AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

LIFE STORIES OF NON-HETEROSEXUAL SYRIAN MEN: OSTRACIZATION AND RENEGOTIATION OF FAMILY

by
OLE MORTEN DENSTAD

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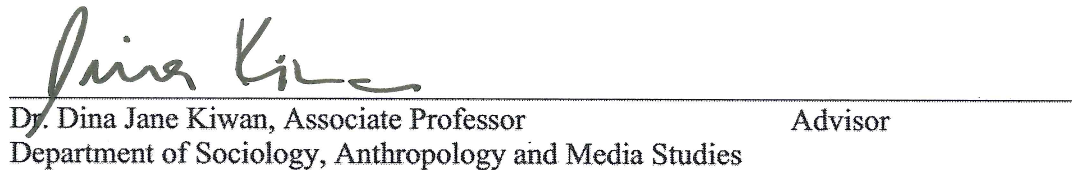

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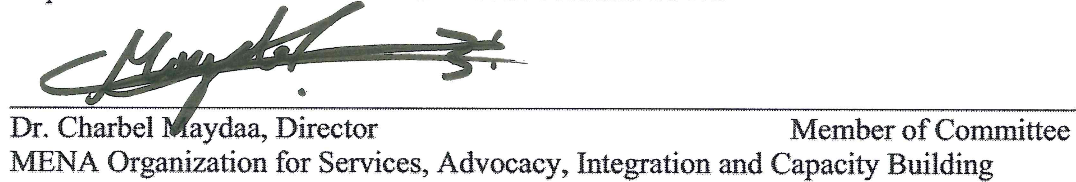

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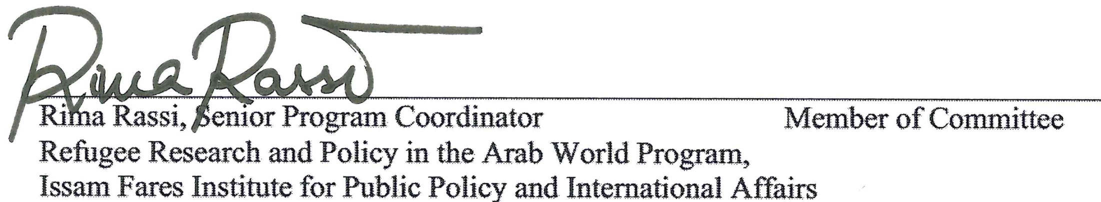

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Ole Morten Denstad for Master of Arts
Major: Middle Eastern Studies

Title: Life Stories of Non-Heterosexual Syrian Men: Ostracization and Renegotiation of Family

This thesis sets out to explore the intersectionality of the concept of family and the concept of homosexuality in Syria through an oral history study with ten non-heterosexual men. As the literature on this intersectionality in the regional context of the Arab world is scarce, the main objective of this study is first and foremost to convey the voices of these oral history speakers through the telling of their life stories related to their experiences within the realms of the traditional family.

The empirical data of this research is mainly based on the life stories of these ten speakers from in-depth interviews conducted during the spring of 2015, in coordination with Proud Lebanon, a Lebanese civil society organization. To better be able to understand the dynamics at play at the intersections between the traditional Arab family and non-heterosexual family members, I will analyze these stories through the means of oral history, grounded theory and discourse analysis. Further, to be open-minded regarding the possible findings, I did not enter this research with a fixed hypothesis or set research questions. Therefore, based on these life stories, this study does not offer any clear-cut answers to a particular questions, but is more geared towards presenting the breadth of stories, bearing witness of the speakers' different experiences and struggles, and their various ways of facing them.

The findings of the life stories in this thesis will be presented according to five broad conceptual labels. These include: 1) the general life stories related to the sense of childhood and what I have termed 'rupture' and the 'getaway', 2) the family life stories focusing on the relationships to parents and siblings, 3) the notion of ostracization and loss of family, 4) the renegotiation of family life, and 5) terms of self-identification.

Further, the findings of this study will especially highlight the notion of the renegotiation of traditional concepts of family among these non-heterosexual men, after their ostracization from the family of origin, and view this as an example of creating new realities and new communities of knowledge and empowerment, as a way of facing lived hardships of their current realities and as a compensation for the experienced loss of their communities of origin – because;

el-janna min ghēr nās ma btendeās….

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The concepts of homosexuality and of family are both well studied in the context of the Arab world; the former mostly as a modern social phenomenon not really existent in the region before the rise of Western imperialist projects and a subsequent 'incitement to discourse' about sexuality (Massad 2007; El-Rouayheb 2005); the latter as the traditional and cohesive institution of social organization (Barakat 1993; Joseph 1999) and provider of security and socio-economic support (Barakat 1993). Despite what, in my view, are inseparable intersections between them, the concepts of homosexuality and of family are mostly studied separately in the social sciences focusing on Arab societies. In comparison, this intersectionality has received some interest in Western fields of study (Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan 2001; Butler 2004; Boyd and Roque Ramírez 2012). Moreover, the existing body of knowledge often takes a very literary, grand-narrative approach to the analysis of these two concepts – both witnessing dramatic and rapid transformations within the transitional nature of many of today's Arab societies.

As Weeks argues in his work *Sexuality*, I consider it important to treat the current changes in family and sexual life in terms of what is happening at the grassroots level of society, recognizing an increasing "diversity of domestic forms, cutting across the apparent solidity of the traditional family" (Weeks 2010, 112, 128). Thus, to be able to keep track with these changes at the grassroots level and to understand the concepts of homosexuality and family in relation to one another, I believe that what is lacking

today in this regional context are studies focusing on their intersectionality through qualitative research based on empirically grounded work in the social sciences. As a case example of this, I want to explore the renegotiation of traditional concepts of family among non-heterosexual Syrian men who are ostracized from their families and who are currently residing in Lebanon as refugees.

Hence, this study is based on in-depth interviews, specifically structured to learn oral histories, with ten self-identifying non-heterosexual men telling their life stories from Syria related to their concept of family. It is the conveying of these individuals' voices and their life-story narratives that is the chief objective of this study. In order to achieve this objective, I will be relying primarily on methods and practices from the field of oral history. Also, as this has been work of an exploratory character, I have been benefiting from methods of grounded theory in my empirical analysis.

The findings of this study will be shedding light on some of the hardships that the speakers have been facing throughout their lives, especially in terms of their ostracization from the family. In addition, it will investigate the concept of renegotiating family life as non-heterosexual individuals within the realms of the traditional Arab family. Thus, with the speakers' stories, I want to show how emerging non-heterosexual ways of life can be seen as a renegotiation of the lost family, and, in the terms of Weeks et al. (2001, 5), as indices of transformation and something new; as a possible positive and creative response to social and cultural change and as an opposition to the patriarchy of the traditional family, which is the expressed reason for the widely present notion of family ostracization.

A. Background

Apart from the wish to contribute filling the mentioned gap in literature, my interest in engaging with these particular topics of study – the family and homosexuality – comes from a quest to better understand the myriad of factors that play out at their intersections, in order to highlight some of the struggles and challenges that non-heterosexual individuals often face with their families of origin. I find it useful to explore these notions in a context such as the Syrian, where, as expressed by the speakers of this study, homosexuality is mostly treated either as a matter of social disgrace, as 'deviance' or as being *ḥarām*, and where there generally "is no concept [*mafhūm*] for 'gays' at all" (Karim 2015).

The family, *al-ʿāʾila,* is seen to be the main reference for identity, belonging, socialization, network and socio-economic support in Arab societies. Thus, for non-heterosexual individuals to be cut-off from such realms, often lead to detrimental consequences. With this, all individuals in this study, being ostracized and cut-off from their families, expressed a wish for their voices and stories to be heard, in order to call attention to the struggles that they face within the traditional understanding of family life. Thus, in this life-story study, I wish to convey these voices and stories through the use of methods from oral history, and with this I also wish to shed light on some of the hardships and struggles emanating from leading non-heterosexual lives in Syria.

Many a critic of such an effort – with Joseph Massad in the front seat – would denounce the raising of this topic as a detrimental 'incitement to discourse' in the Arab world, allegedly producing homosexuals, as well as gays and lesbians, 'where they do not exist' and thus run the errands of the imperialist Western human rights or 'Gay Internationals' (see Massad 2007; 2009). I nevertheless believe that one should not be

so generalizing and disempowering of the alleged 'unfit victims' of this 'Western' discourse on homosexuality in the Arab world. Rather, as I will come back to, I think one ought to prioritize *their* stories as telling for how they wish live their lives, and in what terms they wish to self-identify, and thus not base the discussion on literary representation of the lives and the life choices of non-heterosexual individuals.

Having conducted this life-story study, it became clear that shedding light, or 'inciting discourse', on the tabooed matter of homosexuality and non-heterosexual lives in this regional context is what the speakers of this study wish for; they want to raise their voices and to have their stories be heard. However, being aware of my own bias and positionality as a 'Western' student researcher with regards to conveying these voices and stories, I hope to be able to let the stories themselves be what guides this work. Thus, concerning my positionality, it is my intention in this study to give the authority of representation to the voices of the *speakers*, as to not fall in the trap of Orientalism and of rendering the 'Orient' as 'voiceless' and without authority over its own representation (Said 1979; Moussawi 2013). This is also why I am referring to 'speakers' in this study, and not to 'interviewees' or to 'participants', seeking to give the authority to the concerned Syrian men.

The reason for having chosen to focus specifically on Syrian individuals in this study, and not including Lebanese men or men of other nationalities residing in Lebanon, is mainly of the reason that I wanted to limit the scope of this thesis to one distinct national group to simplify the sample and factors to take into consideration. Another reason is that the concept of homosexuality in the Lebanese context has been much wider studied than in the context of Syria, which in comparison has received fairly little attention and treatment. Further, with this life story study, the main objective

is to look at the family lives of non-heterosexual individuals in Syria before coming to Lebanon as 'refugees'. Thus, the notion of refugeehood will not be a central part of my study, besides taking into account the different ways in which this factor affects their stories and narratives. I am fully aware of this limitation to the study. However, I believe that including the notion of refugeehood would have been outside the limits of this thesis, being preoccupied with notions of family. Taking the notion of refugeehood into consideration might, however, be an interesting topic for further sociological study.

B. Research Questions

I did not enter this study or the interviews with a fully developed research question, as it was the speakers' life stories emerging in the interviews that concerned me, and not my own preconceived ideas or solely the theoretical literature of matters related to the concepts of homosexuality and the family. However, through the use of grounded theory I recognized and extracted some topics that were recurrently referred to in all or most of the stories, after having conducted all interviews. This resulted in the five broad research questions, or topics, that I will focus on in this study in chapter four on the findings and life stories. The first topic is related to the broader *life stories* of the speakers' experiences as non-heterosexuals in Syria, focusing on their sense of childhood and what I call the 'rupture' and the 'getaway'. Secondly, I want to focus on the speakers' experiences from their lives within the realms of their *families* of origin, looking at their relationships with their parents and their siblings, respectively. Thirdly, I will look at the notions of *ostracization,* and the speakers' sense of a loss of family and the severe consequences that this has had for their lives. In the fourth section, I will focus on the *renegotiation* of the terms and concepts of family and also the ways in

which some of the speakers seek to compensate for the loss of their families by creating structures of family within their community or social sphere, *el-jaww*. In the fifth and last section, I will look into the terms and language of *self-identification* used by the speakers, provided as a contribution to the debate raised by Joseph Massad on the topic of homosexual identities in the Arab world.

C. Arabic: Translation, Transcription and Transliteration

All of the interviews in this study have been conducted exclusively in Arabic and subsequently translated and transcribed by me. I have also included some words, quotes and names transcribed in Arabic with Latin characters throughout this paper. This is especially the case when I found these to carry distinct meanings in Arabic, or are not easily translated into English. It is a near impossible task to adhere to any one standard system of transcription[1] when dealing with various dialects of colloquial Arabic. However, the included transcriptions are as far as possible based on a system like the *Transliteration System For Arabic, Persian, And Turkish* presented by the International Journal of Middle East Studies (2015). At the same time, as I have tried to stay as true as possible to the speakers' direct words, some inconsistencies might be observed in the different forms of transcription. As the speakers would use certain terms in English in their stories, I have marked these between quotation marks in the transcription to be identified. Most notably of these are the references to homosexuality, that is 'gay', 'LGBT' and the like. Lastly, also the transliterations of titles, names and expressions from Arabic written sources are based on the IJMES (2015) system. This includes titles of Arabic works in the bibliography.

[1] I use the term 'transcription' here to mean "reflecti[ing] in Latin characters, Arabic as it is spoken"

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SEXUALITY AND FAMILY

As pointed to in the introduction, there exists a range of literature pertaining to the concepts of sexuality and the perceptions of homosexuality in the Arab world. At the same time, much is written on the roles of traditional families in Arab societies. However, throughout my review of the literature in this study, I have yet to find any literature examining the intersections and relations between these two concepts in this particular regional context. Hence, this is where I intend to situate this study, by looking at how these two factors play out on each other in the context of Syria.

This chapter on the theoretical framework, is mostly focused on a literature review presenting some of the most prominent academic contributions to the two fields of writing; sexuality and the family, and trough this I wish to identify the gaps in literature that I hope to contribute filling. This following literature review consists of three sections. First, I will start with a discussion of the field of Sexuality Studies in general, situating this study in terms of the different theoretical frameworks that dominate this field of writing. Secondly, I will explore the literature written on sexuality and homosexuality in the Arab world in particular. Finally, in the third section, I will look into some of the literature dealing with studies of the family in the Arab world and Syria.

No matter how imperative such a literature review is in terms of situating my study within the broader theoretical framework of other scholars, and in identifying the gaps in the existent literature, the bulk part of this life story study, both in terms of the

concept of family and of homosexuality, naturally lies in the stories and narratives of the interviews with the speakers. I will come back to the sample and the scope of these interviews in the next chapter dealing with the methodology. The remainder of this chapter, however, will revolve around the writings on sexuality and family respectively.

A. The Study of Sexuality

> "The invention of identities is apparently never-ending, shifting boundaries, confusing the categories, intersecting various subjectivities, subverting and refreshing the languages of sexuality" (Weeks, 2010; 89).

As Weeks points out above; to deal with sexuality is to deal with a range of inventions, confusions and intersections – all socially constructed. Now, before diving into the discussion of the literature in the field of Sexuality Studies, I will in the following section provide a brief outline of the key-terminology that I am using in this study for the sake of clarification, to be solicitous of Weeks' notes above about all the confusing categories in the language of sexuality.

1. Terminology: Non-Heterosexual, Queer and Homosexuality

a. 'Non-Heterosexual'

> "Non-heterosexual ways of being can be seen as indices of something new: positive and creative responses to social and cultural change" (Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan 2001, 5)

As the field of Sexuality Studies is filled with ambiguous and contradicting views regarding its concepts both in theory and in practice, thus comprising a plethora of greatly contentious political and cultural identifications, terms and labels, I will begin this section with explaining my selection of terminology in the hope of reducing some

of its possible ambiguity (for an overview of sexuality and terminology that has informed my choice of terminology Weeks 2010, chap. 4, and Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan 2001 preface). I will deal more with general English and Arabic terminology pertaining to sexuality, *jinsāniyya*, in the coming section of the literature review of Sexuality Studies. This section, however, mostly deals with the particular choices of terminology that I have applied in this study, with a specific focus on the term 'non-heterosexual', which to some people may seem to be a somewhat unconventional choice.

Although I apply the term 'homosexuality' in this study to refer to the social phenomenon of same-sex practices in general, I will be using the term 'non-heterosexual' to refer to the speakers of this study. There are several reasons for why I am applying the term non-heterosexual, some of which I will elaborate on below.

My use of the term 'non-heterosexual' in this study is first and foremost to refer to people who do not regard themselves exclusively as heterosexual – or rather 'straight*'* which was a word referred to by many of the speakers, stressing the fact that *"ana manne 'straight' "* [I am not 'straight']. As Weeks et al. (2001) discuss in terms of what they call the 'heterosexual assumption', heterosexuality is the all-pervasive social and institutional norm in society. I believe that it is safe to say that this is very much the case in Syria and in Arab societies in general, where a 'deviation', *shudhūdh*, from this norm easily gets labeled and categorized. With this, 'non-normative' would maybe have been another and more familiar term I could have applied. However, in this case, I found 'non-heterosexual' to be a more accurate and persuasive term here as this study focuses on the notion of *sexuality* among the participating men.

Secondly, I apply this term of the reason that the speakers would use a varying and inconsistent array of both English and Arabic labels for self-referral or identification, leading one and the same person to speak of himself as both 'gay', '*mithlī*' and 'LGBT'. Thus, being unable to find any more suitable coverall term referring to the speakers' experiences of possessing same-sex preferences, 'non-heterosexual' is in my view the term most fitting and least contested to serve this purpose. Thus, I find this term more neutral than its many possible alternatives – among others; 'homosexual', 'gay' and the more recent buzzwords, 'queer' and 'LGBT/QQI'[2]. Thus, where the term 'homosexual' as label has long been associated with psychology textbooks, the term 'gay' as a self-identification is a highly politicized, contested and not a 'universal term' (Weeks et al. 2001, viii). With this said, the English term 'gay', was the most prevalent but far from the only term that the speakers would use when talking about themselves in Arabic and often applied in its plural form, as in "*ana* 'gays' ". Of this reason, I will also intermittently apply the term 'gay' in this study when referring to individuals who identify mostly as such.

Moreover, when it comes to the recent term and theory of 'queer', this is maybe even more contested as a label of self-identification than the aforementioned. This relatively new product of the fluidity of postmodernism has, ironically enough, also become the means of a 'non-identity identity' (Weeks 2010, 89). Although increasingly popular in the West as a means of self-identifying, not even once did this term surface during the interviews with the speakers in this study, except when used in its Arabic equivalent, *shāzz*, to refer to one of the derogatory terms that society at large label them with. Thus, I will not be speaking of 'queers' in this study. Further, as I am

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[2] "Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, querying, intersexed" (Weeks 2010, 89)

working solely with non-heterosexual men in this study, I will not apply the label LGBT/QQI as a generic term, although this also seems to be a popular label used by many speakers who spoke of themselves in Arabic. I will come more back to the English and Arabic terms used by the speakers when discussing the findings of the oral histories.

Furthermore, my choice of referring to the speakers as 'non-heterosexuals' is influenced by what Weeks et al. (2001) discuss as "non-heterosexual families of choice and life experiments" in their book *Same Sex Intimacies,* which is a wide-ranging empirical research of the intersections between homosexuality and many various concepts of family. Their study deals with "the lives and life choices of self-identified lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, 'queers', and others historically consigned to the margins of our culture" in mainland Britain in the nineties (Weeks et al. 2001). Although my study exclusively focuses on the lives of non-heterosexual men from another decade and culture, this thorough and inspiring study of the renegotiation of the concepts of family among marginalized individuals has been enlightening to my work with this research.

In addition to Weeks et al. mentioned above, prominent queer theorists such as Judith Butler (2002) and Steven Seidman (2012) also applies the terms *nonheterosexuals* and *nonheterosexuality* in their works. Butler links the concept of *nonheterosexuals* to that of the family in her writing on *Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual.* In this work, she takes a critical look at the growing calls for institutionalized gay marriage in the US and with this discusses alternative forms of nonheterosexual unions and kinship, the latter of which I will come back to with the discussion of the terminology surrounding the family.

Another queer theorist in favor of the term 'non-heterosexuals' is Seidman (2012). In relating gendered behavior and sexuality in the case of cosmopolitan Beirut, he asks how non-heterosexual Lebanese men negotiate this urban world of 'anonymous enemies' that publicly seems to have no alternative to heterosexuality. Thus, it is his contention from his urban ethnography of the cosmopolitan spheres of the Lebanese capital, that:

> "The status of nonheterosexual desire is far from settled in Beirut. There is an uneasy ambivalence among Lebanese, even cosmopolitans, regarding the relation between desire, identity, and public life. In part this ambivalence is rooted in the continued moral and social authority of kin and sect, which stigmatizes nonheterosexuality." (Seidman 2012, 23)

In similar lines, in his original and though-provoking essay, *Queering Beirut, the 'Paris of the Middle East'*, Ghassan Moussawi (2013) also tackles the topic of 'identity' among Lebanese non-heterosexual men, but from the view of international journalistic articles and contemporary 'gay travelogues'. In such publications, Moussawi says, "non-heterosexual Lebanese are racialized and represented as sexually available (in private) but discreet (in public)", and argue that the Euro-American depictions of 'gay-life' in Beirut, in its attempt in making "Beirut and non-heterosexual Lebanese men intelligible", fall in the Orientalist trap of failing to understand the complexities at play and the "intersections of gender, race, class and sexualities" (Moussawi 2013, 858). These recorded and reductionist descriptions of the "travellers' experiences of 'gay Beirut' ", he argues, does not try to explain "Lebanese non-heterosexuals' negotiations and understandings of their sexualities", but rather "flatten queer Lebanese men's experiences and render them *voiceless*" (Moussawi 2013, 861, 868 my italics). I find Moussawi's critique of the evident essentialism in such writings

to be appropriate. Thus with a focus on the *voices* and stories of the 'non-heterosexual' men in this study, this is what I seek to avoid doing.

b. 'Queer'

With the above, I have wanted to show how the term 'non-heterosexual' can be applied in academic writings. Now, in the last part of this section, I want to go back and dwell quickly on the term 'queer'. As both a social theory and attempt of a 'coverall' label for non-normative sexual orientation and gender identity, and as the current "predominant position within Sexuality Studies" (Beasley 2005, 128), many would probably argue that the term 'queer' would have been the most appropriate academic coverall term to use of the non-heterosexual men in this study – knowing that also other qualitative studies focusing on Lebanon have taken a basis in 'queer' (for instance Merabet 2006; 2014; and Meem 2009).

The intended purpose of queer is to disrupt previously believed solidified identities and categories. However, I believe that the notion of queer do not necessarily resonate well in this particular study of lived sexuality within societal and familial structures in Syria. First of all, in Arabic and the context of the Arab world, this term has not undergone the same riddance of its negative and abusive connotations to 'abnormality' (Beasley 2005, 163) as is the case in the English-speaking world, and is thus still used predominantly in derogatory terms for abnormality and 'deviance'. Thus, the closest Arabic translation of 'queer' is still *shādhdh*[3], with the concept being referred to as *al-shudhūdh al-jinsī*, meaning 'deviant' and 'sexual deviance' respectively. Proposed alternative translation of the term, such as the loosely connected

[3] In colloquial Arabic mostly pronounced as *shāzz.* I will use these interchangeably.

aḥrār al-jins (Helem 2005), meaning something like 'sexually free people', has not gained any significant ground in Arabic, either in spoken colloquial or in writing.

The writer of the excellent essay *The Mind-Boggling Queer* in the innovative and eye-opening work *Bareed Mista3jil*, which I will come more back to later, argues that "Lebanon is not ready for queer theory" (Meem 2009, 114). If this is the case for Lebanon, arguably the most open country in the region to 'Western' ideas and notions, I believe that this could be said to be the case also for the Arab world in general, and Syria in particular. In Lebanon, she says, one is 'constantly categorized and referenced' in society and thus she argues that "Lebanese people need something more squarely defined" to refer to, when talking about concepts of homosexuality (Meem 2009, 112–114).

As queer theory advocates for a bigger fluidity of sexual categories and identities, stressing the freedom of "being undefined and uncontained within a social/sexual group" (Meem 2009, 214), this is to be starting in the wrong end in Lebanon, according to the writer. She suggests that; "First let us say: Yes, all people are sexual beings. Yes, people can have sex outside of marriage. Yes, people do masturbate" (Meem 2009, 114). With this, conservative societies such as the Lebanese, or, in my view, the Syrian for that matter, are not 'ready' for queer theory as a theory of disturbing and challenging the "fundamental values that people have attributed to things for centuries" or questioning heternonormativity. Thus, although she identifies as a queer person and is an advocate for Queer Theory herself, the writer still realizes that it is too early to start 'queering the Arab world'. The writer further offers another translation for the word 'queer', which in Arabic, she says, "translates into '*ghareeb al*

atwar'[4] [sic.]" in addition to *shazz*, 'deviant'. Further, in what maybe is an attempt to reclaim the notion of queer, or *shādhdh*, she concludes her essay, saying that:

> "I love the word '*shazz!*' [sic. colloquial pronunciation] I would most proudly love to be called a 'deviant' from a society like Lebanon (or any other country in the globe for that matter). It is in being deviants that we resist all the unfair distribution of power in the world today. So yes, *ana shazzeh*." (Meem 2009, 115)

However, as self-identifying as *shāzz* was not the case among any of the speakers in my study. With this, I will not apply the term 'queer' here, but rather refer to the terms 'non-heterosexual' and 'homosexuality', *al-mithliyya al-jinsiyya.*

c. Homosexuality

Lastly, applying the term 'homosexuality' in this study to refer to the concept of same-sex practices and identification in general is simply of the reason that this is such an incorporated term in the literature and in every-day language, and also what corresponds best to the most correct Arabic term in use, *al-mithliyya al-jinsiyya* – and not *al-shudhūdh al-jinsī*, which Massad (2007, 172) claims to still be "the most common term used in monographs, the press, and polite [sic.] company to refer to the Western concept of "homosexuality". *Al-shudhūdh al-jinsī*, literally meaning sexual abnormality, deviance or perversion, is predominantly used in derogatory ways among people with intolerant attitudes towards non-normative sexual expression. In relating to this notion of *shudhūdh*, or 'deviance', the writer of another essay of *Bareed Mista3jil* (2009), *We Live in a Ruthless Society,* says that she "made the big mistake of coming out to my family" as a lesbian and now being homeless as a result of this. Because, she

[4] *Gharīb al-Aṭwār*, meaning "of odd behavior, eccentric" (Wehr 1979)

says; “my mother has always linked lesbianism to drugs and perversion” (Meem 2009, 157). “How can she not,” she asks rhetorically, “when the commonly used Arabic word for it is ‘*shouzouz*’ ” (Meem 2009, 157) .

Further, in an effort to tackle the problematic surrounding the Arabic use of *shudhūdh* for homosexuality, it is worth mentioning that a legal campaign was initiated in Lebanon in 2004 by the foundation *Hurriyat Khassa,* ‘Private Liberties’, to target local media and press to stop using such ‘insulting phrases and intimidation’ in dealing with topics related to homosexuality (Ḥurriyāt Khaṣṣa 2004; Saghieh 2014). This was a rather successful campaign and there seems today to be a wide consensus at least in Lebanese Arabic press not to use previous derogatory terms, such as *al-shudhūdh al-jinsī* or *lūṭī/liwāṭ* or *qawm lūṭ*[5] when referring to homosexuality (Dailystar 2004). I will return to a discussion of the terms surrounding homosexuality and the Arabic language in the coming section focusing on the field of Sexuality Studies, where I also will discuss the historical background of the general terms of sex and sexuality.

2. Sexuality Studies

> “For was this transformation of sex into discourse not governed by the endeavor to expel from reality forms of sexuality that were not amenable to the strict economy of reproduction?” (Foucault 1978, 36)
>
> “The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology... The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.” (Foucault 1978, 43)

[5] This bears a religious reference to the story of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah and the prophet Lot. *Lūṭī/liwāṭ* thus refers to ‘sodomite/s’, while *līwāṭa* refers to ‘sodomy’.

This first part of the following literature review will be concerned with the field of Sexuality Studies and its dominating theoretical strands. There exists an abundance of writings on the theoretical frameworks for the concept of sexuality and of homosexuality. This has increasingly also been the case in the Arab world, especially where the literary representations of homosexuality in Arabic writings have been studied and historicized – something I will elaborate on in the next section. In this section, however, I will highlight some of the dominating theoretical schemes and frameworks within Sexuality Studies. With this, I will rely mostly on theoretical frameworks developed by Western scholars, drawing on some of the writings of especially Foucault, Butler and Weeks. With this, I will later advocate for the latter's stand within the theory of *Social Constructionism* as the best theoretical framework for treating the matter of sexuality today, especially in the context of the Arab world and Syria.

I further want to underline that in dealing with the question of sexuality in this particular regional context, I believe that one should not escape taking into consideration the groundbreaking, yet controversial, critique of the study of sexuality in the Arab world presented, by Joseph Massad in his grand undertaking, *Desiring Arabs* (2007). Thus, I will discuss the theoretical framework that I make use of in this study in relation to some of Massad's main hypotheses later in this section and throughout this study. First, however, I will present a short historical overview of the field of Sexuality Studies in general.

a. What Is Sexuality?

People vary greatly in terms of their understandings and conceptions of 'sexuality' and what this actually means and entails. Even within the conception of one and the same person, it refers to a multitude of opposing meanings and ideas; pleasure and pain, love and hate, procreation and infertility, normal and deviant, and so on. Thus, to most people there is a certain 'good' and 'bad' sexuality. But then what exactly is sexuality? The etymology of the term that we today know as 'sexuality' is not very old, only developing its modern meanings in the latter half of the nineteenth century (Weeks 2010, 5). The term itself, an "abstract noun referring to the quality of being 'sexual' ", seems hard to define in a tangible manner and, as mentioned, is highly debated and ambiguous among social scientists still today (Weeks 2010, 5). One still widely referenced description of this term and concept, is of course that provided by Foucault in *The Use of Pleasure,* the second volume of his series on the *History of Sexuality*, in which he sought to dwell on what he calls "that quite recent and banal notion of sexuality" (Foucault 1988, 3). Here Foucault states that the term sexuality itself:

> "Did not appear until the beginning of the nineteenth century [...] The use of the word was established in connection with other phenomena: the development of diverse fields of knowledge […] the establishment of a set of rules and norms—in part traditional, in part new—which found support in religious, judicial, pedagogical and medical institutions; and changes in the way individuals were led to assign meaning and value to their conduct, their duties, their pleasures, their feelings and sensations, their dreams." (Foucault 1988, 3–4)

This was the background for Foucault's notion of what he coined the 'incitement to discourse' about sex that emerged the West in the nineteenth century. This particular notion of discourse was to become a trope in various academic critiques,

and thus, was also instructive for Edward Said's theorizing on the concept of a Western production of knowledge about the Orient and the Arab world, of which he says:

> ”Most important, such texts can create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe. In time such knowledge and reality produce a tradition, or what Michel Foucault calls a discourse.” (Said 1979, 94)

Massad, on his part, draws on Foucault and Said's notions of the incitement to discourse about both sexuality and the Orient, to show how the 'West' has used sexuality as a tool for creating a 'discourse' to accommodate their imperialist endeavors in the region. However, Massad blames Foucault for failing to recognize the colonial aspect of the *Scientia Sexualis* of the West. Thus, Foucault's notions of the modern concept of sexuality were, according to Massad (2007, 7) themselves, 'products of the colonial experience' and an important part of the Western imperial 'incitement to discourse' about sex and civilization in the colonies, and especially so in the Arab world. Of this reason, these notions came to be leading as well outside the context of the Western world, which is why I believe they are important to consider also with regards to the historical background of this study of sexuality in a non-Western context.

As an example of how twentieth century European notions of sexuality are still highly relevant in the context of for example Syria and Lebanon, is the fact that the penal codes still criminalizing same-sex practices, mostly acts of 'sodomy', are laws that are left from the French Mandate period from 1949 and 1943 respectively (Al-Jumhūriyya al-Lubnāniyya 1943; Al-Jumhūriyya al-ʾArabiyya al-Sūriyya 1949). Thus, the rules and norms that were dominant during, and in the aftermath of Victorian Europe traveled with colonialism to the Arab world where its epistemology also took its toll on Arab intellectuals (Massad 2007). This 'Western imposed' incitement to

discourse became, as Massad argues, especially apparent in the last decades of the twentieth century, when he says that a new discourse that dealt with sexual relations emerged, partially by elaborating the category 'sexual deviance' " (Massad 2007, 191). In a reference to Foucault's claim that Western civilization was "the only civilization to practice a *scientia sexualis*" (Foucault 1978, 58), Massad argues that "such a practice had by the 1980s, if not earlier, proliferated to the Arab world like never before" in what he calls a "veritable explosion of publications of *materia sexualis*" (Massad 2007, 191). This was in part the epistemological background for the alleged detrimental rise of the 'Gay International' (Massad 2007, chap. 3) and their imperialist roles in the Arab world, focusing on the notion of repressed Arab sexualities.

b. Sex, Sexuality, *Jins*, *Jinsāniyya*

With going back to the understanding of the concept of sexuality as such, another, and maybe more tangible description of it, is that which is provided by Weeks, who is saying that the modern concept of sexuality "came to mean the personalized sexual feelings that distinguished one person from another (my sexuality), while hinting at that mysterious essence that attracts us to each other" (Weeks 2010, 5). With this, he is highlighting both the personalized *bodily* experience embodied in the modern concept of sexuality, and its *social* aspect of attraction and relation.

Weeks, in line with Foucault, argues that the modern understanding of sexuality only developed in the second half of the nineteenth century. Its linguistic origin of 'sex', on the other hand, has a longer history, and is worth mentioning. In English, this term is traced back to the sixteenth century. Coming from the Latin *sexus*, it originally referred to the binary division of people into male and female, creating the

basis of what most people later would refer to as *gender*. Today the term 'sex' has a confusingly complex set of meanings as it refers both "to an act *and* a category of person", that is, "to a practice *and* to a gender" (Weeks 2010, 4, my italics). Thus one both *is* and *does* sex, as both a *bodily* and a *social* phenomenon.

This Western epistemology of sex and sexuality that was especially developed in Victorian Europe from the nineteenth century on, was, as Massad has shown, transferred to the Arab world. These concepts were then adopted by Arabic language, where the linguistically closest equivalent to the two terms 'sex' and 'sexuality' are *jins* and *jinsiyya*, or the more recent *jinsāniyya*, respectively. The latter two are examples of words constructed in Arabic, as what is known grammatically by the feminine *nisba* construct (-*iyya*), as in jinsān*iyya*, which is often used to refer to new concepts and abstract nouns, pointing to the recent construction of these terms from the original term *jins*. This latter term in Arabic, which is argued to be originating from the Greek word *genos*[6], originally referred to a 'type' or 'kind', or 'ethnolinguistic origin' (Massad 2007, 171). Thus the *sexual* connotations of this word, according to Massad, only entered the Arabic language in the early twentieth century when it came to signify the concept of 'biological sex', in addition to a more concrete and modern concept of '*national* origin' (Massad 2007, 171), pointing towards its coinciding emergence with the height of the imperialist projects in the Arab world, and its affect on Arabic language and public discourse. Thus, in Arabic today, speaking of *masrī/iyya al-jins*, meaning a male or female who is 'Egyptian by nationality', and *mithlī/iyya al-jins* referring to a male or female 'homosexual', refer to these two very different

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[6] *Genos* (*γένος*) refers "primarily to birth; and when applied to mark the connexion between a number of individuals, may equally denote the closest natural ties of a common family" or more largely "the widest natural ties of the race or nation" (Smith 1890), or 'parentage', 'gender', 'species', 'sex' or 'race' (Watts 1997)

etymological meanings of the word *jins*, similar to the English meaning of *act* and of a *category*, referred to above. Further, the term *jinsiyya*, which came to signify the even more tangible notion of belonging, as it refers to both 'citizenship' and 'nationality', is said to have taken its meaning of 'sexuality' with the Arabic translations of the works of the Austrian psychotherapist Sigmund Freud to Arabic in the 1950s (Massad 2007, 172). The further derived term, *jinsāniyya*[7], is widely regarded to be the most correct translation of the word sexuality today, but is still to gain any significant ground in both Arabic literature and daily speech. This term is viewed especially to have entered Arabic with the translation of Michel Foucault's[8], *History of Sexuality*, or *Iradat al-Ma'rifah, Al-Juz' al-Awwal min Tarikh al-Jinsaniyya,* in the 1990s (Massad 2007, 172).

In his pivotal and highly influential writings on the history of sex and sexuality, and how these concepts have been subjected to the 'incitement to discourse' over the past centuries in Western societies, Foucault shows how the discourse on sex from around the seventeenth century on has been transformed from being simply an outlawed bodily practice, focusing on "the theme of the flesh and the practice of penance" (Foucault 1978, 33), into a 'polymorphous discourse' taking a dominant place in society and in its state power structures; its 'bio-power' (Foucault 1978, 140). With that development also came the notion of social sexual identities, claims Foucault. Thus, in modern times, the notion of sex, he says, came to witness an "explosion of distinct discursivities," manifested in many fields of study, such as demography, biology, medicine, psychiatry, psychology, ethics, pedagogy and political criticism"

[7] This term is still understood by few although it is gaining ground, especially within civil society circles. For one example see the Lebanese-based "Markaz al-Mawārid al-Jindarīyya wal-Jinsānīyyah", in English "Resource Center of Gender and Sexuality". See http://www.gsrc-mena.org/about-arabic.php (accessed 2015-01-20)

[8] Or "Mishil Fuku" as Massad prefers to transliterate his name (Massad 2007, 172).

(Foucault 1978, 33). With the incitement to discourse about sex and sexuality, and their moving into the realms of bio-power, sex "had to be put into words" (Foucault 1978, 32) and thus different sexualities and sexual categorizations had to be defined and explained.

With this, it is not the historical notion of sexuality and sexual categorization as such, commented on above, that is the core focus of this study. However, I believe it is important to present these historical notions of it; how and when sexuality began to be regulated and confined in society, thus how sexual identities as such have been constructed and constantly renegotiated in different societies in recent history, either if it is in the West or in the Arab world. Thus, people's practices were identified and governed, especially since the late nineteenth century. This was also when sexuality fully emerged as a scientific field of study, whether in the West or in the Arab world, with the tradition of sexology and psychoanalysis (Weeks 2010, 6). With this increased focus on the scientific study also came the increasing politicizations of sexuality. It was subsequently moved into the spheres of the home, where "the conjugal family took custody of it and absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction", and where it was "the legitimate and procreative couple" that created the law and norm of confined sexuality (Foucault 1978, 3). Thus, the political economy of the people played an important role in this new aspect of sexuality, and sex became an issue between the state and the individual, and indeed between the state and the family – or the couple. The attempts were thus to "transform the sexual conduct of couples into a concerted economic and political behavior" (Foucault 1978, 26). I will come back to a discussion on the concept of sexuality within the structures of family later, but first I shall take a deeper look at the general field of sexuality and the different theoretical strands that

have been dominating it in modern, though mostly Western, literature since the second half of the twentieth century.

3. Modernist Essentialism and Postmodernist Fluidity

As mentioned, the study of sexuality within medical and psychological frameworks started gaining ground in the late nineteenth century, and from the late twentieth century on, the political and social aspects of sexuality was to be more widely theorized and studied, especially in the West. Within the scheme of Sexuality Studies, the two theoretical traditions that have dominated modern literature, as in most fields of theory, are the trajectories of *Modernism* and *Postmodernism*.

The modernist–postmodernist divide in this field of study is particularly focused around the questions of *identity* and the use of identity politics. The former trajectory mostly takes an essentialist stance based on identity categorization and liberationist politics, centered on these identity categories. In Sexuality Studies this is especially manifest with the "Gay Liberation" movements of the seventies and the eighties, in which sexuality is largely viewed as an inborn truth and as a trans-historical fact that needs to be freed from its oppression (Beasley 2005, chap. 10). Postmodernists, on the other hand, focus their theories on the fluidity of categorization and reject any notion of identity or identity politics. In terms of sexuality, they view this completely as a socially constructed phenomenon (Mottier 2008, 110).

Another point of divergence in this theoretical divide revolves around the two trajectories' view of *power.* Beasley (2005) holds that where classical modernists see power as an oppressive force that is largely negative or constraining, thus something to throw off and liberate from, postmodernists focus on the notion of power as embedded

in all human relations, and not something you can get rid of. As postmodern frameworks in general "conceive humans as no more or less than a social product organized by power" (Beasley 2005, 24) so also sexuality is never outside nor free from power, but rather a part of it (Beasley 2005, 126). As is the case in both postmodern Feminist Studies and Sexuality Studies, power is not a singular concrete process, but rather something producing "multiple, fragmented selves", as opposed to the modernist conception of power "as a monolithic macro and repressive action from above" (Beasley 2005, 24). In one example of a modernist theoretical direction, a Marxist-inspired Gay Liberation-movement, the goal is thus to overthrow power to "reveal a 'true' shared and universal humanity that can be free of power" (Beasley 2005, 132). Thus, drawing on a Foucaultian sense of sexuality and its history, Beasly argues that the advent of sexual categorization show how diverging sexual identities, as something intrinsically natural and biological, are not the victims of power, but rather effectively produced and upheld by power. Thus, homosexuality and other marginalized and socially excluded identities are part of the organization of society, not outside it.

As a middle ground to these two trajectories' view of identity and power in sexuality, are the lines drawn by what is known as Social Constructionism, much related to postmodernists' view of power relations, but not dismissing the notions of categories and identities altogether. Following these lines, Weeks (2010, 21), as one of Social Constructionism's main advocates, holds that sexualities are the products "of diverse social practices that give meaning to human activities, of social definitions and self-definitions, of struggles between those who have power to define and regulate, and those who resist". Thus, the concept of 'sexuality', Weeks holds, is not an already established and given fact, as is the case in the modernist essentialist view. Rather it is

the result of mechanisms of 'negotiation, struggle and human agency', but yet not as fluid as in postmodernist lines. Regarding my study, I personally regard the notion of sexuality, or rather sexualities, in the lines presented by Weeks (2010), when arguing that we must learn to perceive of 'sexualities' as something produced or constructed in society in a complex set of ways. I believe this is to be the case, whether the cultural point of departure is societies rooted in 'Western'cultural traditions, or for example in the Arab world.

The reason for introducing the above modernist/postmodernist dichotomy, or rather continuum, was to introduce the major lines of discussion that lies within the field of Sexuality Studies, where it was for a long time the modernist approach of sexual identity-essentialism that was the ruling strand in the Global West, particularly from around the sixties until the nineties. As Beasley (2005) vividly shows, all the main theoretical directions within Sexuality Studies can be found on a modernist-postmodernist continuum. Within the borders of the modernist strand there are various sub-trajectories located at different levels of this continuum, mainly differentiated by their degree of identity essentialism. Here, we find what she calls; the *Liberal Human Rights*, the *Gay Liberation,* the *Women's Liberation*, the *Gay and Lesbian Studies* and the *Sexual Minority and 'Race'/Ethnicity/ Imperialism Theorizing* (REI). Common for all of these modernist theories, in contrast to that of Social Constructionism and more so of postmodern Queer Theory, is that they operate on the basis of an essentialist view of identity categories and identity politics.

This modernist essentialism view marginalized sexualities in an 'ethnic minority' fashion (Beasley, 2005; 123), where a term like 'gay' is universally understood to be referring to a 'particular type of person' rather than something simply

classifying a type of sexual preference (Beasley 2005, 123, 147). However, following the lines of Butler, Beasley holds that these universals preached by modernists are not necessarily inclusive of non-Western subjects and are thus clearly promoting a Western ethnocentrism excluding the 'non-Western'.

B. The Study of Sexuality in the Arab World

1. Joseph Massad

> "There is, as we have seen, a rich and spectacularly diverse (in terms of ideology, genre, and intellectual discipline) literature on sex produced in the Arab world in the twentieth century. It is true that much of it is compromised by an unavoidable engagement with Western imperial endeavors from Orientalism to the ostensibly "benign" ethnocentrism of human rights" (Massad 2007, 418)
>
> "The Gay International and this small minority of same-sex practitioners who adopt its discourse have embarked on a project that can only be described as incitement to discourse." (Massad 2007, 174)

The aforementioned critique of the ethnocentric attitudes of modernist Gay Liberation trajectories is strongly reiterated by Massad (2007, chap. 3) in his critique of the liberationst and universal 'Gay International'[9] movements, which he claims "both produces [sic.] homosexuals, as well as gays and lesbians, where they do not exist, and represses same-sex desires and practices that refuse to be assimilated into its sexual epistemology". As I will argue based on the findings from the conducted interviews, I do not fully agree with Massad when he claims that the only people in the Arab world who allegedly are adopting and defending a 'Western' form of sexual identity-politics today are "upper-class native informants" or "Arab and Muslim native informants who

[9] 'Gay International' is the term that Massad uses to refer to especially to the 'missionary' tasks and campaign of "Western male white-dominated organizations (the International Lesbian and Gay Association—ILGA—and the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission—IGLHRC)" which in the last decades of the twentieth century have sprung up "to defend the rights of "gays and lesbians" all over the world and to advocate on their behalf" (Massad 2007, 161).

are mostly located in the United States" (Massad 2007, 39, 189). With this said, however, I think it is important to be aware of what he correctly points out to be universalist and essentialist claims that are sometimes propagated by Gay Liberationist Movements of homosexual identities as an innate truth and of a transhistorical character.

What I seek to discuss and deliberate in this study with the stories this group of largely disadvantaged non-heterosexual men from Syria, is that Massad's claim that the category of homosexuals, gays and lesbians do not exist in or belong to the Arab world engages in a form of reverse Orientalism that gives a simplistic narrative of the transfer of knowledge across nation-state and regional boundaries, trying to show how different everything is in the Arab world. Thus, the question one has to address, I believe, is why such categories would develop in any given society in the first place, including in the West? Was it not Foucault's point to show how the repressive institutions paved the way for a world of sexual categorization only in recent human history? Is this to mean that it is something that would not be possible to take place in the Arab world, even though many of the labels and discourses are taken from the West and are being locally constituted? It is my argument that although appropriated from another language and culture, it does not necessarily mean that it has no local or genuine resonance.

With this, Massad thus dismiss sexual self-identification as a pure and exclusive Western construct – prompting him for instance to refer to the 'so-called' [sic.] 'gays' and 'lesbians' in the Arab and Muslim World. I view this stance as a highly disempowering assertion for the individuals that Massad holds as being either the 'unfit victims' or imperialist agitators of a purely enforced Western discourse of human rights and imperialism.

Thus following the postulates of Massad blindly, I believe, would only serve the function of silencing people that for whatever reason willingly embrace or advocate for a self-identification in terms of their sexual orientation. As I will come back to, all the Syrian speakers in this story unsolicitedly spoke of themselves as ‘gay’ or as other English and Arabic sexual labels, expressing that this has resonance with their feelings although having been brought up in Arab societies. Thus I believe it is important to not view these people merely as individuals who passively adopt knowledge and a sense of false consciousness from abroad, but rather as owning their own right for self-identification and thus creators of knowledge.

In a bashing critique of the study of sexuality in the Arab and non-Western world, Massad claims that sexual identity politics, and that categories such as ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ are far from universal, following this by saying that such categorization “can only be universalized by the epistemic, ethical, and political violence unleashed on the rest of the world by the very international human rights advocates whose aim is to defend the very people their intervention is creating” (Massad 2007, 41). The problem for Massad is thus that the alleged Western incitement to discourse on sexuality in the Arab world from the history of Orientalism until today’s human rights organizations seeks to create sexual categories and identifications out of sexual activities, thus making all practitioners of same-sex activities victims of the alleged epistemic, ethical, and political violence referred to above.

Talking about recent years’ police crackdowns on places frequented by gay men in Egypt – which might as well have been an example from Lebanon, Syria or any other Arab society – Massad claims that “it is not same-sex sexual *practices* that are being repressed by the Egyptian police but rather the sociopolitical *identification* of

these practices with the Western identity of gayness and the publicness that these gay-identified men seek" (Massad 2007, 183, my italics). By stating this, he claims that people in the Arab world who adopt a 'gay' or similar identification, either as part of a struggle against discrimination and inequality, or as an individual choice to let their non-heterosexuality be a part of their self-identification, are Oriental dupes who are themselves not only the reason for their own misfortune, but for the misfortune of *all* people engaging in non-heterosexual activity.

Thus, I believe that Massad's strong antagonism to such identifications is not necessarily reflecting the reality of the 'unfit victims' that his study focuses on, but is effectively disempowering and silencing the individuals who actually willingly, and often without external 'Western' incitement identify in one way or another as homosexual, *mithlī/iyya*, lesbian, gay, or any other terms they may chose.

With the above being said, I still believe that Massad's contribution to the field of Sexuality Studies in the Arab world is important to the vital debate surrounding the many aspects of this field, but I still hold that some of his notions remain out of touch with the reality of the individuals most concerned with his study; both practicing and self-identifying non-heterosexual individuals in the Arab world. Hence, in contrast to Massad I believe that also these people have the right to self-definition, and not just readily be disregarded as Western copycats or Oriental dupes possessing some false consciousness.

2. Literature on Sexuality in the Arab World: Grand-Narratives

There exists, as Massad (2007, 418) concludes his work by saying, “a rich and spectacularly diverse (in terms of ideology, genre, and intellectual discipline) literature on sex produced in the Arab world in the twentieth century”, a literature which is also well continued into our century. However, as I attempt to show in this following literature review, most of these works seem to be mostly grand-narrative representations based on written sources – novels, poems, religious texts et cetera – and are not directly concerned with on the lived experiences of people on the grassroots level, particularly in the case of non-heterosexual individuals. Thus most scholars interested in this topic mostly tend to be occupied with the *representations* of the phenomenon of homosexuality in general and not the specific *lived* experiences of non-heterosexual individuals and their struggles and renegotiations of their roles in society and the family. This is also the case with *Desiring Arabs*. Massad’s immense and highly impressive work on the history of the study of sexuality in the Arab world contains an extraordinary archive of literature stretching from *Abu Nuwwās* and the Abbasid period, through modern day Arab poets and writers, to the ‘Gay Internationals’ of today. With this, his work is mostly restricted to a focus on the representations of sexuality and homosexuality in a somewhat elitist literature, and there is little room for the actual *voices* on the grassroots levels of Arab societies. This is also the recurring case with most of the vast literature of the twenty-first century on this topic. Whether it is focused on the ‘Middle East’, the Arab world or Islam as such, it is my conclusion that most academic work that has been done take a very literature-focused approach and mostly remain grand-narrative works. I will be discussing some of these works in the coming.

a. The Middle East, the Arab World and Islam

As an example of one of the most significant historical studies of homosexuality in the pre-modern Arab Islamic world is Khaled El-Rouayheb's important and highly impressing historical study *Before Homosexuality in the Arab Islamic World, 1500-1800*. In this work, Rouayheb investigates Arabic and Islamic literature and writings from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century Arab world, showing that "Arabic-Islamic culture on the eve of modernity lacked the concept of 'homosexuality,' and that writings from this period do not evince the same attitude towards all aspects of what we would be inclined to call homosexuality today" (El-Rouayheb 2005, 1). Like Massad, Rouayheb draws on Foucault to show how the modern concept of homosexuality as an identity, and not just a sinful act of sodomy, was not present in the premodern Arab world, and how 'Western values and ideas' and "European Victorian morality was to have profound effects on local attitudes toward what came to be called 'sexual inversion' or 'sexual perversion' (*shudhūdh jinsī*)" (El-Rouayheb 2005, 8).

Rouayheb's book is a continuation of his extensive Master's dissertation, *Attitudes to Homosexuality in Early Ottoman Syria* (El-Rouayheb 1996), which gives a historical account of the relations between what we today understand as homosexuality and the understanding of it in early Ottoman Syria. What is peculiar about Arab culture today with regards to the concept of homosexuality, Rouayheb in both his works contends, is that there is still the concept of penetrating someone 'phallically' in order to "dominate, subjugate, and ultimately to humiliate" (El-Rouayheb 2005, 14). He shows how a historical example of this with a poem from seventeenth-century Damascus:

> But I now cauterize his ulcerous arse with the fire of my penis, and ascend the ranks [of virtue] in his eyes.
> I impose on my self what is contrary to its preference; before me many did what I am now doing...
> O penis! Arise! Put on your armor, and enter his interior like a raider, and give us his guts as spoils.
> Make him wide as you hump and shake within him, and if you cannot, delegate in your place a piece of wood. (Ibrāhīm al-Ghazālī (d. 1678) in El-Rouayheb 2005, 14)

Whereas today this is something that might be perceived by many as a homosexual act, Rouayheb tells us that this particular and not uncommon act of penetration "can hardly be called 'sexual,' as it is disassociated, not only from love and intimacy, but also from desire and pleasure" (El-Rouayheb 2005, 14). Most of today's understandings of homosexuality thus seems oblivious to the traditional and important symbolic distinction in Arab societies, in terms of male homosexuality, between 'penetrated' and 'penetrator', where the Arabic terms of *lūṭī* often refers to the latter and *maʾbūn* to the former (El-Rouayheb 2005, 16) and where the 'sexual' act sometimes is a mere symbol of subjugation and not love and intimacy. Thus the term *lūṭī* means 'sodomite' or 'penetrator' in Arabic, and carries reference to the biblical story of the prophet Lot and the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, while *maʾbūn*, referring to a male 'catamite', or a 'receiveing' part of anal intercourse, is derived from the Arabic noun *ubna* meaning 'passive pederasty' (Wehr 1979; Stevenson and Waite 2011).

Following this, el-Rouayheb asserts in both his book on the Arab Islamic World and in his Master's dissertation on Ottoman Syria that "it was consistent to conceptualize the active and the passive sodomite in fundamentally different terms and believe that the latter was more contemptible than the former" (El-Rouayheb 2005, 155 and; El-Rouayheb 1996, 167). This seems also to be the case also in today's Syria, as I will briefly get back to when discussing my findings.

There are a number of other recent books dedicated to the more contemporary intersections between homosexuality and Islam. Especially informative of this matter is Scott Kugle's *Homosexuality in Islam*, which to my knowledge is one of the most comprehensive theological studies of Islam's relation to the concept of homosexuality to date. In his book, Kugle (2010) argues for an Islamic acceptance of sexual and gender minorities through arguments based on his literary and theological reading and interpretation of the Quran. Although Kugle (2010, 7) affirms that his study and analysis is 'informed' by the voices of Muslim gay, lesbian and transgender activists – though exclusively people living in Western, 'secular democracies' – his book does not present us directly with these stories or interviews and remains focused on a literary analysis. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that I am aware of Kugle's recent publication, *Living out Islam*, in which he "presents interviews with a range of gay, lesbian, and transgender Muslim activists, weaving their voices together to offer a composite picture of their struggle" (Kugle 2014, 1). Thus, Kugle gathers the voices of concerned individuals "to offer an 'oral history' of the nascent movement to assert their rights and insist on their dignity" (Kugle 2014 Introduction). However, also here, Kugle includes the voices solely of activist individuals, and only people living in 'democratic and secular Western countries'.

In addition to Kugle's work, the two volumes of *Islam and Homosexuality,* edited by Samar Habib, also look at various contemporary intersections between homosexuality and religion. This work, containing essays from twenty different scholars and authors, shed light on different aspects of homosexual life and its representations within the overly broad terms of Islam. In the introduction of this essay-collection, editor Samar Habib (2010) sets off by problematizing how some prominent,

mainly US-based, academics – inter alios Dr Massad – assert "that gays and lesbians in the Arab world do not exist, but rather that Arab cultures enjoy", what Habib in reference to her reading of Massad calls, "a pervasive [sic.] bisexuality that prefers to remain nameless or is entirely incommensurable with Western discourse on sexuality" (Habib 2010, xvii). Habib's critique of Massad is on the basis of the latter's claims that it is the 'Gay International' that "both produces homosexuals, as well as gays and lesbians, where they do not exist, and represses same-sex desires and practices that refuse to be assimilated into its sexual epistemology", hence this claimed 'nameless bisexuality' (Massad 2007, 162, 188).

The diverse span of writers and issues included in *Islam and Homosexuality* take different positions in the debate surrounding the universalism of the concept of sexual identification and its commensurability with the non-Western world. I personally agree with the view of Habib, who, in opposition to Massad, claims that exclusive or near-exclusive same-sex sexuality is simply not only a Western construct (Habib 2010, xxix) and that it is indeed commensurable with Arab contexts. Habib argues for rather seeing it as a 'cultural universal' and "applicable to both the contemporary Muslim world and the contemporary West", even if some of its terms and concepts first came into being in Western societies.

When it comes to the essays themselves in the two volumes, they are of a highly diverse character, and although the book itself is trying to avoid "essentializing statements about the umbrella term 'Islam' " (Habib 2010, x), I believe that putting the main or sole focus on religion as such is not adequate in the quest to explain the contemporary lived experiences of non-heterosexual individuals in Muslim or any other given society.

Of the twenty different case studies in *Islam and Homosexuality*, only one of the essays, Luongo's[10] *Gays Under Occupation*, actually seek to take a qualitative approach of investigating non-heterosexual practices and identities in an Arab society in particular – in this case, Iraq post the US war and occupation. Luongo's study, however, suffer from many of limitations and biases. In his study, he seeks to look at "influences of military occupation on gay identity within an occupied country" and thus inquire how Western ideas of homosexuality interact with non-Western notions of it in societies under Western military occupation (Luongo 2010, 101).

Thus, Luongo sought to recruit gay or homosexual-identifying Iraqi and Afghan 'men who have sex with men' for a survey (Luongo 2010, 103–104), however, only ending up with a total of "four [sic.] Iraqi responded" (Luongo 2010, 105), two of whom were living in the US. Further, due to his lack of ability to communicate in both written and spoken Arabic, this survey was conducted entirely in English, only adding to the limitation and bias of the survey participation. The outcome of this study is thus both dubious and limited. Luongo's assumption (2010, 108) is nevertheless that gay Iraqi men "seem to welcome interaction with Western gays", an interaction, he claims, that "would not have occurred without the toppling of the Saddam regime". In addition to this, I believe that one of his concluding remarks to this essay, stating that; "one would still want to ask from a simple humanitarian view if so much death was worth it [sic.]" (Luongo 2010, 108), is quite telling of the ethnocentricity of his inquiry of gay-life in Iraqi society. Lastly, I do not quite understand what this essay has to do with homosexuality in 'Islam' as such, except Iraq being a country of a majority Muslim population.

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[10] According to his web-page, Micheal T. Luongo is a "freelance writer, novelist, editor and photographer, concentrating on travel, culture, human rights and other topics" and writer of the book *Gay Travels in the Muslim World [sic.]* http://www.michaelluongo.com (accessed 2015-03-23)

Other works giving accounts of sexuality and homosexuality in Islam is Abdelwahab Bouhdiba's *Sexuality in Islam*, originally published in French as *Sexualité en Islam.* Solely focused on a literary Islamic view of sexuality, this book attempts to investigate the mutual relationship in 'Arabo-Muslim societies' between the sacral and the sexual and argues that an understanding of sexuality begins not with looking at an individual's or society's internal demands, but with the will of God as revealed in the sacred book (Bouhdiba 1985, vii, 5). Thus to understand sexuality in Arabo-Muslim societies, Bouhdiba (1985, viii) claims, one must "set out from the Quran". Further, being only an anecdotal topic in his book, the concept of homosexuality, Bouhdiba (1985, 200) argues, has been 'encouraged' in Arabo-Muslim societies by the segregation of the sexes. Therefore it is understandable, he says, how "homosexuality, so violently condemned by Islam, could be so widely practices among both women and men" in Arabo-Muslim societies (1985, 200).

Moving away from an exclusive focus on Islam and "through its reading of literary, textual, and visual artifacts produced over some four hundred fifty years", Joseph Boone's (2014, xxi–xxii) recent book *The Homoerotics of Orientalism*, "probes the deep history of homoerotic fascination and homophobic aspersion that has played no small role in contributing to this mythic divide [between the West and the Middle East]". This generously illustrated work of nearly five hundred pages is close to a bible of historical orientalist representations of homosexuality, but focuses exclusively on the literary analysis of translated sources. It is also the continuation of a brilliant article Boone wrote in 1995 called *Vacation Cruises; Or, the Homoerotics of Orientalism*, in which the author sheds light on the inherent notion of colonialism in Western homoerotic writings about the Orient (Boone 1995).

c. Literature Gaps

With the works mentioned above being only some of the prime examples of the literature on sexuality in the Arab world that predates my study, there, needless to say, exists a large body of literature on concepts and representations of sexuality and homosexuality in the Middle East, the Arab world or Islam. With undertaking a qualitative social science-approach in this study, however, I intend to move away from these mainly literature-based grand-narrative representations of homosexuality in this regional context and rather put the focus and emphasis on the stories and voices of non-heterosexual people and their lived experiences. With the oral history interviews, I wish to focus on what Kugle (2010, 14) terms "the unshakable authenticity of recording individuals speaking in *their own* voices of *their own* existential struggles in *their own* living contexts" (my italics). It is exactly this focus on the individuals' *own* voices and experiences that I want to be aiming for with this research. I thus want to shift the focus away from the many academics' theoretical interpretations and literary representations of the concept of homosexuality, most frequently based on literary analysis, and rather hand the megaphone to the various voices of the people living the everyday realities of non-heterosexual experiences.

2. Non-Heterosexual Experiences in the Arab World

Although most works referred to above, disregarding the highly uninformative essay by Luongo, mostly take a meta-narrative approach in their studies – hence discerning many of the various and often conflicting voices – there are some notable exceptions in the broader literature that are focusing more on qualitative case studies from lived non-heterosexual experiences in the Arab world. Thus, in the following I

will highlight some of these writings that have been particularly influential to me in this study. However, most of these studies focus on a Lebanese, and especially Beiruti, context. Thus not many empirical studies of homosexuality and lived non-heterosexual experiences in the region take a basis in a Syrian context, which is where I have situated my study.

a. Homosexuality in Lebanon and Beirut

Samir Khalaf and John Gagnon's edited book from 2006 on *Sexuality in the Arab world* is a gathering of essays on contemporary and historical topics of sexuality in the Arab world. Khalaf opens the book with a quote from Jeffrey Weeks' *Sexuality*, saying that "…as society goes, sexuality goes" (Jeffrey Weeks in Khalaf 2006, 7), before arguing that "the Arab world, perhaps more so than other socio-cultural settings, has been undergoing some profound and unsettling transformations in sexual and gender relations", showing that many deep-rooted and traditional values in the Arab world, especially the ones that are rooted in the old loyalties of family and religion, are now being challenged. Thus, the work edited by Khalaf and Gagnon includes a variety of essays and accounts of lived sexual experiences in the contemporary and broad context of the Arab world.

Most relevant of these in relation to my study is Jared McCormick's (2006) *Transition Beirut: Gay Identities, Lived Realities,* and *Creating Queer Space in Beirut*, with the latter being a forerunner to the same author's recently published book, *Queer Beirut*, discussed below. These two studies both give good first-hand accounts to some of the lived experiences of self-identifying gay, homosexual and queer men in Beirut and Lebanon.

McCormick's (2006) essay on the construction of gay-identities in Beirut discuss the lived realities of twelve self-identifying Lebanese men. From his interviews, it was evident, McCormick (2006, 244) argues, that "their gay identity was not entirely locally produced, but rather was greatly influenced by the imported paradigm of the 'global gay' character". As I shall discuss below in my findings, this was also what I found in terms of how Syrian men speak of themselves and construct their narratives.

Merabet's book, *Queer Beirut,* from 2014 is a vast ethnographic account of various experiences of 'queer-identified individuals' (Merabet 2014, 7) in Beirut from the late nineteen nineties until today. In this work, Merabet looks especially at what he calls 'queer spaces' and 'homosexual spheres' created by queer men in the Lebanese capital in relation to the political and socio-economic developments of the country over the last two decades. These 'queer spaces', he says, are "the geographical, along with the socio-cultural and mental, fields in which various homoerotic practices take place and are being integrated into the respective lives of different individuals" (Merabet 2014, 112–113). His ethnographic book, based on what he calls 'queer strolling' within these spheres and spaces, is an extensive and fascinating work containing numerous stories and many voices of Lebanese queer men, giving a qualitative and diverse insight into the dynamics and constant renegotiations within the 'homosexual spheres' and the 'queer spaces' in Lebanon.

When it comes to Merabet's use of the term 'queer' in his study, he brings this back to its etymological origin in the German 'quer', meaning 'transverse' or 'oblique', further relating this to the Arabic term *junūn*, or 'madness', thus telling the story about '*junūn bayrūt'* ['the madness of Beirut'] (Merabet 2014, 8, 113). It is my experience from both the speakers' stories and from the Lebanese context in general, however, that

it is not a focus on queer ‘madness’ that is the pursued object for non-heterosexual individuals in trying to navigate through traditional norms and patriarchy, but rather the opposite. Rather, a recurring feeling in the interviews on this matter, was the notion of *ana mitlī metlak*, in their response to societal discrimination, referring to being the same as the other person, ‘heterosexual’ or not – and not the ‘queer’ notion of being ‘mad’ or a self-proclaimed deviant.

Another work that deals with contemporary lived non-heterosexual experiences in the context of Beirut and Lebanon is the collection of the forty one stories from ‘queer’ Lebanese women and trans* individuals, published by Meem-group in 2009; *Bareed Mista3jil*, literarily meaning ‘express mail’, but here translated to ‘mail in a hurry’ (Meem 2009, 10). This eye-opening essay collection is based on stories from over a hundred and fifty women, the reason behind the book being to “introduce Lebanese society to the real stories of real people whose voices have gone unheard for hundreds of years”, thus dedicating this book “for all of you with stories that are yet to be told” (Meem 2009, 1). I have been influenced by the approach of this groundbreaking and courageous study in my own work, however focusing not on Lebanese, but on Syrian stories and voices, and not on queer women and transgender individuals, but on non-heterosexual men. I will also be drawing on the experiences and stories presented in *Bareed Mista3jil*, when looking at the life of the individuals in this study.

In providing a close reading of and comment on the Meem publication, and with regards to queer experiences and identification in the context of the Arab world and Lebanon, it is Dina Georgis’ (2013, 233) argument that “although Western constructions of sexualities have certainly been influential, these identities are also

responding to the local and cultural context". With this, she advocates for not reducing "Arab queer identities as either Western or traditionally Arab" (Georgis 2013, 233). Further, through her reading of the personal accounts and narratives of the lived female queer experiences in Lebanon, Georgis (2013, 235) denounces Massad's stern critique of sexual and queer identification in the Arab world, wittily likening his view on the topic to that of her mother. Thus Georgis points to the fact that Massad's "defense of this vision of traditional same-sex Arab sexuality situates him in judgment of the Arab subjectivities represented in Bareed, many if not all of whom deploy the nomenclature of Western sexual identities" (Georgis 2013, 235). I think Georgis' writing on the notion of sexual identities in the Arab world is very well formulated and fruitful. Seeing sexual identities as responding to differing cultural contexts is a more empowering and considerate approach than merely dismissing them as something produced in and restricted to the 'West' and thus not applicable to the 'East'.

Adding to the Meem-publication and the other works noted above is a myriad of articles, blog-posts and essays written on the topic of homosexuality in Lebanon, especially with the rise of Lebanese civil society organizations working on 'LGBT'-issues, which in many ways started with the establishment of Helem in Lebanon in the early 2000s. For an historical account of the work of Helem see *Lebanon & LGBT: The Story of HELEM* (2012) and *Helem; A Case Study of the First Legal, Above-Ground LGBT Organization in the MENA Region* (2008). See also for instance the six publications of the Arabic/English/French publication *Barra!,* 'Out!' (Helem 2005). This has, however, not been the case in the context of Syria, where no major civil society organizations have worked in a similar domain and no previous studies seem to have looked into the social aspects of the lives of non-heterosexual people.

4. The Middle Ground of Social Constructionism

> "[Sexuality] is a 'fictional unity', that once did not exist, and at some time in the future may not exist again. It is an invention of the human mind" (Weeks 2010, 7).

Having discussed the field of Sexuality Studies in general, in addition to the study of sexuality in the context of the Arab world, Middle East and Islam, and the lack thereof in a Syrian context in particular, I wish to go back to the field of Sexuality Studies and the modernist-postmodernist divide discussed above to situate this study within these terms. Thus, to be solicitous about the fact that the study of sexuality in the Arab world in general and Syria in particular requires specific social, cultural and linguistic considerations, and to be attentive of some of the critical points presented by Massad with which I agree, my views on the field of sexuality in this study is informed by the theoretical framework of Social Constructionism, especially with the basis in the writings of Jeffrey Weeks.

Positioned somewhere between the modernist essentialist identity-approach and the postmodern Queer Theory's antagonistic view of characteristic identities, Social Constructionism thus "rests precisely upon its account of sexuality as socially constructed rather than merely a matter of voluntary personal choice or biological mechanisms" (Beasley 2005, 142) creating a middle ground for this dichotomy. With this, I take the starting point that sexuality is not "a primordially 'natural' phenomenon but rather a product of social and historical forces" as Weeks advocates for in his book *Sexuality* (Weeks 2010, 7). He argues that the concept of sexuality "is a 'fictional unity', that once did not exist, and at some time in the future may not exist again", and that it is thus "an invention of the human mind" (Weeks 2010, 7).

I consider this view to be solicitous of matters raised by Rouayheb (2005), saying that the modern concept of homosexuality was non-existent in the pre-modern Arab world and that it has been greatly influenced by the West and by Massad (2007), showing how the discourse of sexuality in the Arab world has been a part of Western imperial projects from nineteenth and twentieth century Orientalism until today's 'Gay International' and international human right movements, although not condemning it solely as an imperialist project.

In the terms of seeing sexuality as a social construct, I also agree with the terms of oral historian Abrams, saying that "none of us have an essence – an unchanging, pure and stable sense of self. Instead of being born with an essence that determines our identity, it is now widely viewed that we construct our identity, our sense of self, of who we are, within and in relation to our social and cultural environment" (Abrams 2010, 36). Thus, also the field of oral history is concerned with this cultural and social construction of the self, "leading to the linguistic expression of the self that is the product of narration" (Abrams 2010, 36).

Further, I believe that the concept of family can also be viewed in terms of being a social construction, and this is especially the case among non-heterosexual and non-normative groups of people in traditional societies that sometimes fall out of and feel the need to renegotiate and construct new terms of the family. Writing on the notions of 'a queer construct family' Weeks et al. (2001, 37) explore the different constructs of family and the language applied for this in the 'intricate texture of a non-heterosexual world". Queer renegotiation of traditional family structures thus "displaces the idea of the family as a fixed and timeless entity" (Weeks et al. 2001, 37). Thus, drawing on Butler's notions of 'performativity' Weeks et al. focus on the idea that you

do family instead of merely being *in* a family. Thus, as they say, "instead of being an objective phenomenon, which we can measure against a Platonic image of what the family is or should be, we can now understand it as a subjective set of activities, whose meanings are made by those who participate in them" (Weeks et al. 2001, 37). This is formative also of my view of 'family' in this study, and this leads me to the last section of this theoretical framework chapter, that is the study of family.

C. The Study of Family

In this following section I will be concerned with highlighting the literature and theory that creates the framework for my view of the family. Before going into the writings that I will be dealing with, concerning the context of the Arab World and Syria, I will also here begin with briefly explaining my choice of terminology, as this topic of writing, as with sexuality, contain a variety of applicable terms.

1. Terminology: Family and Kinships

> " 'Family' is a powerful and pervasive word in our culture, embracing a variety of social, cultural, economic and symbolic meanings; but traditionally it is seen as the very foundation of society. It is also a deeply ambiguous and contested term in the contemporary world, the subject of continual polemics, anxiety, and political concern about the 'crisis of the family'. It is surely of great significance, therefore, that the term is now in common use among many, though by no means all, self-identified non-heterosexuals" (Weeks et al. 2001, 9).

The above notion of the family is true, I believe, whether the 'culture' one is focusing on is the nineties' mainland Britain or present day's Arab world. Thus, family is traditionally perceived as the deep-rooted foundation and cornerstone of society, although undergoing many changes. In the following I will be dwelling on some of the

literature concerned with sexuality and family and discuss my employment of the term 'family' in this study, instead of the increasingly popular notion of 'kinship'.

In this study I use the term 'family' and not 'kinship', even though the latter seems to have gained much academic ground today in similar studies, and especially among postmodern scholars and the field of Queer Theory. According to Butler, studies of queer lives offer a " 'break-down' of traditional kinship" and the term bears references that surpass the traditional view of 'blood-kinship' and its reference to "biological and sexual relations" (Butler 2002, 127). In *Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual* Butler (2002) explores the variety of nonheterosexual and queer forms of kinship relations existing outside 'the nuclear family model' with her broader discussion of 'gay marriage' in the West. Thus, gay-marriage, she says, is not to be equaled with 'gay kinship', the latter form of relationships being much broader than the 'gay marriage' model. With this, Butler (2002, 103) ascribes kinship practices to a broad set of relationships "that emerge to address fundamental forms of human dependency, which may include birth, child rearing, relations of emotional dependency and support, generational ties, illness, dying, and death (to name a few)".

Considering the aforementioned, the term 'kinship', which I acknowledge the usefulness of as an analytical category, seems to be a good starting point for referring to non-heterosexual lives and experiences located outside the normative and traditional conjugal family and family of origin. I am not applying the term 'kinship' in this study, however, because it was not a term brought up by the speakers in their narratives. Moreover, the terms for family used by the speakers – *ahl* and *'ā'ila* – both in terms of their families of origin and their families of choice, is most commonly translated into 'family'. 'Kinship' would traditionally be translated into the term *ṣilat al-raḥim* in

Arabic, literarily meaning ‘ties of the womb’, or its abbreviated form *al-raḥim* (Perdigon 2011). This can be seen to carry a connotation to the traditional sense of blood-kinship (although a maternal one) and not its redefined, new and expansive Western connotation. In his dissertation, *Between the womb and the hour / ethics and semiotics of relatedness amongst Palestinian refugees in Tyre, Lebanon*, Sylvain Perdigon (2011) discuss the influence of *al-raḥim*, and its ‘layered textures, among Palestinians in refugee camps in Lebanon. The term *al-raḥim*, which Perdigon (2011, 17) renders “after most translators, as 'kinship,' literally means 'womb’ ”. In his work with Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, he found that this term “spontaneously evokes the relationship that ties one to one's parents, siblings, husband or wife, and children” but that also “uncles, aunts, nephews and nieces (but not cousins), as well as the spouse's parents” are often added to the list (Perdigon 2011, 17–18). This point to the notion of *ṣilat al-raḥim*, kinship in Arabic, to be understood in the traditional sense as referring to blood kinship.

With this said, I will use the term ‘family’ as a reference to both biological families of origin and families of choice in this study. I use the reference to families of choice, however, in much the same fashion as queer theorists use ‘kinship’. In writing on the “the emergence of families of choice” Weeks et al. (2001, 9) say of the term ‘families’ that it is “being deployed to denote something broader than the traditional relationships based on lineage, alliance and marriage, referring instead to kin-like networks of relationships, based on friendship, and commitments ‘beyond blood’ ”. Thus, as Weeks also points to in his work on *Sexuality,* that with the social shifts and changes that are taking place on ‘grassroots’ levels “cutting across the apparent solidity of the traditional families”, it is better today not to refer to “family, as it were a fixed

form, but to families, signifying diversity" (Weeks 2010, 112, 125–128). It is this stand I will take here, when looking at the concept of family in the Arab world and Syria.

2. Family in the Arab World and Syria

> "In a culture in which the family is valued over and above the person, identity is defined in familial terms, and kin idioms and relationships pervade public and private spheres." (Joseph 1999, 12)
>
> "Human interaction and relationships differ according to culture, and notable differences between Arab cultures and those of the West include a stronger value of family and communal bonds." (Meem 2009, 3)

When it comes to the speakers' renegotiated concepts of the family, I would necessarily need to define what I mean by a 'traditional' Arab family in order to explore the speakers' concepts and renegotiation of this notion. With looking at the traditional family in Arab societies, I rely especially on Halim Barakat and Suad Joseph's writings on Arab families. Barakat (1993, 107) argues that the traditional Arab family is a "cohesive and social institution" being "at the center of social and economic activities". It is his argument that the degree of sacrifice of oneself to the family causes the neglect of society and individuals in society. In a similar fashion, speaking about what she terms *patriarchal connectivity*, Joseph says that in traditional patriarchal Arab societies "identity is defined in familial terms, and kin idioms and relationships pervade public and private spheres, connective relationships are not only functional but necessary for successful social existence" (1999; 12-13).

In her book *Intimate Selving in Arab Families* about "historically and culturally specific constructs of relationality in the context of intimate relationships in families in the Arab world" (Joseph 1999, 2) argues that in Arab culture, "the family is valued over

and above the person or society" and that one's bonds and committing to family is more important than 'individuation' or 'autonomy' (Joseph 1999, 122).

Further, in her work, *Within the Circle Parents and Children in an Arab Village*, Andrea Rugh (1997) writes on the importance of traditional kinship in Syrian families, concluding that children in Syria are traditionally taught not to be independent, but rather to be obedient to the hierarchical system of the family, which is what will secure their interests in life. Another ethnographic account focused on the family in Syria is Christa Salamandra's (2006) *Chastity Capital: Hierarchy and Distinction in Damascus*. In commenting on Rugh's work, Salamandra (2006, 157) says that in Syria "children have little time or opportunity to develop friendships outside the home, and that relationships with non-relatives were perceived as dangerous for the young and inexperienced".

With the aforementioned notes on the aspects of traditional family life in the Arab World and Syria, it can generally be concluded that the concept of the traditional family for people in this particular region comes with clearly defined roles, expectations of self-sacrifice, privileges and obligations. With this, I thus believe that it can be commonly observed that Arab cultures may differ from the West in terms of putting more emphasis on the value of family and other communal bonds (Meem 2009, 3).

Considering that none of the mentioned writings on the traditional concept of family in the local and regional context take into consideration homosexuality and non-heterosexual members of family, this is thus what I seek to explore in relation to the life stories of the speakers in this study.

D. Literature Gaps

Based on the considerations of literature on sexuality and the family discussed in this chapter, it is my argument that what is lacking today in this regional context are studies focusing on qualitative research based on empirically grounded work in the social sciences. I thus wish to look at the interconnection between the concepts of family and homosexuality through the narratives and stories of non-heterosexual individuals. With this, I seek to explore how these individuals renegotiate their terms of family within the realms of the traditional family institution in Syria.

Thus bringing the focus of this study down to the grassroots and individual levels, in contrast to most of the meta-narrative literary analysis that has been applied to the topics earlier, there are especially two factors that I wish to focus on with the individuals in this study: first is the effects of the family's *ostracization* on these individuals' concept of family, and second their *renegotiation* of the terms of the family. In other words, how might these two aspects be formative of a renegotiation of the traditional understandings of family? In addition to this I wish to highlight the notions and terms of self-identification applied by these individuals from Syria and with this be contesting some of the notions brought up by Joseph Massad in his *Desiring Arabs.*

CHAPTER 3

METHODS AND ORAL HISTORIES

A. Data Collection

1. Interviews

In this study, I have conducted in-depth interviews with ten Syrian non-heterosexual men. Adhering to the principles of history, and seeking the life stories of the interview-speakers, prompted me to not enter the interviews with a fixed questionnaire or a prepared list of questions. Thus, my approach was that of conducting open-ended interviews, starting the interview with the question: "Can you tell me the story of your life with your family?" I found this method to prove fruitful, as it was clear that the speakers had a lot of stories they were eager to tell and to get off their chests.

Thus I told the speakers that they were free to speak for as long as they wanted to, and that I was more interested in listening to their stories and matters of *their* concern, rather than posing a lot of pre-set questions. This was mainly to enable me to be open-minded about the topics that might arise during the interview, and to try to commit myself to "follow, rather than lead the conversation" (Boyd 2012, 104). With this, I attempted to follow the advice given by British oral historian George Ewart Evans, quoted in Paul Thompson's *The Voice of The Past*, where he says that: "Let the interview run. I never attempt to dominate it. The least one can do is to guide it and I try to ask as few questions as I can… Plenty of time, plenty of tape and few questions" (George E. Evans in Thompson 2000, 227).

With the interviews, I recorded a total of six hours of taped conversation with the speakers, and with very few intervening questions from my part. After having conducted all the interviews, I subsequently translated and transcribed them. Although sinning against core principles of oral history, I did not have the time to transcribe the interviews in their Arabic version. However, I have included many quotes of transliterated Arabic where I found it appropriate. I had not foreseen the amount of work and time that the process of transcribing takes, especially when struggling with the translation of terms related to homosexuality in Arabic. The transcription left me with much written text – the longest transcribed interview reaching 46 pages alone.

As it was imperative for me to create a secure and confidential atmosphere for the interviews, all of them took place at the location of Proud Lebanon, the aforementioned civil society organization, which is a place that all the men are familiar with and visit frequently. Each interview lasted from approximately thirty to ninety minutes, creating, a total amount of six hours of taped recordings. I mostly conducted interviews one-on-one with only one speaker present, but in one of the cases I spoke with a couple, Karim and Walid. It seemed like Karim and Walid knew each other's life stories almost as good as their own, sometimes completing the other's sentences. With also disagreeing on a lot of topics related to the perception of homosexuality and the family in Syria, my interviews with them created a dynamic and fruitful setting that was different from the settings where only one participant was present.

Further, all of the interviews were conducted exclusively in Arabic, which has been another matter of importance to me, as I was interested to see how the narrators speak of both the concept of homosexuality and of family in Arabic. Thus, I was particularly concerned with looking at the terms that are used by Syrian men to refer to

them selves as non-heterosexuals. As I briefly discussed in the literature review, this has been a topic treated in the Lebanese context, but much less so in Syria. On this note, another interesting comparison between these two contexts is that spoken Lebanese Arabic in general incorporates English and French words and terms more easily than Syrian Arabic. Considering this and the fact that most of the speakers of this study have limited to no knowledge of English, it was interesting to see the terms in which the narrators spoke of the concept of homosexuality in Arabic.

2. Speakers and Recruitment

a. Speakers

As a convention of oral history I use the term 'speaker' or 'narrator' in this study instead of 'participant' or 'interviewee' as I view the two former terms to place the importance on the individuals telling their stories while the two latter seem to stand in a somewhat subordinate position to the researcher or interviewer in the study (Sayigh 2015a; Yow 2005, 157)

With this study I wanted to include a sample of speakers with as socio-economic, religious and geographic backgrounds as possible. The speakers thus hail from many different regions of Syria; Aleppo, Damascus, Deir Ezzor, Deraa, Hamaa, Homs, Raqqah and Rif Dimashq, including both Muslims and Christians, in addition to Arabic and Kurdish speakers. The youngest speaker was twenty years old, while the oldest was somewhere above forty, thus including stories from at least two generations of Syrian men.

Although striding against one of the main principles of oral history, of letting the speakers claim ownership to their stories, I could not do other than to apply fictive

pseudonyms for the bold speakers in this study to ensure the safety and confidentiality of them and their families and surroundings. Hence, all names of speakers and other names included in this paper are pseudonyms. As the speakers are from various religious backgrounds, I have tried my best to use names that are religiously and sectarian neutral. In addition to this, I have all omitted names of cities and places of birth and residency, with the exception of the capital Damascus which, as will come back to, most participants told stories about having traveled to or lived in, either as a refuge from their families, or as an urban getaway.

It has to further be mentioned that with embarking on this study, it was my initial intention to also include female non-heterosexuals and trans*[11] individuals, in order to look at the experiences of a broader range of 'queer' individuals from Syria. After having spoken to some of them, however, it was clear that, although facing a lot of the same troubles with regards to their families as male non-heterosexuals, there were a lot of other particularities and unique experiences related to that of being a woman and non-heterosexual, or that of being a trans* individual. In addition to this, I became aware of my restrictions as a cisgendered male in terms of being let into the personal stories and of being able to relate to their experiences. It was clear, however, that women and trans* individuals shared many of the same experiences and stories because of their non-normative sexual orientation or gender-identity within a patriarchal society, especially within the realms of the family.

[11] I use this term to refer to individuals who identify as transvestite, transsexual, and transgender.

b. Recruitment of Speakers and Limitations

As for the recruitment of speakers, this was done in coordination the aforementioned Lebanese civil society organization, Proud Lebanon, which was very assistive of this matter. As this organization is working on the empowerment and protection of marginalized groups, especially 'LGBT individuals', and as this is my point of access to the speakers, I presumed from the beginning that all the individuals that I would get in contact with were individuals embracing some kind of non-heterosexual self-identification. This is a limitation that I am aware of.

Thus, regarding my sample, I am very aware that this is no random selection that is free from bias. I am also aware that my findings are not necessarily generalizable outside the very sample group that I am working with. This is neither my attempt. Thus, the speakers in the study, who mostly self-identify as 'gay', probably do not represent all Syrian individuals engaging in same-sex relations, nor even the majority. If we are to believe Massad (2007, 172, 173), people who actually identify as 'gay' in the Arab world only constitute a 'miniscule minority' belonging only to 'the richer segments of society'. Most of the individuals I have spoken to, however, who do in fact identify as 'gay', among other terms, are mostly far from belonging to this 'richer segment' of the Syrian and Lebanese societies. Thus, with this study, I also hope to problematize Joseph Massad's (2007, 175) claims that sexual self-identification is something only accepted and embraced by the 'upper-class' 'native informants' of the 'Gay International's imperialist epistemological task' in the Arab world, which in his view constitute all the people who advocate for the rights of LGBT and gay individuals.

Thus, this research is not an attempt to generalize my findings to apply to all people engaged in homosexual relations in Syria as such, but rather to explore and try to

understand the different concepts of family that are present among people who are actually proclaiming some kind of non-heterosexual self-identification. Thus I will not try to say anything else than that sexuality, and indeed various non-heterosexual *identities* – among them gay, lesbian, bi, queer –are socially constructed phenomena, but, as opposed to Massad, I do not wish to delegitimize nor diminish the voices of a group of individuals in an Arab society who willingly embrace such various self-identifications as non-heterosexual individuals. My goal is thus to explore concepts of the family among people from Syria who willingly self-identify as non-heterosexuals.

B. Data Analysis

In this study, I have relied on conducting in-depth interviews as my main method of gathering oral history testimonies. In these interviews, I have asked the speakers to tell me their life stories related to their lives in heir families from their childhood until today. In these stories I was looking especially for *meanings*, *concepts* and *discourse* in the narratives regarding their lived experiences as non-heterosexual individuals and as members of family, with the goal of looking into how these two experiences interconnect. I have sought to achieve this through three various methods of data analysis: oral history, grounded theory and discourse analysis.

1. Oral History and Life Stories

> "Oral histories should not be read primarily as a source of historical 'fact' but rather of historical experience and the cultural frameworks through which it is lived and recollected" (Sayigh 1994, 6).

As this is a work of an exploratory character, and as I seek to hand the megaphone and the lead role of the study to the voices and narratives of the speakers, I

rely on methods from the field of oral history. Furthermore, it is first and foremost the *meanings* in the narratives of the speakers that I want to focus on, more than any factual and historical *truth* of events.

Speaking of the importance of such meanings in narratives, Andrea Portelli (1991, 50) holds that; “the first thing that makes oral history different is that it tells us less about events than about their meaning”. These meanings may also be seen as expressions of subjective historical experience rather than eventual facts, as Rosemary Sayigh shows, saying that “how people tell history is necessarily shaped by culture: oral histories should not be read primarily as a source of historical ‘fact’ but rather of historical experience and the cultural frameworks through which it is lived and recollected” (Sayigh 1994, 6). Further, talking about the relation between the narrators voices, facts and oral history, in the book *Queer Oral Histories,* Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramirez (2012, 5) further postulate that:

> “Creating a new vision (and version) of history requires a leap of faith. It means taking narrators’ voices and oral history methods seriously. While the self-understood and often unspoken validation of narrators’ subjective perspectives does not entail taking every recorded declaration as factual truth, it does require that researchers commit to *listening* carefully for what narrators’ recollections reveal about their time and place in history.” (Boyd and Roque Ramírez 2012, 5)

I have tried as much as possible to adhere to these above notions of listening when conducting the interviews, and therefore my goal was to pose as very few interrupting questions as possible.

I want to stress here the idea that in oral history settings, the researcher in many ways becomes the student, and the speaker the teacher (Portelli 1991). Indeed, the researcher relies fully on the speaker in his quest for the stories and information.

Further, oral history is not mainly about collecting some particular historical evidence, but about ‘a relationship’ between speaker and researcher, focusing on self-reflexivity and paying attention to the ‘dynamic interaction’ between the two (Anderson 2012, 141). I think this has been an important momentum in my particular study because it opens for more hearty conversations about important and very personal and intimate details that may arise in a persons life; the life of sexuality and of family.

Further, because of the controversy and taboo related to the topic in this study, and the lack of existing literature or public representations, I believe that the use of oral history and the speakers’ ‘living memory’ (Berg 2001, 220) will be especially valuable. Thus, applying oral history as a historical method “can be used to access information otherwise simply unavailable to researchers”, because such a method “provides a means for answering questions and offering solutions that might otherwise go unmentioned and unnoticed” (Berg 2001, 222). As expressed by Nour in the quote at the beginning of below, I was allowed insight in the very personal details of his life. So was the case with many of the other speakers. Thus, it is these aspects of the *unmentioned* and the *unnoticed* that I want to focus on in this study, realizing that this is exactly what many stories of non-heterosexual beings in this region are.

a. Life Stories

> ”You are maybe the first person I tell this story, by the way. No one knows this story about me… even Suhail, who is a really close friend of mine. Even he doesn’t know the things that I’m telling you about me now.” (Nour 2015)

In terms of the interviews, I relied on what is known as ‘life stories’ in focusing on the speakers past experiences as non-heterosexuals in family life in Syria. Such a life *story* approach may be distinguished from that of a life *history* approach, in

that the latter takes the form of a “chronologically told narrative of an individual’s past”, a kind of ‘truth-telling’, where fabrication and imagination has little place” (Abrams 2010, 40). Life *stories*, however, can be used by individuals as ‘narrative devices’ in which one tries to make sense of a ‘life experience in the past’ (Abrams 2010, 40).

I believe that in letting the speakers be less tied up to this sense of historical ‘truth telling’ and rather be more self-reflexive around experiences, feelings and explanations of their past, may allow for more in-depth narratives of their concepts of family and their lives on the margins of the traditional society. Another reason I want to advocate for the use of life stories is that I want to look at the concepts of homosexuality and family from a new angle and because the methods of “life story has not been very widely used in Middle East research” (Sayigh 2015b) – although some exceptions are studies made by Nadje al-Ali[12], Lila Abu Lughod[13] and Rosemary Sayigh (Sayigh 2015b; Sayigh 1994). Using this method, I have strived to adhere to what Sayigh says about life stories as giving the speakers “the maximum of autonomy in choosing how to tell the stories of their lives, where to begin, what to include and exclude” (Sayigh 2015b).

Further, with having a particular focus on two distinct topics in this study, the family and homosexuality, in the speakers’ narratives about their lives, I will opt for what is called ‘topical’ life stories. About this, Sayigh further explains that:

> “The ‘topical’ life story is where the interviewer explains her/his particular interest to the speaker, and then encourages the speaker to tell those parts of

[12] Al-Ali, Nadje. 2007. *Iraqi Women: Untold Stories From 1948 to the Present.* London: Zed Books.

[13] Abu-Lughod, Lila. 1993. "Migdim: A Bedouin Matriarch," in *Struggle and Survival in the Modern Middle East*, edited by Edmund Burke III. Berkeley: University of California Press.

> their life story that relate to that topic. For the oral historian, the topical life story is a way of balancing an interest in specific 'facts' or situations with an interest in subjectivity and culture." (Sayigh 2015b)

Thus, with undertaking a topical life story approach to the practice of oral history, I have sought to illuminate some of the 'historical intersections' in the lives of non-heterosexual Syrians between sexuality and family (Rivers 2012, 65), hence my opening question of the interview; "can you tell me the story of your life with your family?"

Commenting on the relationship between life stories, and the family among non-heterosexual individuals, Weeks et al. (2001, 13) state that "the emergence of the emphasis on 'family' and relationships in the life stories of many non-heterosexuals represents an important shift in the cultural politics of sexual nonconformity". Thus, with the topical life stories, I seek to present some of the complexities surrounding this topic, and the manifold of ways in which we may establish families and intimate relationships. I believe I would not have been able to do so with applying more structured forms of interviews or through more fixed questionnaires.

Although I opt for a qualitative approach to this topic focusing on the meanings of the narratives and voices of a few concerned individuals in this study, rather than relying on quantitative methods to establish generalizable facts, I think it is important to highlight that "through their voices, in their stories, and the stories of thousands in similar positions, we see new claims being articulated, circulated and re-circulated, creating new communities of knowledge and empowerment, new realities" (Weeks 2010, 131). It is this I mean with the notion of 'renegotiation'. Thus, as in *Same-Sex Intimacies*, I seek to:

> "Use the *voices* of self-identified non-heterosexuals themselves, to chart the everyday challenges that have to be confronted in shaping relationships. There are many different voices, based on different experiences, shaped by gender, age, ethnicity, class, and all the other factors that open up or foreclose life chances. Yet there is a unity provided by a common experience of the dominant heterosexual norms, and the need to create meaningful relationships in a world which remains hesitant in fully validating them" (Weeks et al. 2001, 8, my italics)

b. Refugeehood

As mentioned in the introduction, I will focus this thesis mostly on the speakers' life stories concerned with their memories from their lives in Syria, before coming to Lebanon as refugees, *lājiʾīn* – or rather *nāziḥīn*, 'displaced persons', as they are officially and commonly known as in Lebanon. Politically, Lebanon is not a signatory member state of neither the 1951 Geneva International Convention nor the 1967 Protocal Relating to the Status of Refugees*,* and thus effectively avoiding the legal implications of the term 'refugee' (UN General Assembly 1951; Pizzi 2015; Hussan 2014). As the aspect of refugeehood would have significantly complicated the core of this study, with the focus on homosexuality and family, I believe that including this aspect in any intelligible sense would have been a too grand undertaking for me in this study. I acknowledge this limitation to the study. Including refugeehood as a factor to is a very interesting topic for a possible further study on this particular topic.

Another reason I did not include this factor is because putting the focus on the speakers as 'refugees' would mean that the main focus of this study would necessarily have to be put on their experiences in *Lebanon* and not in Syria. In addition to this; not even once during their life stories focused on their their coming to Lebanon, did any speaker refer to himself as *lāji*, or 'refugee'. They would rather speak of their ostracization and their coming to Lebanon in terms of '*herebt min ahlī /el-bēt',* I

escaped/ran away from my family/the house – or as *herbēn,* most commonly translated to fugitive, but in a non-political sense – and then as '*jīt ʿa lubnān*', 'I *came* to Lebanon', without any reference to being a refugee, although all of them except one told me to be registered with the UNHCR[14].

In addition to the above, I also have not focused on the notion of refugeehood in this study because I recognize that the term 'refugee' itself is a politically and legally loaded term that essentially can be seen as victimizing and disempowering the individuals and to a large degree resulting in their perceived 'powerlessness' and loss of agency (see; Gozdziak 2002; Hardgrove 2009). Thus, in focusing on these people's life stories I believe that it is important to look at them as the stories of people who possess agency, and not just essentializing them as a group of victims or refugees.

With all of the above concerning the notion of 'refugeehood', it is nevertheless imperative for me to take into consideration the effect of the particular lived experiences that these individuals are going through as refugees, especially when it comes to people's memories and narrative. As all the speakers of the study expressed a clear feeling of being in a doubly distressed and vulnerable situation, as refugees *and* as non-heterosexuals, this will inevitably take its toll on the historical narratives of their lives in Syria. In this regard, Sayigh (1994, 6) points out in her work on oral history dealing with another vulnerable and marginalized group of displaced people in Lebanon, the Palestinians of the refugee camps, that one has to take into account "the effects of class, political affiliation, age or gender on what they say". However, "there is the more important question", she says:

[14] The *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees* is responsible for registering Syrian refugees in Lebanon – by May 7 counting 1,183,327 individuals already registered. This excludes the ones waiting to be registered and of course all Syrians in Lebanon who, for whatever reason, have not registered as "refugees" at UNHCR.

> "Of the effect on speech and memory of the situation at the time of the recording with 'situation' including overall and local political conditions, mood, the particular moment and place of recording, and the *researcher's identity* and relationship with the history-givers." (Sayigh 1994, 6, my italics)

I will come back to this last part of Sayigh's important reminder regarding the researcher's identity and relationship with the speakers under the section on ethical issues. What I also want to highlight from the above, in terms of *memory* and the *situation* of the history-givers, is Sayigh's assertion says that; "particular phases of the past may seem good or bad depending on their relationship to the present" (Sayigh 1994, 6). I will look at this in terms of the memory and stories of the speakers and their relation to their current situations in Lebanon. Now first, however, I want to look at two other methods that I have been making use of in my data-analysis.

2. Grounded Theory

> "Grounded theory seeks not only to uncover relevant conditions, but also to determine how the actors respond to changing conditions and to the consequences of their actions. It is the researcher's responsibility to catch this interplay." (Corbin and Strauss 1990, 5)

To be able to look at and analyze the concepts that were emerging in the interviews with the speakers, I have been relying on methods of grounded theory. This is also a part of my goal of giving voice to the speakers in the research and not to close any doors for possible new ways of looking at the research with the emergence of new data or other unpredicted concepts, as a principle in grounded theory is that "strict determinism is rejected" (Corbin and Strauss 1990, 5). Thus methods of grounded theory give much authority to the actors, which has been an important principle to me in

the work with the speakers' life stories, thus looking at the 'interplay' between changing conditions and their actions related to the concept of family.

As Lila Abu-Lughod (1986) did in her acclaimed ethnographic study from Egypt, *Veiled Sentiments*, I wish to undertake a "non-directive approach" of study. Taking this approach is what she said affected her work the most profoundly. In her case, this is shown by the drastic turn of the whole study with her "discovery of poetry's importance in social life" in this society, which she would have been blind to, she says, had she followed a more rigid structure in her research (Lughod 1986, 24). This is an approach I strive to adhere to as well in my study, because it would enable me to focus on the topics and concepts that the *speakers* find the most interesting and central. In addition, this non-directive and open-minded approach might potentially help reduce my own bias and positionality as a researcher from the outside. For this reason, I think that the principles of grounded theory have been useful, as it accommodates for such changes in doing the research.

Thus, the approach in grounded theory that I am seeking to follow is the one of Strauss and Corbin, focusing on "giving voice to [the] respondents, representing them as accurately as possible," in addition to "discovering and acknowledging how respondent's views of reality conflict with their own" (Charmaz 2000, 509). Hence, grounded theory methodology can be helpful to me in this sense of two main reasons. First, "since phenomena are not conceived of as static, but as continually changing in response to evolving conditions, an important component of the method is to build change, through process, into the method" (Corbin and Strauss 1990, 4), second is the grounded theory-principle that, along with nondeterminism, "strict determinism is

rejected" (Corbin and Strauss 1990, 4). These are both principles I will strive to adhere to throughout my research.

a. Coding

In applying these principles of grounded theory, I have relied on means of 'coding' as an interpretative process of analysis when looking at the data and making sense of the findings. Coding as a technique in the social sciences "allows researchers to identify and even extract themes, topics, or issues in a systematic manner" (Berg 2001, 164) and is helpful when not having entered the research with a clear-cut hypothesis, as is my case with the oral histories. I have been relying on techniques of 'open' coding in this research, where the recorded data is "compared with others for similarities and differences", and where it is the notion of making sense of what the speakers are saying, hence the stories, that is the main objective (Corbin and Strauss 1990, 12). Thus, the data is given 'conceptual labels' in order to "group it together to form categories and subcategories" (Corbin and Strauss 1990, 12).

Thus, scrutinizing the recorded interviews and the transcripts, looking for such 'conceptual labels', I recognized and compared the stories and the data, which I subsequently grouped together in categories and subcategories. These categories and sub-categories, or rather *topics*, which I will be calling them, form the various sections in chapter 4 on the life stories of the speakers. Here I will be looking at; 1) the general life stories and the sense of childhood and what I have called 'rupture' and the 'getaway', 2) the family life stories focusing on the speakers' relationship to their parents and their siblings, respectively, 3) the sense of ostracization and loss of family, 4) the renegotiation of family, and 5) the speakers' various terms of self-identification.

3. Discourse Analysis

A third part of my methods of analysis will be through the tools of a 'discourse analysis', focusing on the interpretation of 'language in use' (Ritchie 2012, 29) and its contextualization. This is interesting because of the myriad of related terms used in everyday Arabic for both concepts. I will in the following briefly discuss some of these terms and their relevance for this study.

a. Family

First of all, 'family' in colloquial Arabic is most often talked about either as *al-ahl*, usually referring to the parents and/or the 'nuclear family', and *al-ʿāʾila* [colloquially *el-ʿayle*], signifying the extended family. The terms of *(ṣilat) al-raḥim,* as discussed earlier, most often refer to the traditional meaning of (blood) kinship. Furthermore, the words *al-ʾāl, al-usra* and *al-bayt* are used of family in more classical Arabic terms. In the speakers' life stories, it was only the two first terms that were referred to when talking about family, which I will come back to when discussing the notion of the renegotiation of family.

With the concept of family comes a vast terminology of addressing and talking about relatives and family members. As shown by Barakat (1993, 99–100), the way especially young people in Syria address their nuclear family "illustrates many aspects of Arab family life, including its interdependence, sentimentality, commitments and self-denial". Barakat also adds that in the Arab world "the deep attachment to the family verges on morbidity" especially between mother and son" (Barakat 1993, 99–100). This is an interesting observation that I seek to investigate more, in terms of how the men narrate their stories

b. Homosexuality

The array of terms in use regarding the concepts of homosexuality in the Arab world is interesting because the etymology of most words and terms in use is relatively new and because they are often interchanged with English equivalents, also in contexts where the rest of the language is exclusively Arabic. As, according to Khaled El-Rouayheb (2005, 153), “the concept of male homosexuality did not exist in the Arab-Islamic Middle East in the early Ottoman period”, and thus “there was simply no native concept that was applicable to all and only those men who were sexually attracted to members of their own sex”, many of the terms used are thus mostly new constructs of Arabic, as in the case of *al-jinsāniyya* and *al-mithliyya al-jinsiyya*, referred to above.

As discussed earlier, according to Joseph Massad (2007, 172), *al-shūḏūḏ al-jinsī*, or ‘sexual deviance’, is what “remains the most common term used [in Arabic] in monographs, the press, and polite [sic.] company to refer to the Western concept of ‘homosexuality’ ”. In these terms a homosexual person would be termed *shāḏḏ/a*, ‘deviant’. However, another, and more ‘polite’, term that has emerged is *miṯlī/iyya (al-jins)*, referring to the concept of sameness, and can be best translated to ‘homosexual’. Other and far more derogatory terms include, such as: *munḥarif/a* meaning ‘distorted’, *lūṭi,* referring to the sodomites in the biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah, and *suḥāqīyya* used derogatorily about lesbian women.

As an interesting anecdote about the latter term, ‘*suḥāqīyya*’ is widely believed to stem from the verb ‘*saḥaqa*’, in Arabic meaning ‘to pound’ or ‘to crush’ something – in a supposed reference to the movement of the female body during sexual intercourse. Massad, however, holds that this is a pre-classical Arabic word stems from the Greek *sapphikos* (Massad 2007, 109), having nothing to do with this notion in Arabic of

‘crushing’. A couple of critical questions regarding the popular use of this term that might lend credence to Massad’s theory, are expressed in the testimony of one of the women from *Bareed Mista3jil*, asking:

> Where does *sou7aq* [sic. colloquial] come from? I don’t know. I read somewhere that it is supposed to denote sexual acts between two women in the form of ‘rubbing,’ thus the derivation from the verb ‘*sa7aqa.’* Well, *‘sa7aqa’* also means ‘to crush,’ as in: ‘*Sa7aqa fareeq korat al qadam al almani nazeeraho al brazeeli 6-0’* [The German football team crushed their Brazilian opponents 6-0]. So how in the world is the verb ‘to crush’ supposed to signify anything related to a woman loving or making love to another woman? I have had my fair share of sexual experience in my lifetime, but I swear I have never ever crushed (or been crushed by) another woman. So why in the world is the word ‘*sou7aqa*’ supposed to represent who I am?” (Meem 2009, 35–36)

Further, another and mostly derogatory used of non-heterosexual men refer to the person as the one that is ‘being fucked’, *yintēk,* thus playing on the gendered aspect of the effeminate submissive man in the sexual relationship. This is, to my knowledge, one of the most widespread terms used in Lebanon and Syria, especially among people who want to express their abomination to the concept of male same-sex relations

With the aforementioned aspects of simple introduction of the different terms and the discourse analysis*,* I thus want to look into the terms employed by the speakers in this study and see in what different ways and contexts in which they use the etymologically different words to speak about homosexuality in general and themselves as non-heterosexual in particular.

C. Ethical Issues and Limitations

1. Researcher Subjectivity

Given the sensitivity of the topics covered in the interviews and the particular vulnerability of the narrators, it has been imperative for me to create a safe and secure environment, not only physically, but also mentally for the interviews. Before the interviews started I assured the oral consent of all participants, in line with the approved application from the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), March 31, 2015. Further, it was imperative for me that the narrator had the sense of feeling respected, of trusting my intentions, and of having some control over the outcome of the interview (Anderson 2012, 141). Commenting on these aspects, in the context of 'queer oral history', Kelly Anderson (2012, 141) has stressed the 'usefulness of self-disclosure at the beginning of the relationship with the narrator'. This is an aspect she "cannot overemphasize the importance of", she says, adding to this that the readiness to disclose private information can create a connection and trust that sometimes leads to finding a 'shared experience' (Anderson 2012, 141).

Regarding Andersons' notion above, I found this aspect to be useful for me in conducting interviews. This also was a part of my aim of seeing the interview as a 'dynamic interaction' and a relationship between the speaker and the researcher (Anderson 2012, 64), what . As one example of several similar experiences, I vividly remember one of the first things I was asked, although indirectly so, when meeting a group of the people that I was going to meet for an interviews; *khaṣṣo shī howwe?* It was one of the guys in the group asking another one in hope that I did not hear what was being said. As I did hear the inquiry, I was a bit perplexed because in my understanding then, this question was a relatively crude way of asking if all of this was

"any of his [ie. my] business". The term *khaṣṣ* with a following personal pronoun in Levantine Arabic normally translates to someone who is 'concerned' with something. Thus, the exclamation *ma khaṣṣak!* is a popular and fairly unpolished way of saying that something is 'none of your business'. With a questioning and surprised look at my new acquaintance, I quickly received an apology and the explanation that this is the term used to signify if a person is concerned with the 'gay community'; *el-jaww*[15], as he called it. In other words, this was a circuitous way of asking if I was 'gay' – an assumption I subsequently confirmed. I believe that my positive response with a chuckle to this at first a bit awkward inquiry broke the ice in a nice way and enabled me to take part in their intimate life stories to a larger extent than I would have been able to if I had not confirmed his assumption. The posing of similar questions breaking the ice happened in several of the interviews.

Lastly, I wish to say about my approach in conducting these interviews as the field work of this research, that I to the utmost degree have tried to adhere to the importance that Protelli (1991) stress on viewing this as 'a *learning* situation'. Hence, these interviews are not about me pretending to be an "expert scholar leading the narrator down the road to illumination" (Boyd 2012, 48), nor about me coming to study these individuals – many of whom have later become my good friends – as mere 'sources'. Rather, the speakers are the ones that possess information that I lack, and I try as best I can to learn from this and to be humble about it (Portelli 1991, xi). With this, I can only really say that the conduction of this research has really been a big and enriching learning process for me.

[15] *El-jaww* literarily mens 'the atmosphere', but in the Lebanese and Syrian 'homosexual sphere' (Merabet 2014)m it is used to signify the [gay] 'community'.

2. Institutional Review Board

Securing approval from the University's IRB for this research proved to be a very laborious and not least time-consuming process. Working with a marginalized group of people in Lebanese society, the full board review of my application for approval, including the many rounds of modifications of proposed research methods and procedures, stretched from January to April 2015, and thus pushed my field work to the limits of the achievable, in terms of time at hand, nearly prompting me to change or postpone my study.

With the intention of the IRB to "protect the rights, safety and well-being of all human subjects recruited to participate in research activities" (AUB IRB 2010), this is an important part of any researcher's fieldwork with human subjects. However, the securing of approval might sometimes feel like a too over-tedious process constraining the fieldwork of the student. It is thus my argument that more autonomy should be given to the student researcher when doing field work with human subjects in the Social Sciences.

3. Positionality and Orientalism

> "The West is the actor, the Orient is a passive reactor. The West is the spectator, the judge and jury, of every facet of Oriental behvaiour." (Said 1979, 109)

Sayigh's last point in her important reminder above in the section on oral history, regarding "the researcher's identity and relationship with the history-givers" (Sayigh 1994, 6) when doing oral history, leads my to my last point in this chapter, which relates to my identity as a researcher and my innate positionality in conducting this study. As I am very aware of my own innate bias as a European student coming to

this region to do sociological work on an already controversial topic, I cannot do other than to explicitly make my own background clear to the reader, and do as much as I can to not fall in the many traps of Orientalism and indiscriminate overgeneralization leading to "an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident', and "as a Western style of dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 1979, 2–3).

Said (1979) and Massad (2007) after him have both shown how the study of sexuality in 'Oriental' societies was and is an important component of 'Western' Orientalism and many of its accompanying imperialist projects. What is more, my own cultural and geographical background combined with my field of study already makes me an 'Orientalist', according to Said (1979, 2), because "anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient – and this applies to whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or philologist – either in its specific or general aspects, is an orientalist, and whatever he or she does is orientalism". There are nevertheless a few aspects and traits that I hope may help reduce, if only to a modest degree, my cultural European, orientalist baggage.

First of all, as I have conducted all interviews strictly in Arabic, I felt that this helped me eliminate possible obstacles of external translation and interpretation and enabled me to listen and speak more freely to the narrators both within and outside the interview. I hope that this will place me at a certain middle ground not too often thread before; by being an outsider and insider at the same time. My experience from the people I have spoken to is that they actually appreciate telling their story to someone from outside the local society, because of fear of the stigma and possible repercussions from Lebanese and Syrian society in general. Furthermore, many of the people I spoke

to, also expressed a sense of relief of finally being able to tell someone their story, hence Nour's quote above, on not having told this to anyone before because of its social stigma. I think the fact that they can have the chance to do this directly in Arabic to an outsider actually made for an advantage.

Moreover, as I hope I have been able to underline in the preceding, I want to let the narratives of the speakers be as guiding as possible for both my data collection and analysis. Thus, I hope that through this focus, and by relying on grounded theory and oral history, I can reduce some of my inherent "Orientalist" bias, making their stories what counts the most throughout this research. Also, by using open-ended interviews and oral history, letting the narrators speak freely, I will try to not enforce any of my inherently biased terminology or theories on the speakers during the interviews.

And now, to the life stories…

CHAPTER 4

LIFE STORIES: OSTRACIZATION AND RENEGOTIATION OF FAMILY

"I cried and asked why God had created me this way… like a woman. Why am I deprived of everything? Deprived of having the chance to be with my mother and my brother and to see my family and everything." (Alaa 2015)

"Since I was a kid my family doesn't know, whatsoever, nor does my surrounding society. I had very limited relationships with a secrecy that I can't even explain. Only by thinking of [the fact that] I am like this in this city I become scared." (Akram 2015)

"*Yaʿnī*, pretend you are imprisoned, but in an open prison. That's my situation. […] Cut-off from my family and threatened…" (Samir 2015)

"I'm not wanted by my parents […] and in the family I'm not liked by my older siblings […] So, with living my life as 'gay', in addition to having society rejecting me, also my family rejects me." (Ghassan 2015)

"Still, the topic of 'gays' is not spoken of at all [in Syria]. When my family found out, I was able to run away, but they still persecute me, even to this day. They are following both me and Walid. You remain afraid, afraid for your life, and this feeling of fear is very difficult, it is not easy, it is very difficult." (Karim 2015)

"I came home one evening and found my family gathered; my father, uncles, brothers and cousins. […] So I was wondering what was going on. Then they started asking me; 'Where are you going, and who do you go out with?' […] They became violent, but I didn't say anything. They tortured me for six months. I was tied-up in a small room. The first two months they would come in and hit me every day." (Walid 2015)

"There is no concept called 'gays' [in Syria]. You're considered either, sorry for the words, *sharmūṭ aw lūṭī* [whore or sodomite]. I can't sit down and explain [my family] that this is my body and so on. That is not an option because we have something called *Shāmī* norms and traditions. They would kill you. *Dhabeḥ!*" (Nour 2015)

"I'm thinking about myself and how my family looked at me two days ago… *enno*, I'm still me! It's still me with you. Nothing has changed. What changed in me? The son of yesterday is me and the son of tomorrow is me. But they don't think this way […] *Khalaṣ!* I've lost them. (Farid 2015)

"The loss of my family doesn't affect me anymore because they don't mean anything to me any longer, because *they* are the ones who rejected me if they don't accept me as I am naturally." (Salim 2015)

"So, because of my 'gender' I lost my family… I've lost all the people I love, and I'm waiting for God to relieve us from this grief." (Fouad 2015)

The above way of introducing this chapter – presenting snippets of each of the speakers' life story – might have been somewhat untraditional and chaotic. This was the intention. Untraditional, because I wanted this to reflect how the following stories told by non-heterosexual speakers from Syria is in a constant renegotiation with traditional Syrian society and family-life. Chaotic, because these are stories of people's lives, and are bound to be marked by some degree of chaos, especially in the case of these men, whose lives have been greatly inflicted by ruptures, especially in terms of family-ostracization and the uncertainties of a life in refuge. On another side, this chaos, within the realms of oral history, and in the words of Portelli (1991, 271), can be seen as "resembling the fragmentation and overlapping of voices in everyday conversation, and yet distanced from it by being placed in a new context and medium." Thus, it is with the context of the family and the medium of this oral history study that I wish to present the voices and the life stories of these speakers.

At the same time, with the above introduction, it was my intention to briefly introduce these ten speakers whose stories have the main roles in this chapter. Thus, I found the presented quotes to be among the most essential to these various stories – every single one of which has both dismayed me and uplifted me. These have been heartbreaking stories of hardships and struggles, yet inspirational accounts of hope and love, and have all left a deep impression in me. Hence, I sincerely wish that I had the opportunity to present all these stories in their entirety in an oral history archive. However, due to the constraints both in terms of the scope of this thesis and of ensuring the full confidentiality of the brave speakers, I will only be able to include parts of these stories and present them in this modest thesis. I nevertheless hope that this endeavor will do just to the stories of these speakers, to whom I am forever grateful.

The ensuing life stories belong to ten men of different ages and from various socio-economic, religious and geographic backgrounds, and thus vary accordingly. I believe that the major challenge and shortcoming of this study is the difficulty of finding any clear, overarching consistency between all these stories, all being unique in their own particular way. However, it is this inconsistency that I want to highlight with this study, viewing neither the concept of homosexuality nor the understanding of family as set in stone, but rather as highly fluid and as constantly shaped and renegotiated by the individuals in the society they live in.

I further believe that it has become clear through the voices and experiences of the speakers in this study that especially the concept of family is an object of fluidity and renegotiation. The Syrian men in this study largely face similar situations of family ostracization and displacement, but have different ways of facing these challenges. Thus, it has not been my attempt with this study to try to generalize and oversimplify these speakers' life stories for the purpose of reaching any definite and clear-cut answers about their experiences within the traditional realms of family. Rather, my intention with this study is to present the various, complex and at time chaotic experiences and stories that growing up as non-heterosexual individuals in families in a society such as Syria has created; caught between the norms and traditions [*ʾādāt wa taqālīd*] of society and the need for self-expression.

With this said, I have nevertheless tried to identify and extract some broader 'conceptual labels' or topics that can be said to be more or less recurring in the different life stories. These topics are represented by the five different sections of this chapter. In terms of the outline of this chapter, I will start by looking more closely into the broader *life stories* of the speakers; related to their experiences of growing up and living as non-

heterosexual individuals in Syrian society – focusing on their sense of childhood and what I call the 'rupture' and the 'getaway'. Secondly, I want to focus on the speakers' experiences from their lives within the realms of their *families* of origin, looking more closely into their relationships with their parents and their siblings, respectively. Thirdly, I want to explore the notions of *ostracization* and the speakers' sense of a loss of family and the ramifications that this has had for their lives. In the fourth section, I will focus on the *renegotiation* of the terms and concepts of family and also the ways in which some of the speakers seek to compensate for the loss of their families by creating structures of family within their own community or social 'homosexual sphere', *el-jaww*. In the fifth and last section, I will look into the terms and language of *self-identification* used by the speakers, provided as a contribution to the debate raised by Joseph Massad on the topic of homosexual identities in the Arab world.

I will not be able to include stories from every speaker under each section and topic. Rather, I have tried as best I can to include the parts of the speakers' stories that I sensed best represented the various stories and experiences that emerged in the interviews. Thus, with the stories and quotes that I am including in this chapter, I want to present some of the commonalities of the speakers' narratives and at the same time show the big variety and the overarching inconsistencies between the different stories, trying to show that the experiences of non-heterosexuals in the family of origin are highly diverse.

A. Life Stories of Non-Heterosexual Syrians

> "The situation for 'gays' in Syria… you may hear things in the news and think 'how do they live?' I mean, really, how do we live!?" (Samir 2015)

> "And *al-ḥamdillah*. That is my story… But in Syria I was much happier than I am here. Here I'm not happy at all." (Fouad 2015)

Samir, who is in his early thirties and from a city in northern Syria, was deemed unwelcome by his family in Syria a long time ago. His expressed despair in terms of living as a non-heterosexual man in Syrian society was shared by all of the speakers. With the stories they were carrying with them from Syria, none of the speakers currently expressed a wish to return, even if the *aḥdāth*[16] in the country sees an end. However, several of the speakers spoke vividly of beautiful and joyous memories from their childhoods and certain parts of their lives in Syria. In this first section of the chapter I seek to introduce the speakers and their life stories in more depth and present some of the despairs and at the same time, some of the joys raised in the speakers' broader life from their experiences of living in Syrian society – thus not only restricted to the realms of family – to set the ground for the coming sections related to family life.

Because these stories are manifold, and because every single story is unique to its owner's life experiences, it has proven a difficult task to subdivide and collate the topics in this chapter any more than I have already done with the sections. However, in this section on the broader life stories, I want to highlight three recurring topics that were brought up by the speakers talking about their life in Syria; the nostalgia of their childhoods, the sense of a life rupture, and lastly what I have called the getaway [*al-hurūb*]. Again, the purpose with this is to show both the commonalities and the breadth

[16] *Al-Aḥdāth,* 'the happenings'; what most speakers refer to when talking about the situation in Syria after 2011. I will be using this when referring to the situation in Syria.

and variety of these stories, but most importantly, to let the voices of the speakers be heard.

Somehow contrasting Samir's dismal quote from above, about his life as gay in Syria, I will start this section by presenting the speakers' stories about their childhoods, which for a majority of the speakers brought a clear sense of joy and nostalgia to the stories.

1. Childhoods and Nostalgia

> "There were a lot of things happening in my childhood… Beautiful things. There were "gay" things, if you want." (Nour 2015)

Nour, now in his late thirties, spoke vividly about his beautiful life in a big, happy family with many siblings and a lower-middle-class mother and father. They lived the life of a regular Syrian family in an apartment on the outskirts of a bigger city amidst humble circumstances. "We were a beautiful family," he said, "I miss it very much!" Nour's childhood story was a typical example of the sense of nostalgia expressed in many of the speakers' stories about their childhood lives in Syria and the sense of having spent good days there as children. *ʾAḍḍaynā ayyām ḥilwe honīk*, 'we had some good days there', was expressed by several speakers. Thus, many of them look back on their childhood days with a sense of joy and longing.

Further, the memories of the speakers' childhoods would frequently be used by some as a stark contrast to the life that they are currently living in Lebanon. With this, and especially considering the common situation of all of these men – being ostracized from their families *and* from their country – I think it is important to keep in mind Sayigh's notion previously referred to, stressing that "particular phases of the past may

seem good or bad depending on their relationship to the present" (Sayigh 1994, 6). Thus these men's situation as doubly discriminated, as 'refugees' and as not conforming to society's norms for gender and sexuality, and as doubly displaced individuals, undeniably have an effect on the speakers' portrayed life stories from Syria, and maybe especially on the distant stories related to their childhoods. This can be exemplified with what Fouad said, referred to in the beginning of the section. Fouad is in his early twenties and from a city in central parts of Syria. After having told his story of how he had been ostracized from his family after being severely battered and rebuked because of his non-normative gender expression by his father, he said that; "*al-ḥamdillah*. That is my story… But in Syria I was much happier than I am here. Here I'm not happy at all. You know how the situation for Syrians in Lebanon is…" Fouad was one of the few who did not recall any memories of a particularly happy childhood, rather the opposite. Thus, I think it is telling that this was his conclusion of his comparison between present and past. Considering the troubled times that Fouad had been through in Syria; beaten by his father and ostracized from the family, it still remained a perceived better place for him than living a life as doubly discriminated against in Lebanon; for being Syrian and for having a non-normative gender expression.

In the stories of the speakers' childhoods, memories of their first romance or sexual encounters would in several cases arise as a main event and point of focus. Nour continues his story of the beautiful 'gay things' happening in his life, saying:

> "But the concept of 'gay' [*mafhūm el-gay*], I don't know… I didn't know it. Until I turned around eighteen, before I went to the army. I felt that I was 'gay' in the sense that I'm 'gay', sexually speaking, or *lūṭī* […] So, my childhood in school started. I got to know a guy in school, a young boy. We had 'sex'… but not in the meaning of 'sex', *yaʿnī*… like kissing each other and stuff." (Nour 2015)

Nour was obviously looking back on his childhood with nostalgia and good memories, smiling and laughing when telling the story about his life as a kid with his childhood friends and his many adventures with them in the neighborhood and on the roof of his family's building. Talking especially about one of his friends from childhood, he says that; "I really miss him, and I still think of him. Like; that guy, where is he now? […] Did he get married or not? Is he still 'gay'? I want to know if he turned 'gay' […] He was my first real love." Nour's story of happy childhood memories stretches until his late teenage years, when he goes to serve in the Syrian army in Lebanon, after which his life would change drastically…

From his childhood memories, also Walid, now in his early forties and hailing from a rural area in northern Syria, recollects the story from his first romantic relationship, with a friend he had known for a long time. He tells how they would always have their 'eyes on each other' and how there had always been lot of suppressed attraction between them. "Then, one time", Walid said,

> "I was courageous enough to kiss him. He answered the kiss and he wasn't afraid or anything. So, he returned the same feelings and then I knew that he liked me the same way that I liked him. So, we disclosed ourselves to each other and stayed together in a beautiful relationship for two years [*ʾemelnā ʾalāqa ḥilwe, ʾaʿadnā sintēn fīha*]." (Walid 2015)

Like Nour and most others, also Walid seemed to have very fond memories from his childhood in general, and in particular from his youth time romance with his friend and the adventures that were connected to it. However, society separated their paths when his friend later went on and got married. "His family was putting more pressure on him than on me," Walid said, "and as soon as he got married, our relationship ended". Walid

then continued talking about how he from a young age had been wanted by his family to marry a girl.

> "For me, I was always running away from my family when they wanted to marry me. [Chuckling]. I was pretending I was traveling to find work in another area. *Wallah*, I've been going as a *khātib* [suitor], as they say, more than twenty-five times! [Laughing]. If I went to see a girl, I would come back with a thousand excuses about her. 'This girl is not well-behaved', 'this girl doesn't have a good personality', 'I didn't like the looks of this girl', and so on… I would tell them that and then go travel for two-three months until they would forget about it." (Walid 2015)

Another and quite different example of expressing happy memories from his childhood was Alaa, also from rural northern Syria, and now in his mid-twenties. Alaa told of how he had been living in a beautiful family and how he would always play with his sister in the family, and never spending time with his brothers, and be very happy about that

> "I used to be the pampered kid in the family! I would always go with my sisters […] Every gesture they would make, I would copy. I would dress the same way, put the same make-up and wear dresses, just as they did. Everything. I have brothers, but I didn't spend time with them, I spent more time with my girl siblings. I really miss that time." (Alaa 2015)

In an otherwise dismal story of woes and maltreatment, the childhood memories of Alaa seemed to be the main highlight and point of joy in his story. These childhood memories of playing with his sisters remained the points of reference throughout Alaa's story of what he was longing back to. This was a recurring topic among many of the speakers.

Although two of the speakers told stories of having been molested at a young age, ruining their sense of any happy childhood memories, the other speakers, in concert with Nour, Walid and Alaa, would express a sense of great nostalgia for their younger

years, of the ‘beautiful days’, *el-ayyām el-ḥilwe*. However, with this feeling of the good old childhood days, came a clear sense of what I call a *rupture* in their life stories, when things would change and the lives of most of the speakers would be turned upside-down. I borrow the term ‘rupture’ from Weeks et al. (2001, 36–37) talking about non-heterosexual life experiments in terms of “commitment and negotiation; of responsibility and care; of living together and living apart; of continuity and rupture”. Such a sense of a life rupture occurred mostly after events of non-heterosexual relations were disclosed by their families, causing major implications for the speakers.

2. Rupture

> “With this, the sufferings of Nour started. [Crying]. Like now, I have neither a mother nor a father. [Crying]. And my brother is a thug [*ʾakrūt*] and knows everything about me and has taken over the house. And you don’t have anything called a house. What would you do?” (Nour 2015)

While it was with a big smile that Nour told the story of his childhood memories as an adventurous little boy in the neighborhood, the rest of his story was not equally cheerful. “It continued like this until I left for the army,” he said about his happy childhood memories. At that time, Nour served his conscription in the Syrian army in Lebanon. One day he was caught for having an affair with another man during service, and was subsequently sent to jail.

> “In the army I had a lot of ‘sex’. Then, while in the army, I was caught and imprisoned for nine years… nine *months*, I mean… at the prison in [name of city], in the section for *al-liwāt*. It was only for young guys. Guys between like seventeen and twenty, twenty-one, and twenty-two, arrested for the same crime… *al-liwāṭa* [sodomy], that is.” (Nour 2015)

It was after this incident that his brother, Salam, received the news about Nour's same-sex practices, as he had to sign his brother's release form in the prison where they told him that; "your brother is accused of *al-liwāṭa*". Following this, Nour said that his life would never return the same, because after this Salam would start blackmailing him and have total control over him, exploiting the fact that he knew about his brother's sexuality, thus making Nour's life a misery. Nour then entered what he called a competition of 'the weakest link' [*el-ḥalaqa el-aḍʿaf*] with his brother, the latter trying to exploit this weak spot of Nour to control him. Thus, this is where "the sufferings of Nour started", he said.

Also in the cases of Alaa and Walid, there was a sense of rupture in their fond memories of their childhoods. Both of them had been subjected to severe and violent repercussions from their male relatives in the wake of receiving news about their engagement in same-sex practices. They both hail from traditional rural areas on each side of northern Syria, and express the severity of the concept of 'sexual deviance' among their societies and families.

Alaa recollects how, later in his childhood, an older man in the neighborhood, Hashim, had started coming on to him and subsequently exploited him sexually multiple times. Being afraid that the news about it would spread, "at the end I was put to shame", Alaa said.

> "My brother and father heard about the story. My brother came and grabbed me when I was out on the street and brought me back home. He took me to the house and asked me; 'two-three days ago, where were you?' I asked him; 'where was I?' He told me this and that, and that 'you went to Hashim's house and that he had 'sex' with you and stuff'. I was denying this out of fear. Then they started to hit me and beat me. And they weren't only hitting me with their fists. They hit me with electric cables, as well. They would hit me… I was fourteen years old!" (Alaa 2015)

Thus, although he had been sexually abused by an older man in the neighborhood at the age of fourteen, Alaa's father and brother would reprimand him for what they perceived of as bringing shame upon the family, as the story had already reached the streets. After this, Alaa told how they would lock him up and maltreat him.

> "They put me in this storage room and tied me up with chains [*zanjīl*]. Do you know what *zanjīl* is? It's what they use to tie up donkeys and stuff. They locked me up with these chains for seven days [...] After they released me and felt sorry for me, I took to myself and ran away from home [*ḥmelet ḥālī w hrebet*]. We have a neighbor called Wael. I went to his place and told him that I had been locked up for seven days, and told him the whole story. I said that I wanted to run away from home. I was so afraid and just wanted to leave home, so I went with him to Damascus." (Alaa 2015)

Walid, told a similar story of severe reprimand and of being locked up by his male relatives, as expressed by his quote from the introduction of this chapter. However, in comparison to Alaa, this happened when he was about twenty-five years old and after a consensual sexual relation with another man his age. After this, the man repeatedly attempted to blackmail Walid and in the end ratted on him to his family when Walid wouldn't give in to his demands. "It was obvious from the start that this was only exploitation", Walid said, "but I didn't imagine… because the problem I would have, also he would have… I didn't imagine that he would [tell my family] and run away to Lebanon". After this, Walid was one day confronted by his male relatives in a "strange family gathering" and subsequently locked up for six months, which included two months of severe beating and a very limited access to food.

> "… after I got out from this I was weighing forty kilos! What is forty kilos for a twenty-five year-old guy? Can you imagine how skinny and bony I was? So for six months my sister would sometimes come and give me water, without them seeing her. If they had seen her they probably would have killed her. So she would get me a glass of water in secret." (Walid 2015)

With looking at the three stories of Nour, Alaa and Walid, I think it is worth mentioning that in all of them it was the various *acts* of same-sex intercourse that had brought on this rupture as a result of the repercussions from their families, and not some perceived "gay" identity on their side, which they all expressed that they did not know of at that time. In addition, none of these men displayed what would be deemed as 'effeminate' looks or behaviors – most often referred to by the speakers in Arabic as '*mbayyan ʿalēh*', literarily meaning 'it shows on him'. Thus, I consider this to contradict Massad's notion pointed to earlier saying that it is not "same-sex sexual practices" that are being repressed and deprecated in the Arab world but rather what he calls "the sociopolitical identification of these practices with the Western identity of gayness and the publicness that these gay-identified men seek[17]" (Massad 2007, 188). I will come more back to this in the last section in this chapter on the notion of self-identification in relation to the debate raised by Massad.

Somehow similar life ruptures as the ones presented above happened to two other speakers, Akram and Ghassan, after having been abducted by armed groups during the *aḥdāth* in Syria. Akram is in his mid-twenties and comes from a city in northern Syria where he lived a quiet and normal childhood, except having lived in fear of his family or surroundings finding out about his secretive and 'very-limited relationships'. Akram spoke of how he had been set up in a trap in 2013 by an armed 'Islamist' group in his hometown, which he describes as "more conservative than any other area in Syria". He added that; "Syria as a whole has not accepted the idea of 'LGBT' at all, but that "in this particular area people don't accept it in any form, whatsoever!" Continuing his story, 'this armed group', he said:

[17] Here Massad specifically refers to the "gay" police raids in Egypt, but this is his argument generally of what is and has been taking place in the broader Arab world.

> “took me to this [makeshift prison] and at first they interrogated me for my name and all my personal information. After I had given it to them, they asked me; ‘Do you know why you are here?’ I said, ‘because I did not have my ID?’ They said; ‘no, because you are ‘gay’.” (Akram 2015)

After this, Akram said, that “they wanted names of other ‘gay’ people,” but that he did not give them any names. He was subsequently locked up and tortured for a week – in the most inhumane manner possible, showing the scars he still carries during the interview – before he was able to escape and run away. Then he said that:

> “I didn’t go back home. First of all because I didn’t know what my family’s reaction would be, because they do not accept the idea whatsoever. Second of all, I knew that when they [the group] found out that I had run away, they would of course go to my family to look for me. So I went to a ‘gay’ friend of mine and found out that he knew about my story. He told me that almost everyone had heard about what happened to me.” (Akram 2015)

Thus, rather than going home to his family after this incident, knowing that his family had heard about the story and thus fearing further repercussions, Akram sought refuge at a gay friend of his. After this, he talked on the phone to his sister, who warned him that their father had become furious when learning of the incident and the reason behind his abduction. He arranged with her to secretly get him his papers from their home in order for him to travel. After this he ran away to Lebanon, and has not seen his family since.

Also Ghassan, in his late-twenties and hailing from a city in the southern parts of Syria, tells the story of how he has both been arrested by the police and abducted by an ‘Islamist’ group’ during the *aḥdath*, “*liʾanno ana* ‘gay’ [because I am ‘gay’]”:

> ”I have been arrested four times by the regime army and abducted two times by armed groups, so I ran away to Lebanon. Also, a third reason for me coming here was that my family knew… well, not that they knew, but they started

> suspecting me being ‘gay’ after the abduction episode that happened to me.” (Ghassan 2015)

Ghassan gloomily recollects the night of his first abduction and how he had taken a taxi from “a ‘gay’ gathering area in Damascus” returning from a party, when the driver had abducted him. Along with three other people, the man had sexually molested him and beat him before leaving him outside his parents’ house, half-naked and humiliated.

In addition to Ghassan, four others – thus half of the speakers – told stories of having been subjected to sexual molestation; in three cases by militant groups and security forces, and in two other cases by close male relatives. Listening to the stories about the molesters of the former type, the security forces and militant groups, it seems as though these were ways to reprimand and humiliate the men. Thus it may seem to bear a clear reference to what el-Rouayheb says about phallic penetration and ‘sodomizing strangers’ as means of domination, subjugation and humiliation, and not necessarily as a sexual act as such (El-Rouayheb 2005, 14).

In the case of Ghassan, the abductors actions were allegedly ‘religiously’ motivated. “They claimed that they were from [name of militant Islamist group],” he said. Thus, Ghassan explained how; “they kill *el-lūtī*, basically us ‘gays’ we are *el-liwāṭ*, and they kill us, because they think that if they kill a *lūṭī* they will go to heaven”. However, they did not kill him, but rather gave him what in their view was a proper penalty by sodomizing him.

Also as a story of molestation as a form of penalty, Nour told how he had been sexually molested by Syrian security forces, after having been arrested at a demonstration in the beginning of the *aḥdāth* in his neighborhood in Syria. “Then the

war erupted…” he said, with a devastated look on his face, in what was the only actual reference to the *aḥdāth* in Syria as *war* [*ḥarb*].

> “I went down to the demonstrations, and they imprisoned us for ten days. We were subjected to harsh torture. They raped us two times in prison. First time. And second time. The first time by three people. The second time two. [Pause. Sobbing]. But I don’t want to talk about this. It hurts too much.” (Nour 2015)

Also this seems to bear a reference to the notion of ‘sodomizing’ someone as a way of penalizing. All these stories of molestation thus created a clear sense of rupture in the life stories of the speakers, affirming that things would not be quite the same again after this. After being released from jail, Nour went to Damascus, from where he later traveled to Lebanon, as was the case for many of the speakers.

3. The Getaway

> “I ran away and went to Damascus. I stayed there for a while before I left Syria.” (Samir 2015)

While few of the speakers originally hail from Damascus, most of them told stories of how they would escape to Damascus; either after having run away from the house to seek a long-term refuge, or as a more temporary getaway [*hurūb*] from the family and the home community to be able to live out their sexuality and gender more freely. In addition to Samir, also Alaa, Ghassan and Walid expressed how they had run away [*herebet*] from home to seek refuge and a getaway in Damascus:

> ”I’m originally from [name of home city]. I ran away and went to Damascus.” (Alaa 2015)

> ”After I got out of detention, I ran away to Damascus with one of my friends. And from Damascus I came to Lebanon.” (Ghassan 2015)

> "I was able to get a hold of my passport and ran away – [I've been on the run] from 2006 until today […] I met him [Karim] in Damascus […] we lived there for the last five years, but when the *aḥdāṯ* in Syria started that was no longer possible, so we came here…" (Walid 2015)

Other speakers would tell of how they would travel more temporarily to Damascus while still living with their families, to be able to live their lives more freely, without the immediate pressure and the fear of repercussions from family and the home community. Both Farid, Nour and Fouad, would all talk about leaving their homes elsewhere and seek a getaway in the relatively free spheres of Damascus. With this, there was a clear sense among them of living a double-life, or as Farid put it:

> "You live one life at home, and if you want to live your life as 'gays' you need to go away and find a place far away, *yaʿnī*. I would try to go away from where I am from. I am from [name of city] and I would go to Damascus, for instance. Like, to meet people from Damascus, […] and to live your life and to let go of a some of your energy [*faḍḍī ṭāʾtak shway*]." (Farid 2015)

Many of the speakers also commented on how Damascus had a relatively much wider range of 'gay' gathering places, compared to their hometowns. While he was serving in the Syrian army in Lebanon many years ago, Nour told how, in his leaves from the military service, he would travel to Damascus, "to explore my situation as 'gay'," rather than going back to his family's home, as he said. After that, Nour explains one of the scenarios that would unfold there.

> "This one time I was standing in an area called [name] where there are like these toilets [*toiletāt*]… So people enter these toilets and do things, you know. So I knew about this area and started hesitating about it. Then, when I was standing there one time, two guys passed me. It was showing [*mbayyanīn*] that they were 'gays' because they had earrings and stuff. 'Hello, how are you?' They asked about me and I told them that I like guys, so he said that 'that means that you're 'gay'. Come on so I can show you the places for 'gays'!' So he took me to the places for 'gays'." (Nour 2015)

Thus, in the speakers' stories, Damascus was portrayed both as a temporary getaway [*hurūb*] from the family and home community and as a place where people of non-conforming sexual orientations or gender identities could live their life a bit more anonymously and freely. This seemed to be much like how many of the narrators in *Bareed Mista3jil* (2009) would seek a getaway in Beirut, after having escaped their home towns in Lebanon to seek an escape from its societal and familial pressure.

As a short anecdote about my use of the term 'getaway' in this study, this notion is not new in writings about non-heterosexual people, and maybe especially for gays, as it has become a trope within what is known as "Gay Tourism" (Moussawi 2013), where even Beirut has topped the charts of international acclaimed 'gay getaways' and was in this context once crowned "Provincetown of the Middle East" (Healy 2009). While the latter may be true for people with wallets big enough to partake in Beirut's glitzy nightlife, this Beirut was far from the Beirut portrayed by the speakers in this study, most of whom currently reside there, and who had very different sense of getaway in mind, than is the case with the wealthy gay tourists visiting Beirut on summer holidays. Thus, for them, Beirut is neither the Provincetown nor the Paris of the Middle East (Moussawi 2013; Healy 2009), but rather a place that all of them want to leave, and some of them wish they never came to. With the above, I also wanted to underline that I cognized the possible link between the terms, after having applied it here, thus the field of Gay Travels has of course not been my inspiration for this term.

From their time in Syria, however, many of the speakers tell about their previous temporary escapes to Damascus with a sense of joy and excitement. In addition to their memories of their childhoods, the recollected experiences of their travels to the capital was probably the part of the stories that seemed to incite the

biggest sense of joy among the speakers. Thus, the relatively urban sphere of Damascus provided a realm where the speakers could move relatively freely, in a sense of what Merabet (2014) in the case of Beirut calls the "homosexual sphere". Merabet speaks of this type of sphere instead of a 'gay community'. I think this is a good description of this phenomenon in this local context, particularly considering the fact that the term used by non-heterosexual men in Lebanese and Syrian Arabic about this notion is *el-jaww*, meaning 'atmosphere' or 'sphere', and not *mujtamaʿ*, which is the Arabic word for 'community'. Merabet thus describes this sphere as "a semi-amorphous space that is fluctuating and every so often ambiguous" (Merabet 2014, 112). This 'homosexual sphere', he continues, "is mostly a realm that consists primarily of gendered as well as sexual symbols in relation to which queer space is perpetually produced. Be it at a particular social venue or a seemingly random street corner."

When talking about how he would travel to Damascus to partake in what one could call such 'gendered and sexual symbols', Fouad said that he would leave his parents' house and go to Damascus to 'perform' (in the terms of Butler (2004)) his gender more freely, saying that:

> "I would go to Damascus, for instance, before I got to know Sami. I would make myself 'shemale' and go out. All the Iraqis were in Syria then and they would all believe that I was a woman for real. They told me 'come with me' and stuff… I would wear a dress [*fustān*] and shave… I told them I couldn't and that I was still a *mademoiselle*. [Laughing]. I was afraid. [Giggling]." (Fouad 2015)

With his experiences from Damascus, Fouad stressed that "*ʾaḍḍaynā ayyām ḥilwe bi Souria"* [we had good days in Syria]. It was thus clear for some of speakers' stories that the relatively more urban 'homosexual sphere' of Damascus provided a positive escape from the constraints and pressures that the families and home communities of these men

put on them. Now, on the notes of these pressures and the family, leads me to the next section of this chapter, in which I will present some of the speakers' non-heterosexual life experiences within the realms of the family.

B. Life in the Family

> "The biggest worry is the scandal and what people are going to say about us. And how people are going to look at us […] Arab societies are ruled by the fear of other people. I mean, the fear of the other, or what the other is going to say about you, controls you. So if you're in a problem, what are they going to say, how are they going to look at us? So if a problem happens within the family, it'll get covered up. They don't talk about it so that there will be no scandal [*fḍīḥa*], because in [Arab] societies they gossip a lot." (Karim 2015)
>
> "They deem you an infidel. You're a *kāfir*. You're doing something that God rejects." (Farid 2015)
>
> *"Enta ʿam bitwaṭṭī rās ahlak."* (Fouad 2015)

Listening to the men telling their stories of their relationship with their families, it was apparent that their attitudes towards their parents and other family members varied to a great degree. However, in contrast to *Bareed Mista3jil*, for instance, reflecting "varying degrees of parent's acceptance of their daughters' sexuality" (Meem 2009, 8, 12–13), all the sons in this study were without exception facing stark disapproval from their parents in terms of their homosexuality. Further, except for Farid who was still miserably living under the roof of his parents' house in North Lebanon, everyone had left, either voluntarily or forcefully so, their parents' home, and had thus effectively been ostracized from the family. I will come back to this notion in the next section.

What differed in the narratives of the speakers, however, was their reaction to their families' disapproving attitudes to the issue. Thus, some of the men were taking a

conciliatory stance toward their families, saying that no matter how badly they have been treated, they feel no anger towards them and would want to come back to them. Others, however, were very resilient in their opposition to their families, saying that they would never forgive their families for what they had done to them and had neither the hope nor the wish of being accepted back into the family. What was clear, however, was that all speakers had a much better relation to their female family members, than to their brothers and fathers.

In this section I will highlight some of the aspects in the speakers' stories regarding their relationships to their parents and their siblings respectively. Before this, however, I want to dwell on some of the more general notions of the struggles that the men expressed they are facing as non-heterosexual members of traditional Syrian families.

In telling his life story related to the family and contemplating on how this intersection plays out in a traditional 'Arab societies ", Karim, who is in is early fourties and from a city in central Syria, said that in Syria or in Arab societies in general, "you need to live two struggles". Or, as he corrected, "you need to live two personalities [*baddak tʿīsh shakhṣiyytēn*]; one personality at home with your family, and one in the society outside – with work and society – and another personality with your friends. This will make you feel a lot of guilt inside and internal struggles." This was also something stressed by Farid, who, as previously mentioned, said that; "it's like we live two lives." Before telling how he would escape the house to 'let go of his energy' in Damascus, Farid explained how "you live one life at home, and if you want to live your life as 'gays' you need to go away and find a place far away."

Karim explains this with the fact that in Arab societies and families "there is no concept [*mafhūm*] for 'gays' at all." This point of a non-existent *mafhūm* for 'gays', or more than that, having a 'gay' or non-heterosexual son, was something expressed by many of the speakers. Also Nour stressed this fact, by saying that;

> "there is no concept [*mafhūm*] called 'gays' [in Syria]. You're considered either – and sorry for the words – *sharmūṭ* aw *lūṭī* [whore or sodomite]. So, I can't sit down and explain them [my family] that this is my body and so on. That is not an option because we have something called Syrian norms and traditions [*ʾādāt wa taqālīd shamiyyeh*]. They would kill you. *Dhabeḥ*!"

Regarding these *ʾādāt wa taqālīd*, there were differing views among the narrators of what was the most important reference for the families in terms of their rejecting stance towards homosexuality. As Karim's quote from the beginning of this section highlights, for his family it is the family's reputation and the notion of "what people are going to say [*shō badda tʾōl el-ʾālam*]" that generate the major problem for non-heterosexual individuals in Syria. Karim continues explaining how, when being with his family, he had to "act very 'straight'."

> "In front of my family, I need to act very 'straight.' My moves, my words, the intonation of my voice; it all needs to be very natural so that my family doesn't suspect anything [*killa badda tkūn ktīr tabīʾiyye kirmāl ahlī ma yshikko bi shī*]. Then outside, when you meet your friends and '*mithliyīn*' like you, you are able to relax more. (Karim 2015)

This shows how there is a big assumption that gender expression is linked to one's sexuality, thus, an effeminate man would easily be associated with being 'gay', or in the terms of the family or society, 'deviant'. In a similar fashion, talking about the importance of acting 'straight' so that no one would 'notice anything, Salim, the

youngest speaker – in his early twenties – who is still visiting his grandmother and mother, living in Lebanon, from time to time, say that:

> "When I go to them, I go very 'straight', and I don't let them notice anything [*brōḥ la ʾandun ktīr 'straight', ma bkhalliyon yilāḥzo ayya shī*]." (Salim 2015)

With this, it was important for Salim not to carry any symbols of what his family perceive as feminine and not suitable for a man; his tied-up hair, his tattoos and so on. Akram also commented on this feeling of 'keeping appearance' so that his family and society would not notice or be suspicious about anything, with saying that:

> "Since I was a kid my family doesn't know, whatsoever, nor does my surrounding society. I had very limited relationships with a secrecy that I can't even explain. Only by thinking of [the fact that] I am like this in this city I become scared. No one knows. When I started university, I got to know a 'group' and we started meeting in secret. We wouldn't go out in front of people together because of the fear that they would be suspicious about it or notice something [*liʿanno yimkin yishikko aw yilāḥzo shī*]." (Akram 2015)

With these three experiences, it was the worry that their families or society would 'notice' [*yilāḥzo*] or 'suspect' [*yishikko*] any perceived 'effeminate' traits, thus stressing the importance of the connection between gender expression and sexuality. Thus, it was very important for most of the speakers, as long as being with their family or in communities where the news could spread, to act in a gender-normative manner in fear of bringing shame upon the family and being ousted from the family.

Farid, on his part, however, tells how in his case it is religion, more than the 'society' and family reputation that plays in. He says that even if his family knew, they wouldn't grasp it; "*ma bistawʿibo aṣlan* [they wouldn't grasp the idea anyway]*..."* Thus in Syria, he said that:

> ”It is not possible that my family would think that, or that any of my behavior show [*yibayyin*] that I may have an inclination for guys or… They didn’t know about the matter in Syria […] And even if they knew about the matter, they wouldn’t grasp the idea anyway.” (Farid 2015)

Among his very religiously observant family, homosexuality is considered being of the *kabāʾir*[18], and with committing such ”you are upsetting God”, he says. Thus, for Farid’s parents, it would be almost unthinkable for them to even think about having a son who would be involved in committing these *kabāʾir*:

> “They deem you an infidel. You’re a *kāfir*. You’re doing something that God rejects […] Even if [my father] gets upset, he still doesn’t tell me about the ‘society’. No. He doesn’t say that; ‘*Wallahi*, you’ve made us a disgrace in front of people’, for instance. No, they turn to religion, like; ‘What you are doing is offensive of God the Almighty!’ Thus the principle is in religion more than in the society.” (Farid 2015)

However, Farid was the only one of the speakers focusing to such a degree on religion in terms of his family’s perception of the concept of homosexuality. Based on my experience from the interviews, most speakers shared the ideas expressed by Fouad, in that the deep opposition to homosexuality in the family stems both from religious terms and the societal reputation of your parents or family, although most weight was normally put on the terms of society. Thus Fouad said that:

> ”It’s both from religion and the family [*al-ʿayle*]. You are making a ’disgrace’ out of your parents [*ʿam bitwaṭṭī rās ahlak* – literarily ‘lowering the head of your family’]. Like; ‘Is this how your parents raised you?’ But it has nothing to do with the upbringing…" (Fouad 2015)

Most participants expressed a similar view; that having a non-heterosexual son in the family would imply major consequences for the wider family, in terms of lowering their

[18] The major sins in Islam.

social standing, and especially for the parents, who would be accused of not being able to raise their children in a proper manner. Also talking about how having a non-heterosexual son cause major implications for the parents, Karim, explains that society and the extended family will:

> "think that this son became like this because of the upbringing from his mother and father. Like; if they knew how to raise him, he wouldn't have turned out like this… So at the end, *I* have been insulted and my *parents* have been even more insulted. People stopped visiting and contacting them." (Karim 2015)

A similar point was also stressed in one of the stories in *Bareed Mista3jil*, where the author, talking about her mother, says that; "there's the whole issue of 'what would people say?' She made a huge fuss about that. She's constantly afraid of being accused with '*7a2 3aleyki… inti ma 3rifti trabbiya'* [it's your fault… you didn't know how to raise her]" (Meem 2009, 139). This point takes me over to the next part of this section highlighting some of the aspects in the speakers' stories about their relationships with their parents, especially that with their mothers.

1. Parents-Son Relationships

> "*Ḥayātī emmī*" [My mother is my life]!
>
> "The deep attachment to the family verges on morbidity (this is particularly true for mother-son relationships) and results in a shunning of society" (Barakat 1993, 100).

In the literature on Arab families, the love between mother and son has been described as unconditional and 'hypervalorizing' (Joseph 1999) and as being close to 'morbidity' (Barakat 1993, 199). Thus, Barakat's above notion on Arab, and especially Syrian, family life, states that the bonds between the members of the family are so

strong that “the interests of both the individual and society are denied for the sake of the family” (Barakat 1993, 100).

In terms of the notion of mother-son relationship and love, Joseph further explores this as the son’s “rejection of father-son continuity in a highly patriarchal and patrilineal society” (Joseph 1999, 176). Joseph names several possible reasons for this strong relationship between the son and his mother. She does not, however, take the possibility of homosexuality into account. With the clearly strong and loving bonds that all the speakers, except one, expressed having to their mothers, while at the same time clearly rejecting the relationship to the father, I believe that Joseph’s notion from above of seeing the mother-son relationship as a rejection of the patriarchal lineage of the family, bears resonance with the speakers.

At the same time, I believe that by looking at the intersectionality of homosexuality and family, an intersection clearly demonstrated by the speakers in this study, it is also possible to look at some Joseph and Barakat’s notions of the family in a new light. In this study, the families and especially the parents are not willing to disregard society in terms of their position towards their non-heteosexual son, no matter how strong the relationship to the mother might be, for the sake of the family bonds, ultimately leading to the ostracization of the son. In the same fashion, as shown by the stories here, also the sons are not willing to deny themselves and their sexuality or self-expression ‘for the sake of the family’. In the following, I briefly want to look at this in the terms of the speakers, putting Barakat and Joseph’s contentions in a new light. At the same time, these notions of the relationship between the mother and the child by Barakat referred to above is reflected by, for instance, what Nour says about his mother, having lived with her after his father passed away:

> ”My mother found out when I was in the relationship with that guy [for ten years]. So, she knew about me, but she never spoke about it. She knew that I was like this. But she kept quiet […] See, I don’t have a problem with her knowing, but it would be very hard for me if she confronted me with it. My mother is my life [*ḥayātī emmī*]! So if she had confronted me with it and asked me; ‘Nour, are you this and that?’, then that would be very difficult. I don’t care about my brother knowing. But what happened was that he started hating me. Hate, hate, hate.” (Nour 2015)

With this, Nour, told how strong relationship he used to have to his late mother. He thus expressed that one of the worst things that could possibly happen to him, would be that his mother confronted him with the matter of his homosexuality. Moreover, his mother *not* confronting him with it, even though she knew about it, seemed partly to be out of fear of what could happen to their relationship and of being distanced from her oldest son after her husband passed away. This kind of fear may be seen in comparison to what *Bareed Mista3jil* say about Lebanese mothers’ relations to their queer children:

> “A common saying in the queer community is that mothers always know. Often they get scared and feel a sudden distance from their children, so they choose to deny that homosexuality is even a possibility” (Meem 2009, 18).

Thus maybe it was the better option for Nour’s mother to live in denial. Moreover, based on the interviews, the case of the mothers’ knowing about the son’s homosexuality is very different than in the case of the father in the family finding out about it, where this sense of denial seems unlikely to would have happened. Like Nour, several of the speakers had mothers who ‘knew’, but did not confront their sons with it before the news broke in the family, and especially the father knew about it. Although he did not explicitly say so, I believe Nour’s case might be seen in the light of the loss of his father years prior to this, leaving the role of the family head up to Nour, as the

oldest brother, even though his brother was still trying to make his life a misery. Thus in the absence of the father, and with Nour, the oldest brother, as a head of the family, there was no room for ostracizing him from the family, although, at that point both his brother and mother knew about his homosexuality.

Thus, in all the life stories of the speakers, the mother was viewed as a much more caring figure in the family than the father was, also in terms of their position with regards to their sons' homosexuality, however she seemed to be bound up by her place in the patriarchal hierarchy, and thus did not really have a voice in the family in terms of the family's response to the disclosure of their son's homosexuality. Walid, for instance, coming from a very conservative and traditional background, explained how the female members of the family would support him in times of hardship, but nevertheless had no chance to say anything. According to Karim and Walid the female members of family have no voice or right in these situations in the family anyway, because such decisions are left up to the father and the male family members.

> Karim: In their [clan] society, that even the woman has *no* rights.
>
> Walid: She doesn't have any rights, whatsoever. Not even an opinion or anything.
>
> Karim: The woman is only a medium for pleasure and work. *Bass!*

A similar notion about the role of the mother in the family was expressed by the story of one transsexual man in *Bareed Mista3jil,* and was a common feature in the speakers stories. He says that; "My mom, however, was wonderful. She is one of a kind, but she has no voice in my family, like so many Lebanese mothers. And like so many Lebanese mothers too, she has only cared about my happiness, and I love her for that" (Meem 2009, 131). Also Ghassan told about his relationship to the female members of

the family as much better than that of his father or brother, by whom he is wanted by and cannot speak with. Ghassan thus said that:

> "I don't speak with anyone except my mother sometimes, her and my sister. She tells me; 'go as far away as you can'." (Ghassan 2015)

Some of the speakers would even preserve a good relationship with their mother and still have some connection with her, also after having left the house, expressing that if it had been up to her, there would have been no problems with staying within the family, but that the patriarchy of the family efficiently obstructed this possibility.

Telling about his reconciling mother and his oppressive father and brother, Alaa said that several years after he had left the house, a relative of him had seen him in Damascus and thus wanted to tell his family about his whereabouts, whereby Alaa abruptly had responded that: "if you tell them this, I would commit suicide, I swear to God."

> "He told me, 'okay, it's fine, I will just tell your mother to relieve her and tell her you're still alive.' So, I told him it is okay for him to tell my mother. Then, one week after this, my mother and one of my sisters came to visit me in Damascus." (Alaa 2015)

This was the first time he had seen his mother in five years, and thus this was so clearly a very emotional moment for him. He said that with seeing how he lucidly had taken on a more 'feminine' appearance – "I was looking like a woman" – his mother "didn't accept the idea at all". "But nevertheless she hugged me", Alaa said.

> "Why? Because she had spent five years thinking that she had lost me. She told me to come back home. Then I said that after five years of this vagrancy, it's impossible for me to come home. All that I've seen… My father and brother are the reason for all this… all that has happened. My father and brother didn't just tie me up and imprison me for seven days with chains in the storage room.

> My father and brother have been imprisoning me for six years, taking away any chance for me to see you, taking away any chance for me to grow up amongst you. They made a vagabond of me when I was just a young kid." (Alaa 2015)

Alaa did not go back home with his mother, knowing that he would have had to change his personality and appearance to be able to live among his family again, especially among his father and brothers, but from then on he kept in touch with his mother and sisters on the phone. It was clear from what Alaa said that the blame was to be put solely on the male family members. Thus, as the rest of the examples above, Alaa's story shows how the mother and the sisters in the family took on a mediatory role in terms of their ostracized non-heterosexual son, trying to get him back in to the family again.

Moreover, in all cases but one, the mother seemed to take a different stance than the father regarding their sons' homosexuality. In addition to this, the speakers seemed to have a much stronger and loving relationship with their mother than with their father. However, the one example noted above was expressed by Farid. When I asked him if there was any difference between his mother and his father with regards to learning about his same-sex practices, and if his mother acceptss the idea any more than his father did, his answer was clear: "No, no, no… impossible, they think the same way", he told me. Saying that: "they see it as a disease… deviation [*inḥirāf*]." Being the only child still living at home, he said that after his father discovered him being engaged in a " 'gay' website", all hell had broke loose, and now, it was only his mother who would talk to him although very rarely, despite the fact that he was still physically living under the same roof as them. Thus, in any other meaning than his physical

presence, Farid was given the signs that he was not a part of this family. The rest of the time he was sitting by himself in his room, only going out at night to eat.

> “No one approaches me, *yaʿnī*, I go into my room and close the door. I don’t even eat together with them. Only my mother comes… She wants to marry me. ‘*Enno khalaṣ,* if we marry him, he will be saved’, *yaʿnī*.” (Farid 2015)

However, even if his mother and father takes the same stance towards Farid’s homosexuality, she would still be the only one who would try to interact with him, even though trying to convince him to marry against his will.

On the question of marriage, Farid comments that; “It’s impossible for me to marry! So, either I run away from home, or I leave home and go away, and that is the easiest solution, or I do something to myself… What am I supposed to do!?” Farid thus express his unwillingness to marry and to sacrifice his personal life as a non-heterosexual to conform to the norms and ‘be saved’ as to stay with his family. Thus, he would rather run away, because he has seen what has happened to the people before him.

> ”I don’t want the society to force me into this, this wedding, and make me turn into the people that I’ve seen. *Enno*, I’ve seen them. There’s a proverb saying that ‘*ma metet bass ma sheft yelle ʾablak māt?* [’you didn’t die, but haven’t you seen how the one before you died?’] I didn’t die… but I’ve seen the ones before me, what happened to them, *yaʿnī*. They live two personalities. I don’t know what this will lead to in the end.” (Farid 2015)

Except Farid, all the speakers clearly expressed having a considerably better relationship to their mothers than to their fathers. This stark divide between the speakers’ relations to the male and female members of the family, was also the case with their relationships to their sisters as compared to their brothers.

2. Sibling Relationships

> ”[When I came home] my brother didn’t speak to me. My mother had told him that I was coming back home, and had told my brother that he wasn’t allowed to speak to me. From then on I got attached to my family. Because I had been deprived of them. I got very attached to my sisters and their children [...] I had come back to my sisters after 8 years. I had missed them. I had missed them a lot.” (Alaa 2015)

A clear commonality in the life stories of the speakers concerning their families of origin was the big difference in their relationship with their sisters as compared to that with their brothers. There was a clear view of the brothers as oppressive, exploitative and violent, while the sisters were talked about as rescuing and as compassionate mediators, in addition to being portrayed as being somewhat rebellious in the face of the family patriarchy. Moreover, the sister was also the only one in the family that some of the speakers felt comfortable enough disclosing their sexuality to. Samir for one says that; “my sister knew… I tell my sister everything.” When it comes to his brother, however, he said that he is a hundred percent certain that he would ‘kill him’ if he got the chance to, clearly highlighting the big difference in his relations to his siblings

In her work on Arab families, Joseph comments on the brother-sister relationships, and argues how important this is to the reproduction of patriarchy (Joseph 1999, 109–110). In her study, Joseph shows that there was a sense of mutually shaping the terms of each other’s gender and sexuality, where the brother was charged with protecting the sister and the sister with providing ‘service’ to the brother (Joseph 1999, 109–110). Her conclusion of this was thus that the brother-sister relationship “helped socialize young males into masculine patriarchal roles and young females into feminine roles, serving the patriarchs” and thus seeing this as a chief example of the reproduction

of what she terms the 'patriarchal connectivity', that is, "the production of fluid, relational selves socialized for gendered hierarchy (Joseph 1999, 110). Moreover, the brother-sister relationship, as Joseph (1999, 140) contends in her study, "was second only to the mother-son relation in evoking love, and yet it was premised on a power of asymmetry–the subordination of the sister to the brother." However, I think the case example of my study of non-heterosexual men who often do not seek to be socialized into these 'masculine patriarchal' roles in the traditional family may contribute in shedding new light on Joseph's notion on the brother-sister relationship.

As was the case with the speakers' strong relationships iwth their mothers, it was clear from their stories that this was the case also with the brother-sister relationship, among the speakers. Thus, from their stories, there was a clear resonance to Joseph's notion of the brother-sister relationship as strong and as 'envoking love'. However, I believe that for the speakers and their stories in this study, it is possible to view Joseph's notion of the 'subordination' of the sister in this relationship in a new light. Thus, in the stories of the speakers, the brother-sister roles seemed to be somehow turned upside-down compared to Joseph's view of it.

One direct example of this notion of the brother-sister relationship was the shared case of Walid, Alaa and Akram, who had all been locked up and beaten – the two former by their fathers and brothers, and Akram by an armed group. In these cases, it was always their sisters, who would protect their brothers, risking their own personal safety, to help them. Walid, for instance, told of how his sisters would risk their lives to bring him water and his papers to escape with while he was being locked up by his father and brothers. "There were two sisters that helped me when they could," Walid said, "but only by coincidence when they were able to, so very rarely..." Further, at the

end of his detention, Walid continued, “my other sister was able to get a hold of my ID-papers, and then I ran away”. Alaa told of a similar story showing the clear difference in his relationship to his brothers and to his sisters. After having been severely reprimanded and locked up by his older brother for the second time, upon his return from his five-years’ getaway in Damascus, Alaa told the story of how it was his sister who had helped him escape.

> “So, my brother locked me up in the storage room again and kept me there for two days. In the same storage room that I was in when I was fourteen! This time he tied me up with ropes, not with chains. After two days, my married sister, who was living next door, came to our house and asked about me. My mom told her that [my brother] had battered me and locked me up in the room again, so she came and set me loose.” (Alaa 2015)

Before this incident Alaa also talks about his other sister as the conflict mediator between him and his brother, after the latter had denied Alaa any rights for the inheritance of their father – his brothers having taken it al – because of perceiving him as a ‘woman’.

> “My mother told me that my share was with my bigger brother, the one that had beat me. I didn’t speak to him so I brought my bigger sister, Samira, and I told her; ‘My sister, I don’t talk to my brother… But I am also a son of this family and I have a right for my share’. My brother said that I wouldn’t get anything. ‘He’s a *ṭanṭ*, a girl, a woman. He won’t get anything’.” (Alaa 2015)

The brothers of the family, the male family members, had split all the inheritance between themselves, and because Alaa was perceived to be a ‘woman’ [*marʾa*] in the family, he was not entitled his share. Commenting on the procedures for inheritance in her work on Arab families, Joseph shows how “inheritance and property issues impacted the brother-sister [relationship]” (Joseph 1999, 135). In her terms of the ‘patriarchal connectivity’ between the brother and the sister, this could be seen as a

guarantee for the sister in their ‘natal families’. Thus “leaving their inheritance with their brothers”, she holds, “could offer them insurance should they need protection from their families of origin” (Joseph 1999, 135). If this was the case also among Alaa’s sisters, is unclear, but it is noteworthy that since he was perceived by the brothers to be an ‘effeminate’ and ‘girly’ man, he was not eligible for the inheritance of his own father and that it was his sister who had to defend his right to claim it.

Lastly, also Akram told about how he was saved by his sister, after having been abducted by the armed group in his hometown,. Telling how he did not dare go home, after having escaped the makeshift prison they had held him in, he said that he had phoned his sister who had brought him his necessary papers so that he could run away.

With the above notions on the speakers’ relationships with their sisters, it was obvious how the sisters who would make their biggest efforts – no matter how constrained they were within the patriarchal family structure, like their mothers – to protect their brothers. Thus as the case of Joseph’s notion of the sister’s ‘subordination’ to the brother, I believe that in the case of non-heterosexual men, I would argue that it is possible to alter this view and look at it as a joint opposition to the ‘patriarchal connectivity’, rather than the ‘reproduction’ of it.

In all cases in this study, the speakers were talking about their relationship to their sisters as “envoking love”. On the other hand, not one of the men spoke of their current relationships to their brothers in positive terms, and it had in many cases been the brother who had been perceived as the most threatening part, and the main provocateur for the ostracization of the speakers.

C. Ostracization and the Loss of Family

> "There is this idea of cutting [*inqiṭāʿ*] the bonds."(Samir 2015)
>
> *"El-janna min ghēr nās ma btendeās"* (Karim 2015)

The above Arabic proverb, meaning that "paradise without people is not worth stepping a foot in", signify that the most important thing in life is having people you care about around you. Karim taught me this proverb after having told the story of his ostracization from the family, and of the hardships one faces when suddenly deemed unwelcome by most of the people you love and care about. For a long time after this, before meeting his boyfriend ['*ṣāḥbī*'] Walid, he had lived by himself, having lost connection with all of his family and most of his friends after the 'story' about his 'orientation' [*muyūl*] had spread in the family. At that point he was married. "The story was spread to my brother and father and to my wife's family", he said, "and now I am wanted murdered from my wife's family, and everyone knows because we are a people that blabber." Thus, after this he said that he was literarily 'cut off' from the family and that he had lost everyone he was close to. Karim then contemplated on this notion of being cut off from the family of origin, saying that in Arab societies:

> "You stay with your family until your death. So what if all this just disappeared? […] When you suddenly find yourself cut off from your mother and father and siblings and your country and friends. [*fajʾa inʾataʿt ʿan emmak ʿan abūk ʿan ekhwātak, inʾataʿt ʿan baladak inʾataʿt ʿan aṣḥābak*]" (Karim 2015)

This feeling of being 'cut off' [*inqiṭāʿ*] from your family may be seen in relation to the Arabic notion of *silat al-raḥim*, or kinship. From his experiences with the Palestinian refugee community in Tyre, South Lebanon, Perdigon (2011, 119) found that the "(*silat) al-raḥim*, '(ties of) the womb', cannot be 'unmade.' However, he says that: in the

“language of the Qurʿan and the hadith, they can be 'cut' (*qataʿa*) – a cutting more akin to that of a piece of flesh” (Perdigon 2011, 119). This sense of being cut off from the *ṣilat al-raḥim*, or the blood-kinship, was what was expressed by Kairm, and many of the other speakers.

Samir also contemplated on this notion of being ‘cut off’ from the family ties, on a religious basis. Coming from a clan [*ʿashāʾir*] family background and talking about their perception of homosexuality, Samir thus says that; “there is this idea of cutting [*inqiṭāʿ*] the bonds. It has been one year and three months now since I’ve heard anything from them…” Samir said. Coming from a religiously conservative *ʿashāʾir* family background in northern Syria, he explains that in their traditions homosexuality is *ḥarām* and that it can be followed by killings.

> “We have this thing, especially in [name of home city], or among the clans [*al-ʿashāʾir*]… my family comes from a *ʿashāʾir* background… among conservative people, this is *ḥarām*. *Ḥarām*, meaning that his is very wrong, and that ‘we need to kill him’.” (Samir 2015)

Like Karim, Samir, had also been married to a woman in Syria, and for him it was either risking death at the hands of his family, or being completely cut-off from them. However, some of his male relatives, most notably his brother, are still looking for him to ‘retaliate’ on him, he said, leading to his current situation as “cut-of from your family and threatened…”

In concert with the two former speakers, Salim also spoke of this ‘cutting’ of the bonds, saying that; "I’m not in contact with them [my family] anymore. My father, I am not in contact with him. They cut the connection.” Salim also speaks about having been extremely lonely after this, before meeting his boyfriend. Now, however, he says that the notion of the loss of family:

> ”Doesn’t affect me anymore because they don’t mean anything to me any longer, because they are the ones who rejected me if they don’t accept me as I am naturally.” (Salim 2015)

With their families’ having cut the bonds to them, all speakers live in a situation of being ostracized and excluded, not only from their family, but also the cucial socio-economic network that comes with the traditional Arab family (Barakat 1993). This has of course also had detrimental consequences for these people’s lives as refugees in Lebanon. As Perdigon also notes that; “As should be expected in a refugee community maintained in a state of disenfranchisement and perpetual uncertainty, isolation from the unit defined by *al-raḥim* entails dreadful material consequences” (Perdigon 2011).

No matter in what sense the speakers were cut off, ostracized or isolated from their family, the fact remain that all the men all have the feeling of having lost their family, and are facing the severe consequences that it comes with. When commenting on the similar notion of ostraciation in the Lebanese case, *Bareed Mista3ji* say that; “hundreds of cases of queers being ostracized from their families have been reported in the last 10 years. This form of homophobia manifests itself in different ways: gay men commonly get kicked out of their homes, denied inheritance, or in fewer cases sent out of the country by their parents” (Meem 2009, 18). As shown, these ‘ways of homophobia’ and ostracization were all cases experienced by the men in this study, and in the following I wish to quickly have a look at the consequences that this has lead to for some of the men.

D. The Renegotiation of Family

> "We make a community between ourselves that is not conventional/official [ghēr rasmī], so that we feel that we didn't leave our family communities [*el-mujtamaʿāt el-ʿayliyye*]. And this community is really strong. And we love each other and have responsibilities for each other." (Karim 2015)

> "We make a community as a compensation for the society that we lost." (Walid 2015)

Having presented parts of the speakers' life stories in this study, and shown how they have been ostracized from and lost their families of origin, I now want to look at the stories of some of the speakers explaining how they are renegotiating the terms and traditional concept of family, establishing new structures of family among friends, in *el-jaww*. I draw this sense of the 'renegotiation' family on what Weeks writes about "claims being articulated, circulated and re-circulated, creating new communities of knowledge and empowerment, new realities" (Weeks 2010, 131). To my knowledge, this notion of renegotiation of family among non-heterosexual individuals in the Arab world is something that is not yet treated in earlier literature, and thus my focus here will be on presenting the speakers' stories regarding the ways of and reasons for this type of renegotiation of family, of the "new communities of knowledge and empowerment" and the "new realities" created. This is expressed by many to be a way of coping with their family's ostracization and to be able to feel that they still have a family, as a 'compensation' [*taʿwīḍ*] as a as expressed by the quotes from Karim and Walid above. This phenomenon of creating a new family within the community, in terms of "my friends became my family", after having left the home was also a recurring topic in the Lebanese case with the stories of *Bareed Mista3jil* (2009, 11, 203, 210).

I want to look at this phenomenon of the renegotiation of family among friends in relation to what Joseph sees as the crossing of the boundaries of family norms and constructed alternatives to the traditional 'corporatist' family structures. Joseph sees family patterns in the Arab world in a way of social constructionism between the fluid 'individualism' and the essentialist 'corporatist' view that often has been used before to project Arab family relations, arguing that the construct of patriarchal connectivity is widely supported and purported in many Arab societies.

Thus, with the feeling of having lost or been cut-off from their family of origin, some of the men in *el-jaww,* the 'sphere' or 'community' in Beirut expressed means of renegotiating their understandings of the traditional family, establishing family-like social bonds between themselves in the community. Discussing this phenomenon, Karim and Walid, explained the following:

> Karim: "So we cannot create a conventional/official family [*ma fīna nshakkil ʿayle rasmiyye*]. So because of this, in the Arab society, you will find that we create an unconventional family [*ʿayle ghēr rasmiyye*] of the *mama* and *baba* and the *ʿāmme* [parental aunt], that we talked about, between each other to feel that we still have a family sphere. For instance, I received congratulations on Mother's Day…"
>
> Walid: We make a community as a compensation for the society that we lost.
>
> Karim: "… and also they ask me for advice in very personal matters, like; 'what should we do? *Mama*, what should we do? *Mama*, we have a problem.' So, we make a community between ourselves that is not conventional/official [ghēr rasmī], so that we feel that we didn't leave our family communities [*el-mujtamaʿāt el-ʿayliyye*]. And this community is really strong. And we love each other and have responsibilities for each other."

Karim shows this by saying that if someone 'adopts' [*yetbanna*] someone as a 'son' or 'daughter', there is a daily correspondence and a lot of care and love involved. In addition to this, in what the speakers call *el-jaww*, there was also the idea of

embracing the roles from within a traditional family. Thus, the *mama* and *baba* and *ekhweāt* and *ʿāmme* and *tēta* were all roles that were present in this community, as Karim and Wallid said:

> Karim: the majority takes the role of *el-mama*, I mean, the role of the dad is a bit more rare, but it exists. So everybody treats him with this role, and loves him, so we really live these roles […]
>
> Walid: [The young take] the role of the siblings [*ekhwāt*].
>
> Karim: I would come here to Proud and there are people who hug me and kiss me as *mama*, and other people who kiss my hand as *tēta* [grandma].
>
> Walid: … that is, 'grandma'.
>
> Karim: So, we live this beautiful atmosphere and are really happy about it. We feel this is a family [*ʿayle*]. So we compensate for [the loss of] our family with another family. And we live it, and we are not able to give up on the community easily. We are not able to give up on the family [*el-ʿayle*] easily. You just can't. And in general, you would find that 'el-gays' are more sensitive and caring. So when we lose something, the loss is important to us. Like, if you lose your friend, you get very upset, so what if you lose your mom and dad and siblings suddenly!? And of a reason that is not even a reason!?
>
> Walid: Something that you don't have control over…

The same concept of the renegotiation of family, as expressed by Karim and Walid above, was referred to by half of the ten speakers, with the ones new to the community seemingly less likely to have become a part of this, than people who had been in the *jaww* for a longer time. Thus, in addition to Karim and Walid, also Salim, Fouad and Nour told similar stories about the same sense of a constructed family. Salim explains this by saying that:

> "This [organization] is the only refuge for us, *yaʿnī*. Like, you've seen how we come together… and there are people that you can feel that… Like for instance how Ramzi is my *mama*, and I have three children [*wlēd*] that I'm the *mama* of…" (Salim 2015)

Being a bit confused concerning Salim's young age for having children, Salim asserted me that he is of course not talking about his biological children. Almost as playing on the famous quote by Khalil Gibran Khalil from the Prophet saying that "your children are not your children" [*abnāʾukum laysū abnāʾan lakum*] (Gibran 1971; Gibran 1994), Salim told me that: "they are not my children as in my *children,* but in the community, yeah [*mish wlēdī wlēdī, bass bil-jaww, ēh*]".

On this topic, and talking about his previous boyfriend, Sami, that he had been forcefully separated from, Fouad says that:

> "I don't care about my family [of origin] as I care for Sami. Sami has compensated me for my parents a lot. *Wallahi*. May God be with him. He gave me everything. Not just materially, but that feeling that you have someone next to you; someone you care for and who cares for you, that passionate touch that he gives you. There are feelings that I can't even explain with words. I felt secure and passionate and emotional with him [...] Now, I don't make friends with 'straight' [people] at all. 'Straight' as in a person who don't like 'gays' or a 'straight' that is not gay [sic.]. I only make friends with 'gay' people. I consider us a family [*ʿayle*]. I feel that this is my second home, Proud. I swear. I come here and I feel relaxed and comfortable […] Like this person, Talal, he's the *mama* in the community [*hay mama bil-jaww*]. Ask him about Fouad and see what he tells you. And Joud, he's *el-baba*, and I have my siblings [*ekhwātī*] and so on." (Fouad 2015)

I believe that for these individuals this is much about what Weeks (Weeks 2010, 131) says of "creating new communities of knowledge and empowerment, new realities", as a way of coping with the situations they are in; ostracized from their families of origin and displaced from their country of origin, they come together in this family and find joy and relief in it.

E. Self-Identification and Joseph Massad

> ”It is the very discourse of the Gay International, which both produces homosexuals, as well as gays and lesbians, where they do not exist, and represses same-sex desires and practices that refuse to be assimilated into its sexual epistemology.” (Massad 2007, 162)

> ”I am originally ‘gays’ from my childhood and was brought up in an Arab society and came out of an Arab society.” (Karim 2015)

In this last section, I wish to conclude with a topic that I have been referring to throughout this paper, which are the notions presented by Joseph Massad regarding his views on homosexual self-identification in the Arab world. Thus, Massad sees this solely as an epistemology forced upon the region by the West, spearhead by the imperial ‘Gay International’ and assisted by an alleged Westernized ‘local upper class’ of ‘native informants’. With this, I believe that the life stories of the men in this study can help in shedding new light on Massad’s claims, and to move away from his essentialist outlook on individuals who embrace some form of self-identification related to their sexuality. Thus, it is my claim, based on the empirical evidence in this study, that Massad’s claims are resulting in a generalization and disempowering of these people as Western copycats without any agency. Thus, I believe that the life stories and voices of the individuals in this study may help to shed some new light on and complicate Massad’s uncompromising contentions.

All the speakers in this study, without exception, embraced some form of self-identification related to their sexuality, unsolicitedly referring to themselves as either ‘gay’, ‘LGBT’ or *‘mithlī’*, with some speakers applying them all in the same conversation as ways of referring to themselves. Thus, it is clear that English terms related to concepts of homosexuality to a large extent have entered the daily language of non-heterosexual Syrian men who speak limited to no English. Further, it is noticeable

how the *only* English words that would actually be used by the speakers were terms related to sexuality and sexual identification; ‘gay’, ‘LGBT’, ‘straight’, ‘shemale’, ‘boyfriend’ and ‘sex’, among others. With this, I believe it is important to bear in mind, as stressed by *Bareed Mista3jil*, that for many Arabic speakers, “Arabic as a language has not adapted itself to create new words or a more comfortable use of existing words to describe things related to sexual expression” (Meem 2009, 6), even though solicitous attempts have been made to translate the concepts from English to Arabic, especially by various civil society organizations and advocacy groups.

None of the speakers in this study had lived in another country than Syria, before coming to Lebanon, and none talked about having any contact with groups or organizations or their preaching that Massad coin the ‘Gay International’. In addition, they all expressed the sense of being ‘gay’ or ‘*mithlī*’ and so forth, as an important part of their self-identification. Thus, I believe that it is nothing less than highly disempowering and generalizing to denounce these individuals as ‘native informants’ for the ‘Gay International’s imperialist epistemological task’, as is claimed by Massad (Massad 2007, 189–190), solely for finding resonance in the notions of being ‘gay’. These might be terms originating in one part of the world and adopted elsewhere, but I do not believe that this necessarily make them any less valuable locally, if these are seen to resonate with the feelings and experiences of people there. I believe that one has to see this transfer of knowledge as fluid and as trespassing ethnic and national boundaries, and not as a static fact, only applicable in the time and context in which they emerge.

With this, I believe, as McCormick contended from his work in Beirut, that these people’s “gay identity was not entirely locally produced, but rather was greatly

influenced by the imported paradigm of the 'global gay' character". However, I do not believe that this is to say that this is something forcefully imposed on 'unfit victims' by a Western discourse, but rather a solicitous choice by the people to identify in these terms. Also commenting on this topic is Dina Georgis (2013, 233) arguing that "although Western constructions of sexualities have certainly been influential, these identities *are also responding to the local and cultural context*" (my italics). This notion, I believe, can be illustrated with what Karim said in his example from above:

> "Then here I am, a Muslim from an Eastern country and society and from an Eastern family, ' *'ayle*' and I have taken these customs and traditions that you understand that were forced on us, but no, they were born with us and we are present." (Karim 2015)

Thus, in contrast to Massad, I believe that we should not readily dismiss individuals in the non-Western world who adopt terms of sexual self-identifications, neither as 'upper-class native informants' to the Gay International, nor as a 'miniscule minority (Massad 2007, 39, 173). I believe that Massad's take on this matter is both condescending and disempowering for these individuals.

Moreover, in continuing his critique of the "Gay International's imperialist epistemological task" (2007, 385), it is Massad's contention that:

> "By inciting discourse about homosexuals where none existed before, the Gay International is in fact heterosexualizing a world that is being forced to be fixed by a Western binary." (Massad 2007, 188)

It is my experience from this study, however, that it is the speakers' wish to raise their voices and speak up, and they want to be inciting a discourse – what I would view as a reverse discourse, as the discourse and the homo/hetero binary is obviously already omnipresent in the Arab world, as clearly witnessed by the discrimination and

ostracization faced by these individuals. Nevertheless, to say that this discourse and this binary between the heterosexual and the non-heterosexual, or 'deviant', is solely forced on the Arab world by the 'West', I believe, is naïve and apologetic of any local inciter to this, as for example the traditional patriarchal family.

Thus these men are caught in between and want just to have their stories heard, for people to understand their struggles. As Walid said: "When I'm abroad… and I know that no one is going to kill me abroad… I will stand in front of everyone and I don't care if it was a journalist filming and my face would show. I would tell my story in detail, with the injustice that I lived with and what they did to me".

In a similar fashion of wanting to raise his voice on this topic, Samir also comments on this, saying that:

> "There is just a message that I want to spread to all people in the whole world. God created us like this. Is there anything we can do about that? I was born 'gay'. Is there anything I can do about that? Did I create myself? God created me 'gay' […] When are they going to understand this!?" (Samir 2015)s

Lastly, as I have stressed earlier, I believe that one should not to be so generalizing and disempowering of the alleged non-heterosexual 'victims' of this 'Western' discourse on homosexuality in the Arab world. Rather, we should start prioritizing *their* narratives and their stories as exemplifying how they wish to self-identify and live their lives, and not, as Joseph Massad, base the discussion in grand-narrative and literary representation of the lives and self-identifications of non-heterosexual individuals and by this tell them how to live their lives. With this, Kugle holds, Massad "appear more concerned with ethnic solidarity than with insuring the security and welfare of the vulnerable members of the ethnic groups he purports to defend" (Kugle 2014, 4).

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: THE OPENING OF NEW FIELDS…

Undertaking this study of the life stories of non-heterosexual Syrian men in order to investigate the intersectionality of homosexuality and family life in Syria has resulted in a difficulty of finding any overarching consistency in these stories or reaching any clear-cut answers regarding this topic. Thus, one goal of this study has rather been to present the breadth and variety of the life stories of non-heterosexual men from a society such as Syria, instead of trying to over-generalize from the findings and the stories.

In concluding this thesis, however, I will present some of the most prominent recurring topics, the commonalities, in the stories of the speakers in this study, and suggest what these may mean in the bigger picture when looking at the intersectionality of homosexuality and family in this particular regional context. I realize the limitations in the scope of this study, having spoken solely to men who embrace a 'gay', or otherwise sexual self-identification, in addition to all having been ostracized from their families of origin. It would have been interesting, thus, in a future study and as an arena of further investigation, to include men who may only be involved in same-sex practices, but without embracing this as a mode of self-identification, in addition to non-heterosexual men who are open but reconciled with their families regarding their homosexuality.

Several commonalities and recurring topics expressed by a majority of the speakers in their life stories have been highlighted throughout this paper. In this conclusion, I will sum up these and comment on their possible wider meaning. As I

consider this a somewhat groundbreaking study, without much other existing literature to support these findings on, the generalizability of these findings to a broader scope of Syrian society in general and Syrian non-heterosexuals in particular, cannot but remain debatable, and would require further empirical research. Nevertheless, I believe that these stories can be seen as indices of some of the social and societal changes that are currently taking place in both Syria and the wider Arab world, especially within the spheres of non-heterosexual lives and the realms of the traditional family. Further, I believe that it is only with the *stories* of the concerned people on the grassroots level of society that these social and societal changes may be understood.

The stories of the speakers in this study were typically focused on their lives of hardships, despair and ostracization. However, as expressed by the stories, most of the speakers had memories of happy childhoods and typical lives within their families of origin until a distinctive rupture happened in the speakers' lives, most often when their non-heterosexual activity was disclosed and reprimanded by their families, that is, their male family members. In all cases of this study, this ultimately led to the ostracization of the men from the home of their parents, and has thus inflicted them with a sense of an irreversible loss of their families of origin, and its socio-economic support, safety and networks. Further, in most cases, this led to the men seeking a temporary 'getaway' in Damascus before coming to Lebanon.

Based on the stories of the speakers in this study, Syrian non-heterosexual men who embrace a sexual identification, as 'gay' or *mithlī* often live a double-faced life; one life in their *jaww* of close friends, and one life among their family and society at large. This can be seen to be a result of the fact that the concept of 'gay', or other forms of sexual ways of identifications, are not known or recognized in Syrian society, outside

the terms of ‘deviation’, *shudhūdh* or *inḥirāf*. Similarly, and in contrast to the popular belief of some scholars, especially Massad, same-sex *practices* are also often rebuked by family and society. Thus, both these social phenomena, non-heterosexual identification and non-heterosexual practice, are often met with stark rejection and repercussions from the patriarchy of both the family and of the state – and, more recently, as tragically witnessed by some of the speakers, from various armed fractions involved in the *aḥdāth* in Syria. This forces non-heterosexual Syrians, whether identifying in these terms, or as mere practitioners, to face extremely challenging situations, both in terms of their family and society, compelling them to live this double-life, especially in the face of their parents and their families.

Regarding their lives within, and now without, the realms of their families of origin, both before and after their ostracization, the men spoke of much better and more loving relationships with their mothers and sisters, compared to their relationship with their fathers and brothers. Thus, the female family members were mostly portrayed as loving and as caring mediators, while the fathers and brothers were depicted as oppressive and violent imposers of the family patriarchy. Moreover, the brother-sister relationship was noticeably strong and love-evoking. With this, the sister was often rendered a rebellious character, often putting her self at risk to protect the brother.

Having reviewed some of the literature of the family in this regional context, I view the non-heterosexual men’s clear alignment with the female family members, and especially the sisters, as indices of a challenge to the practiced patriarchy of the family and its ‘patriarchal connectivity’, and the assumed fixed gendered hierarchical roles that the traditional Arab family imposes on them. The same might be seen to be

the object of the sisters in these cases; challenging assumed gender positionings of subordination to the brother in the context of family dynamics.

In my study, I believe that the portrayed relationship between the speakers and their sisters may challenge especially Joseph's notion of the traditional Arab brother-sister relationship. Joseph sees this relationship as helping to "socialize young males into masculine patriarchal roles and young females into feminine roles, serving the patriarchs" and seeing this as a chief example of what she terms the 'patriarchal connectivity' (Joseph 1999, 110). It is my argument in this study of the family, however, that the non-heterosexual individuals and their often-rebellious sisters, do not seek to be socialized into these 'masculine' and 'feminine' roles of the patriarchy, because this implies all the *taqālīd wa ʿādāt* [traditions and norms] that patriarchy comes with, and thus challenge Jospeh's notions of the 'patriarchal connectivity'.

Another topic that was clear from the speakers' stories of their family lives, was that no matter how big the pressure from home was; either to marry or to dress or behave in a more conforming manner, the men were not willing to compromise and deny themselves for the sake of the family, even if the initiator for this was the mother, with whom most had a very loving relationship. I believe the notion brought up by Salim is illustrative of this matter, saying that: "I'm not compelled to be the way that they want me to be, I need to be the way that *I* want to be." In a similar fashion, the family as such was not willing to deny the society, and the reaction of '*shō badda tʾōl el-ʿālam*', 'what are people going to say', to keep the family together.

With this, I believe that looking at the case of non-heterosexual men opens the possibility to alter the view of the family as 'valued over the individual' in the Arab world, and to look at the 'morbidity' of the strong relationships between the family

members in traditional Arab families in a new light. I am thus arguing here for the opening up, not only of the study of burgeoning sexual identifications in this regional context, but also for a reconsidered view of the study of the traditional family, which often seems to be carved in stone. With this, I believe that there should be an increased focus on the developments emerging with this particular group of people, who are increasingly claiming a presence and negotiating their own terms as not conforming to prescribed sexual or gendered norms within a traditional and patriarchal Arab society. I believe that the wider effects of these burgeoning developments remain to be seen, and need further studies, but I believe that they will be more visible in the coming times and with the coming generations. With this, I want to reiterate the proverb referred to by Farid earlier, as an example of how things might be changing:

> " '*Ma metet bass ma sheft yelle ʾablak māt?'* ['you didn't die, but haven't you seen how the one before you died?'] I didn't die… but I've seen the ones before me, what happened to them, *yaʿnī*! They live two personalities. I don't know what this will lead to in the end." (Farid 2015)

Further, I strongly believe that one such burgeoning development are the terms in which non-heterosexual Syrian men choose to *renegotiate* family, after their *ostracization* from it; taking the frameworks of the traditional Arab family with them to *el-jaww*, the 'sphere' or community of non-heterosexuals, to compensate for the loss of their own families of origin. This allows for these individuals to come together in a group of loving people, in times of hardships and ostracization. It is my experience that this way of coming together in a non-conventional family [*ʿayle ghēr rasmyyie*] in especially Syria and Lebanon has been an empowering experience for these men living through tough times, in terms of "creating new communities of knowledge and empowerment" and creating "new realities" (Weeks 2010, 131).

With all of this said, I believe that more qualitative studies are needed on the topic of social renegotiations in the rapidly changing realms of the Arab world in general, and in Syria in particular. I also believe that we are witnessing major shifts in this with the coming generations, who are increasingly aware of their chosen ways of life as being in conflict with the traditional patriarchy of Arab societies, especially in the case of individuals with non-conformative sexual orientations or gender identities, who are gradually calling for a change and demand to be heard. I believe that this case can be seen in opposition to Barakat's (1993, 100) terms of the 'shunning' of your self and of society for the sake of the family in traditional Arab societies. These men clearly do not want to shun themselves and their place in society anymore, for the sake of adhering to the family and its patriarchy, and renegotiates their families elsewhere, in non-patriarchal terms. With this modest thesis and research, I thus hope to have been able to identify a field that may open up arenas for further investigation and new ways of looking at both the concept of homosexuality and the concept of family and their intersectionality in Arab societies. This might hopefully have positive effects for a many individuals who are now risking to be ostracized from society and family because of their non-heterosexuality and their perceived non-conformity to traditional gender roles and sexual norms. With this, I will end this conclusion with the final remarks from Karim, and the struggle that this takes:

> "You remain afraid, afraid for your life, and this feeling of fear is very difficult, it is not easy, it is very difficult. This needs a lot of study, and people who are convinced by it… people who are convinced by it and who can work on this matter. It is not easy to change the Arab societies… *Manno mawdūʾ sahel abadan…* it is not easy at all. It needs people who work from a struggle… *Badda maʾrake!* But we re going to do it…
>
> *Liʾanno el-janna min ghēr nās ma btendeās…"*

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