of Egypt's debts and structural adjustment policies undertaken by the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), respectively (Zaki 2006:15).

Egypt has been cornered in international debt by the World Bank/the International Monetary Fund, powerful states such as the U.S., and the ruling elites to encourage direct foreign investment and to privatize the public sector, which played a key role in securing employment for millions of Egyptians back in the 1950s and 1960s (Zaki 2006:2). As this study aims to show, these policies were crucial in the outmigration of Egyptian migrant workers. Neoliberalism has negatively affected the less-privileged Egyptian middle class, those who benefited from the post-1952 coup d'état democratization of education but were unable to realize global dreams in Cairo’s neo-liberal age due to the fact that they do not possess the required social and cultural capital (Barsoum 2002). Those Egyptians constitute the majority of migrant

---

13 In this section, I do not delve into the discussion of whether neoliberalism is a one hegemonic mode of regulation as developed by Harvey (2005) or does it represent several competing paradigms as Ong (2006) notes. In this section, I follow Harvey’s conceptualization of neoliberalism as a hegemonic mode of regulation for its being the most relevant to the discussion.
workers I met. Due to devaluation of the Egyptian pound in the global market, migrant workers earn much higher wages as "unskilled" laborers in the U.S. than what they used to earn as professionals in Egypt. The same policies have been implemented to varying degrees in the U.S. through the neo-liberal government of the Bush administration. These policies directly affected the welfare of people in a number of ways. The most important is cuts in government budget spending on social programs, such as health and education, and/or the removal of subsidies on major basic needs (Harvey 2005). It also left laborers in fierce competition lowered the production costs as much as possible and absorbed cheap and illegal migrant workers from less-advanced countries of the global capitalist economy in late capitalism (Sassen 1998; 2001).

From the Field

Marriage as an Illustration of Individual Success

Neoliberalism has had direct and major effects on the social life of individuals. It promoted individualism, private property, self-strategizing, personal responsibility instead of unionization and other forms of social solidarity (Harvey 2005). On the level of agency, neoliberalism reproduced a sense of individualization and strategizing, which can be best described in migrants' narratives such as "I'm smart and the world is open. It's me who decide, if I'm going to fail or succeed." In other words, by focusing on the (in)ability of human agents, neoliberalism led to the emergence of "wants, desires, and demands that are linked to new notions of individuality and selves, in order to increase consumption among the diverse population of the world" (Ali 2002:5, Trouillot 2001). In Egypt, for instance, neoliberalism has exposed human agents to what Abaza (2006) calls "empires of consumption," represented by shopping malls and coffee shops, among others. It has produced a discourse that puts individuals in situations where they have to respond creatively to these pressures, wants and desires. Migrant workers, through their migration journeys, respond creatively and variably to neoliberalism through fulfilling a number of desires, including marriage. Indeed, ethnographies on low-income neighborhoods in Egypt demonstrate that under the neo-liberal policies migration is not only a major strategy for upward mobility but also the hope for both educated and uneducated men to fulfill marriage requirements (Ali 2002; Hoodfar 1997; Ghannam 2006; Singerman 1995). Accounts of many people I met touch upon marriage-related issues and unsuccessful love stories, in addition to economic insecurities, to best describe hardships faced by the Egyptian middle class today. Mona, a 30 years old cashier in a Middle Eastern patisserie and who joined her sister who migrated earlier with her husband, notes,

"Life in Egypt today is best illustrated in weddings; couples get married in the Marriot Hotel and pay millions of pounds whereas others get married on rooftops with families and friends and serve sandwiches and cokes. The problem is that we are in the middle, we cannot economically afford to do the first but also we cannot socially afford to marry that cheap. I did not marry my fiancée for that stupid reason, can you imagine?"

Hussein, a limousine driver in his mid thirties, affirms Mona's observation,
In university, I was in a relationship. But the girl decided to date another guy who was very rich, although I loved her so much. I saw how money affects everything even relationships. That was one more reason to leave... I also knew that without the help of my parents who belong to the typically forgotten middle class, by which I mean that we used to own a 128 Fiat car that we sold when my sister got engaged to buy her trousseau, I won't be able to survive.

Tying the Bonds with Home

Selecting and marrying a bride from home is one recurrent transnational practice that male migrant workers are involved in. It is a strategy to escape US hegemonic nationalism and the gendered-racialization of Arab men, especially post-9/11, not only vis-à-vis the American state but also the American wife. I follow Naber's use of the term hegemonic (white) U.S. nationalism "to refer to "the official discourses of the U.S. state and corporate media and the notion of a universalized abstract American citizen that at the same time systematically produces sexualized, gendered and racialized bodies and particularistic claims for recognition and justice by minoritized groups" (2006:2). This is particularly true in the case of Arab-Middle Eastern-Muslim in post-9/11 era. It is an act that is not only prompted by Arab-Middle Eastern-Muslim racialization, but also by "other historically specific social, cultural and ideological factors" (Al-Ali 2002:101). Gender, as articulated in selecting a bride from Egypt, is one variable that impacts the ways migrant workers negotiate and create homes in a culturally specific way (Al-Ali and Koser 2002:5). It is but one gendered strategy that male migrant workers employ to establish a home where "proper values"- embedded in what they perceive as Arab/Muslim culture are produced. Among migrant workers I interviewed it is a practice that is articulated within a discourse that associates Egyptian brides from home with an idealized “true” Arab/Muslim culture and American brides with the "corrupt" American culture. Mohsen, a forty years old migrant worker, quotes:

...An Egyptian wife: would know what is right and wrong; would care about her husband and children; would understand religion, politics and Egyptian farce; would find something funny in a sad story; would know how to deal with the family of her husband and respect them; would stand by her husband in crisis...An American wife is tasteless, at first she makes you feel that it's ok to raise children Muslims Then you find her baptizing your children. She may look for a boyfriend after one year of marriage because she is bored. She would raise your children "American," she would let your daughter believing that it's ok to have sex...

When I asked Mohsen about whether or not he would accept to marry an Egyptian raised in the U.S. or a Muslim-American, he replied:

14 See Yen Li Espiritu (2003) for an analysis the ways that philipino immigrants exercise gendered power to escape US racialization.
Here the culture is open. You will never know what they do behind their parent's back. They may practice Islam, frequent the mosque regularly, but still they were raised in mixed schools with other Americans, they walk in the American streets. It's risky. Here the culture allows everything.

As per the quote above, not only Mohsen makes a distinction between a bride who is born to Egyptian and/or Muslim parents, but was also raised in the U.S. on the other hand, and an "authentic" Egyptian Muslim bride who was born and raised in Egypt, on the other hand. For him the former is not a preference as she might have absorbed the "corrupt" American culture from the school and the street whereas the latter is characterized by chastity.

Influenced by the discourse above, in a typical sequence, the man goes to Egypt to select a bride after spending five to seven years abroad accumulating savings. At home, marriage is not only a means to connect with Arab/Muslim culture and traditions, but also a manifestation of the man's success in his migration journey. Selecting the bride is primarily through relatives, but it can also be via friends or coincidental such as seeing a woman in the neighborhood. Sometimes migrant workers return to marry their first love. Mustafa, for instance, married Mona, a girl whom he loves since he left. Mona kept corresponding Mustafa via letters, tapes and e-mails, and Mustafa used to call her regularly, even when he was married to his American wife Jenny. For Mustafa, Mona represented the "original" love that he trusts; the girl who waited for him so long and put up with joyful and sad moments despite the fact that she is from a higher social class than his. According to him, he married her to prove to the world that he was able to make it.

It was a challenge. When I returned the first time after spending two years abroad, I made sure to dress smartly, to carry the latest mobile phone, to get the most expensive gifts to Mona and her parents; in brief to propose in full shape. When we visited them, my mother noticed that there is a major difference in social class; she lives in a 300 m² apartment in Mohandessin and I live in almost a squatter at the outskirts of Giza. My mother asked the reason why I was doing this to myself. I told her that why not I'm a smart and intelligent guy and I can do it. To tell you the truth this always caused a problem, until now I have to prove that I'm doing better financially than her brothers and male relatives so I exert double effort; now I bought a new apartment in Madinet Nasr, I bought her a car, a driver and many other things.

Like other workers I met, Mustafa perceives his work in the U.S. as the main road to prosperity; the road where he was able to fulfill his dreams of accumulating funds needed for marrying someone who is situated in a higher position in the socioeconomic ladder, in addition to fulfilling consumption desires needed to acquire a high social status in her setting. Buying expensive presents from America to Mona and her family, consuming expensive clothes and equipments, and competing financially and socially with other male members in Mona's family is a way to reconcile the notion of Egypt as home before and after working in the U.S. In other words, whereas before going to the U.S. Mustafa was incompetent in the Egyptian
Ahmed: Marriage Transnational Style

marriage and labor markets, his successful journey to the U.S. enabled him to
compete at least in the former.

For Mustafa and other migrant workers, their disadvantaged middle class
positionality has been upgraded as a result of migration to the U.S. and accordingly,
has granted them the chance to compete in the Egypt marriage market and
accordingly, to construct Egypt as home.

**Conclusion**

In this research, I discussed one transnational practice that Egyptian less-privileged
middle class men in New York City's service sector and women in Kafr al-Dawar
chose to be involved in. Based on a multi-sited ethnographic study in Egypt and in the
U.S., I tackled the many ways Egyptian migrant workers strategize and deploy
resources and networks transnationally in an attempt to get married and thereby to
fulfill their desire for acquiring social, economic and cultural capital. I analyzed their
marriage stories as they unfolded within a layer context shaped by processes of
globalization, transnationalism and neoliberalism. In so doing, I highlighted how their
lives, the lives of their transnational families, as well as the neighborhoods, which
they have left behind in Egypt and those they inhabited in NYC are affected by such
broader structures.
Works Cited


Ahmed: Marriage Transnational Style


Ahmed: Marriage Transnational Style


