

COFFEE-SNATCHERS

When packing for our family holidays in Lebanon in the seventies, my mother always made sure of tucking her 'set' carefully amongst her clothes. This constituted a box containing two cups, matching saucers, a coffee pot, an electric hot plate and two jars, one of Turkish coffee, the other sugar. I remember how my parents would religiously share their coffee ritual on the balcony overlooking the mountains, every morning and after their siesta.

Arabs always seem to rely on the 'mood' or '*mazaj*' created by that small china cup, filled with rich sediments of ground coffee and cardamom. It's no surprise that the origin of the word 'coffee' is from the Arabic '*qahwah*' meaning, wine!

Egyptian Nobel Laureate, Naguib Mahfouz's novels are full of descriptions of busy cafés, bustling with labourers, intellectuals and revolutionaries. The scene of women sitting around a table, cooking their coffee on a burner as they gossip about their men, infests many an Arabic film. This 'individual and social mood' extends itself not only to places of leisure, but also work. Some offices even have small burners for cooking the coffee when a kitchen is not available.

In the Middle East, people take pride in cooking and serving their coffee, in rituals steeped in tradition.

When I moved back to the UK, I realised that here it's the English cuppa that serves as this mood enhancer. I found no contradictions between the pride Arabs take in coffee and the British in tea. Brewing tea and drinking it while chatting to friends, I feel at home. How many times is the comforting expression 'I'll just put the kettle on' heard in East Enders?

When our streets began to fill with chain coffee shops, I felt defensive over a drink I have to admit I don't even like – yes, despite my Arab credentials, I'm not a coffee person! But the new format is a cultureless way of gulping coffee in fake surroundings, each shop a clone of the other, dressing with a fast-food method a drink and a bean that demand more respect.

In short, coffee in the Middle East, like tea in England, is a 'big deal'; for the chain shops, it's nothing but big business. Gone are the particularities of preparation and the niceties of social etiquette.

I wish to be rid of the soulless Coffee-Snatchers!