

***Egyptian Products*, by Laila Soliman
Translated by Khalid Laith
Education Pack**

THEMES:

GENDER & SEXUALITY

LOVE & MARRIAGE

TRANSFORMATION ACROSS GENERATIONS

GENRE: Absurdism

AGE RESTRICTION: 14+ (sexual references)

NUMBER OF CHARACTERS: 10 (2F, 3M)

CHARACTER LIST:

HADIA, a young woman in her late 20s who suffers from a lack of a romantic life. She works as a nurse/companion to the Ustaz. The word Hadia in Arabic means 'she who is calm'.

GASIR, a young man in his early thirties, an introvert, who works in a medical lab and suffers from loneliness after his mother's death. Gasir is the Egyptian pronunciation for the Arabic word Jasir, which means 'he who is heroically brave'.

USTAZ IDRIS, an elderly writer who is relatively famous and well off. He suffers from loneliness and a few medical illnesses related to his old age. Ustaz is a term used for a learned elder.

Also, a **SPICE SELLER**, a female **LINGERIE-SHOP ASSISTANT**, four **PSYCHOTHERAPISTS**, a **TAXI DRIVER**, all of whom can be cast singly or be doubled up with one male and one female actor.

SYNOPSIS:

Hadia is an independent woman living in modern day Cairo. Gasir is a painfully awkward lab assistant with attachment issues over his dead mother. Is he really her knight in shining armour?

The play charts the journeys of Hadia and Gasir as they struggle to find a life partner. Gasir is stuck with his 'nice guy' image, crippling shyness and attachment issues to his recently deceased mother. These prevent him from connecting with women. Hadia has dated many men but her fierce independent-mindedness means she is awake to the contradictory expectations her society places on women, leading to a blockage in her mission to find a suitable husband. The pair live entirely separate lives in the same Egyptian town before a series of chance encounters bring their worlds together.

Egyptian Products is written in Egyptian Arabic and translated into English by Khalid Laith. Its first outing in the English language was as a rehearsed reading at the Royal Court in 2008.

KEY MOMENTS:

Scene 3 (1F, 1M)

Hadia is frustrated with a recent break up and Ustaz tries to make her feel better about it. Meanwhile, Ustaz wants to eat foods that are forbidden to him and Hadia must negotiate and barter to dissuade him. Suitable for duologues.

Scene 15 (1F, 2M)

Hadia and Gasir are at the beginning of their courtship. Gasir is at home while Hadia is at the Ustaz's house. They each read out advice from very different types of literature – Hadia from a book on 'advice for brides on their wedding day', and Gasir from a range of traditional Arabic romantic poetry. They read the texts simultaneously. Suitable for duologues.

Scene 26 (1F, 1M)

Hadia and Gasir bump into each other in the supermarket and carry on a conversation about products and consumables, mirroring anxieties around 'sexual repression...the inability to break away from the past... [and] societal pressures...', as described in the editor's introduction. Suitable for duologues.

STEP ONE: EXPLORE

Refer to the duologue featuring Hadia and Gasir in Scene 15.

What philosophical questions does this duologue raise in the students' minds? In groups, ask them to come up with questions based on the scene, and which have no easy answers. Think about the themes raised and perhaps try to combine more than one concept in one question to broaden it out. For example:

- Is marriage an institution that reinforces gender roles?

Vote to select one of the questions and discuss it, keeping the fruits of your conversations (themes, further questions, provocations, points of discomfort...etc) alive as you go through the exercises below.

STEP TWO: EXPLORE

Exercise 1: Arabic Zip Zap Boing

The play is translated into the English from the Egyptian dialect of the Arabic language. It is therefore prefaced on p.159 with notes and references to Arabic words, which are peppered throughout the script. Have a look at those notes and references and pick out three words. Discuss the references by exploring the context within which these words fall in the text, and attach a gesture to each word.

Depending on their skill and level, you may want to challenge the students to conjure up imaginative gestural interpretations. For example, for the word *Inshallah* (God willing) you may want to encourage the students to avoid putting palms together in prayer. In all cases, challenge them to steer clear of stereotypical gestures.

Once you have agreed on three gestures for three words, start a game of *Zip Zap Boing* replacing the Zip with a word and gesture, the Zap with a second word and gesture, and the Boing with a third word and gesture. Play a few rounds of your co-produced Arabic Zip Zap Boing, layering on new words and gestures as you go.

Exercise 2: Contradictions & Dissonance

The playwright makes a point of giving the two main protagonists' names with meanings that are opposite to their characters, a reflection on the contradictions in a sexually repressive and misogynistic society. Hadia, which means 'she who is calm', is impatient and easily grows bored, not least with men. Gasir, which means 'he who is heroically brave', is so shy and cowardly he is frequently tongue-tied especially around Hadia. Gasir is also the exception to other male characters in the play who frequently speak about women in a derogatory manner. Meanwhile Hadia, like other women in contemporary Egyptian society, is caught in the dissonance between the hyper-sexualised male discourse around women on the one hand and the expectation of purity and religiosity of a woman when it comes to marriage on the other.

What must it be like for Hadia to be navigating a world where what she sees is not what she gets? What other contradictions did you notice throughout the play? What contradictions exist in UK society when it comes to gender and sexuality?

Explain to the students that you will now experiment with the script in ways that highlight these contradictions. Ask students to play out the following three scenes with their corresponding instructions. You may wish to give them time to prepare before they share.

Scene One -

Description: Gasir and Hadia first meet at the Spice Store in Scene One, where Hadia takes up a lot of space and Gasir is barely able to place an order.

Assign the three characters to three students and ask them to read out the scene in order to familiarize themselves with it. Next ask them to stand it up in such a way as to highlight body language that is in opposition to what is being said. For example, while Hadia says Gasir is standing too close to her, what if it is she who is invading his space? Consider how else body language might be in contradiction to what is being spoken in this scene before standing it up.

Scene Three -

Description: Hadia is frustrated with a recent break up and Ustaz tries to make her feel better about it. Meanwhile, Ustaz wants to eat foods that are forbidden to him and Hadia must negotiate and barter to dissuade him.

Assign this duologue to two students and ask them to read it out loud first. Next, ask them to stand it up in such a way that the pace and tone of the words spoken is dissonant with their meaning. Perhaps they speak slowly when they are angry with one another, and pick up the pace when they are trying to placate and barter.

Scene Four -

Description: The Taxi Driver speaks about women in rude and derogatory ways, much to the embarrassment of his shy and gentle-mannered passenger, Gasir.

Assign this dialogue to two girls. Ask the girls to take on the lines of the Taxi Driver so that they are speaking of men in a derogatory way.

In all the scenes above, the level of the dissonance can be 'turned up' and 'turned down' as the scenes are playing out.

Exercise 3: The Product

The cultural dissonance of contemporary Egyptian society, not least when it comes to attitudes towards gender and sexuality between generations, is

reflected in sudden switches to surreal sub-scenes (scenes within scenes). We see Gasir sexually harassing Hadia in the spice store; Hadia riding on Gasir in Ustaz's house; Hadia and Gasir in a Bollywood dance scene in the middle of a supermarket. The unexpected interruptions may be a commentary on *'a young Arab generation strangled with sexual repression, the inability to break away from the past, the societal pressures imposed by expectations on marriage, children and so on...'* as stated in the introduction to the play. Refer to Scene 26 (the final scene). What might these products have to do with the themes of the play? What does Hadia mean when she asks Gasir whether he supports Egyptian products?

Hadia and Gasir briefly break into a surreal Bollywood dance in this scene. In groups, create a dance scene that advertises a product you might find regularly in your local supermarket. The advertisement is a coded critical commentary about gender and sexuality in society, exposing tensions and/or contradictions. This could be in the context of Egypt, the UK or a global commentary.

For example, students might create an advertisement about sugar-free drinks as per the scene itself, and the disproportionate pressures on the female body to remain slim.

STEP THREE: FEEDBACK

Discuss what came up for the students. What are they still wondering about? What was the most interesting thing they learned? What was their least favourite part and why?