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A Rendezvous with Revolution: The Transformative Impact of Contemporary Female Singers in Egypt

Summer El-Shahawy

University of Arkansas, sselshah@uark.edu

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**A Rendezvous with Revolution:
How Contemporary Female Singers Have Transformed Egypt**

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors Studies
in the Department of Anthropology

By

Summer El-Shahawy

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Anthropology

J. William Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences

The University of Arkansas

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction and Methodology
2. Historical Context
3. Umm Kulthum's Legacy and Modern Female Musicians
4. Egyptian Globalization and Western Influence
5. Popular Culture and Politics
6. Post-Revolution Conditions for Middle-Class Women in Entertainment
7. Financial and Creative Autonomy over Production
8. Nadah El Shazly
9. Maryam Saleh
10. Sahar El Zoghbi
11. Conclusion and Discoveries

References

1. Introduction and Methodology

I chose to write my Fulbright Honors Thesis on contemporary female musicians in Egypt to show to how nontraditional female singers have contributed to sociopolitical and cultural change in Egypt. I landed on this topic for my research because I noticed that female singers played an important role in the social transformations in Egypt regarding the 2011 uprising. I wanted to further explore the extent to which modern female indie singers have expanded women's abilities to participate in the field of entertainment and how their musical contributions continue to affect the current political sphere in Egypt.

As an undergraduate student majoring in both anthropology and Arabic, this research project ended up incorporating my passion for language, culture, art, and music in the biggest undertaking of my academic career. My methodology for this project involved building a base of knowledge about Egyptian history upon which I could contextualize my interest in the contemporary indie music scene in Cairo. To do so, I read books, journal articles, and popular culture analyses on the nation of Egypt. After this, I listened to hours of music on iTunes, Soundcloud, and Bandcamp to familiarize myself with the defining sounds and features of indie music in Cairo. With the help of my Arabic teaching assistant, Nour El-Nagdy, I then chose specific songs to translate from Arabic to English. I then analyzed the lyrics under the context of current social, political, and economic issues in Egypt. I sought to connect the lyrics with events in Egypt post the 2011 Revolution, and to compare and contrast the topics that modern female singers address versus the topics that 20th century singers addressed in their music. Finally, I aimed to answer why the topics differed and how the standards for success have changed over the past 100 years with an emphasis on how the 2011 Revolution and subsequent

dictatorship of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has affected female participation in the public entertainment sphere.

2. Historical Context

Despite modern assumptions in the West about Middle Eastern women being oppressed throughout history, Egyptian law has long afforded women rights such as the ability to own property and equal treatment of men and women under a court of law. Although there are important legal guarantees under both Islamic and secular law, the Egyptian government has also set many limits for women, particularly in regard to physical space. Private and public areas of interaction are typically gendered, and men are more welcomed in and encouraged to participate in public spaces, while women are expected to inhabit the private sphere. As a public space, the entertainment industry has historically been an unacceptable sphere for “respectable” women to participate in. Those who did participate would likely be using their physique for success as dancers and entertainers, rather than creating music and using their voices. This was an issue because it created a stereotype of female entertainment being purely ornamental, and instead of being seen as artists, women were considered decoration. Because of this, women who wanted to get into the world of entertainment were subject to negative social stigmas that has stymied or limited female participation in the field of musical entertainment.

In my study, I’m interested to see how modern social standards and state policies have affected women’s participation in the music scene by comparing the rules and regulations that governed legendary Egyptian singers like Umm Kulthūm during her rise

to fame and her dominance of the musical field. I explore modern female indie artists' experiences in the music scene: how these women were able to infiltrate the music industry, whether they are afforded financial and creative autonomy over their music, and the how their activities have been impacted by the post-revolution atmosphere

The women artists I focus on are: Maryam Saleh, Nadah El Shazly, and Sahar El Zoghbi. Each uses music as a form of expression and resistance against restrictive forces in Egypt. These female artists perform music outside of the mainstream of popular culture and are considered "alternative." Maryam Saleh is a partial exception, an "alternative" artist who has enjoyed some success in infiltrating the mainstream pop culture scene. The focus of their music is experimental: using sounds like sighs, yells, and groans to convey feeling and emotion to their audience. There is also a combination of the new and the old as these artists incorporate traditional instruments like the *'oud* with electronic synthesizers. I focus on questions such as how these women's education, background, socioeconomic status, and gender affect what kinds of music they produce and whether they are able to achieve success and wider acceptance in their creative endeavors.

3. Umm Kulthum's Legacy and Modern Female Musicians

One hundred years before the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, women participated in the 1919 revolution in which they marched in protest of British colonialism. According to Dalia Basiouny, "The period between 1919 and 1922 was an important period of transformation from the invisible social feminism to a highly public and organized

collective feminism.”¹ Right around this time, legendary singer Umm Kulthūm, the famed Kawkab al-Sharq (Star of the East), began her rise to fame. Her “career unfolded during two world wars, the Egyptian Revolutions of 1919 and 1952, the Great Depression, and the momentous sociopolitical changes of the 1950s and 1960s.”² In the course of career that lasted from 1910 to 1973 Umm Kulthūm produced 300 songs. For 40 years, she gave monthly Thursday night concerts that were broadcast live across the nation’s radio waves. “You couldn’t read about anything else in the newspaper that day except the color of Umm Kulthūm’s dress and what jewelry she would wear... on those Thursdays, we lived in her world all day.”³ Umm Kulthūm was not a proponent of Egypt’s feminist movement of the time. In fact, she consistently underscored her conservative values and maintained a very “clean” public image, devoid of the looser, bohemian lifestyle that often accompanies those who participate in the world of music. Despite this, her fame and acceptance across Egypt carved out space for women to participate in the entertainment industry and set a precedent that would allow a woman become Egypt’s most famous persona and voice in history. Hers is “the story of a village girl who grew up to become the cultural symbol of a nation.”⁴

In addition to the way Umm Kulthūm presented herself as a conservative young woman with high morals, her formal education contributed significantly to her success.

¹ Basiouny, Dalia. "Egypt." In *International Women Stage Directors*, edited by Fliotsos Anne and Vierow Wendy, by Levitow Roberta, 109-21. University of Illinois Press, 2013.

² Danielson, Virginia. *The Voice of Egypt Umm Kulthūm, Arabic Song, and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1997.

³ Ibid [3]-[6]

She spoke Arabic eloquently and adhered to hundreds of strict and sophisticated grammar rules regarding declension and pronunciation. It is rumored that she memorized the Qur'ans, and she was trained in Qur'anic recitation, an impressive feat that earned her favor from those in elite classes. Although Umm Kulthūm herself was from the peasant class, as she became more popular, she obtained wealthy patrons which allowed her to continually raise her concert fees until she her family became so well-off that she was riding in first class to her performances. She also became a very serious musician and mastered difficult vocal techniques. Although women were not allowed to participate in lessons at the Oriental Music Club, her father hired teachers privately to instruct her in the art of music. Through her lessons with the poet Ahmad Rami, composer Al-Najridi, and fairly famous singer Al-Shaykh Abu l-Ila Mohammad, she honed her natural talent for singing into a meticulously perfected art. "The extent to which she pursued musical training distinguished her from most of her peers, [and] her efforts extended into the realm of dress, manners, and language."⁶

Umm Kulthūm was also fortunate to get in on the ground floor of rising media platforms like the radio which allowed her exposure like artists never had before. She became "The Voice of Egypt," and was broadcast across the Egyptian airwaves to every home in the country. In 1952, Egypt became an independently sovereign republic through a military coup that overthrew King Farouk. Gamal Abdel Nasser took leadership of the country and began pushing a political agenda aimed at building a national Egyptian

identity, introducing the concept Pan Arabism and an Arab union.⁷ Artists like Umm Kulthūm were able to become more successful by capitalizing on this idea of an Arab identity, and so many of her songs are about her love for her country and the Egyptian people. Nasser used the state-controlled media to promote his own political agenda, and by aligning herself with his political endeavors, Umm Kulthūm was able to reach unparalleled levels of fame and success. Nasser adored her so much that he redacted the ban that had been placed on Umm Kulthūm's music after the Egyptian musician's guild expelled her for her friendship with the ousted King Farouk I.

Umm Kulthūm's story is one of success, but it is also one that is deeply rooted in socioeconomic status. She started her career dressing like a boy, because women were not permitted to publicly recite the Qur'an, and quickly blossomed into the one of the most successful, respected, and famed female singers in Egypt's history. Despite her status as a lowly peasant "boy," she was so talented and persistent that she was able to free herself of rules that governed Egyptian women in entertainment at the time. I think it is worthy to mention that the Star of the East, is a woman— not a man— a fact that makes it clear that women need not necessarily remain silent, submissive, and confined to the private sphere. When women are exposed to and encouraged to participate in the entertainment industry, they cause social and cultural revolutions, making a name for themselves and their nation.

While Umm Kulthūm's poise, education, and sophisticated style of singing earned her love, fame, and success, 45 years after her death, women in entertainment can still

⁷ Shanab, Nadya. "Questioning the Authenticity of the Modern Egyptian Sound – Are We in Search of Something Non-Existent?" *University of Liverpool*, School of Arts: Department of Music, 2015.

achieve stardom and success without needing to memorize the Qur'an. In particular, the past fifty years have dramatically changed the standards regarding women's participation in the entertainment industry. The conditions for success are no longer dependent on factors like being well-versed in classical Arabic, Quranic recitation, and presenting oneself with conservative style and impeccable grace. If anything, modern female artists have portrayed themselves as bona fide rule-breakers who don't abide by what's accepted and have little regard for traditional beauty standards.

4. Egyptian Globalization and Western Influence

One explanation for the change in conditions for female success in the entertainment industry, some have argued, is the massive expansion of media platforms and the decentralization of government control over these outlets. As anthropologists argue, every culture, including Egypt's, is constantly changing as it is exposed to other ideas, practices, and people. In the 19th century, and well into the 20th, Egypt's culture was "influenced externally through avenues such as migration, trade, travel, tourism, imperialism, colonialism, as well as technological avenues such as satellite, TV, radio and the Internet."⁸ As Western ideology permeated Egyptian society in multiple ways including economic ideology, as demonstrated by former president Anwar Sadat's choice to move away from government control of the economy and his encouragement of unfettered capitalism and neo-liberal economic ideology. In addition to neo-liberal

⁸ Shanab, Nadya. "Questioning the Authenticity of the Modern Egyptian Sound – Are We in Search of Something Non-Existent?" *University of Liverpool*, School of Arts: Department of Music, 2015.

economic policies, there was also heightened emphasis on keeping media outlets and social media platforms separate from the influence of the state. As a result, especially post-2011 Revolution, many Egyptian citizens have found their voices and use their newfound freedoms of speech online.

And yet, westernization and globalization have resulted in a hybridized society that doesn't quite fit any one agenda. While Egyptian citizens are indisputably more able to express themselves on social media platforms, there is unmistakable cultural dissonance that has resulted directly from this uptake in western norms. This has resulted in disagreement in the society about Egypt's cultural identity. The nation's culture is an amalgam of the powers that have had a hand in influencing the state; including the Ottoman empire, French colonists, and Islamic law. For this reason, there are arguments about whether Egypt's essential identity is Muslim, Arab, or a cultural stand-alone. In fact, some would argue that Egypt is a hybrid; an ever-changing product of a history of diverse contacts that is able to incorporate other influences and trends without ever ceasing to be "Egyptian."

This hybridized nature of self and culture has translated into the domain of music in Cairo. Singers, particularly indie singers, consistently address themes of identity in their music, asking themselves and their audiences, "Who are we?" Often, hybridization within a culture results in the creation of new music genres such as the incorporation of Jazz and Blues music into RnB and Disco.⁹ This is exactly what is happening in Egypt; artists are covering and riffing on well-known favorites and adding a modern twist,

⁹ Shanab, Nadya. "Questioning the Authenticity of the Modern Egyptian Sound – Are We in Search of Something Non-Existent?" *University of Liverpool*, School of Arts: Department of Music, 2015.

hoping to capture and define Egypt's new hybrid culture by adding elements of 21st century popular culture to Arab classics.

Access to social media platforms that aren't regulated by the state has afforded many artists the ability to express themselves more freely. This relatively new independence has afforded musicians across the country access to and utilization of platforms like YouTube, SoundCloud, Bandcamp, and other sites to make their music available to the public. Other platforms of social media like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter have also played instrumental roles in bringing mainstream listeners' attention to indie artists in Cairo. These social media sites have provided Egyptian artists and entertainers with greater access to wider audiences which has considerably strengthened the variation in the popular culture scene in Egypt.

Nadah El Shazly, for instance, uses Instagram to advertise events and collaborations with other indie artists involved in the scene. It is a way of boosting one's own fame as well as inviting other indie artists into the spotlight to support and encourage their fellow artists. On Facebook, El Shazly has around four thousand followers while Sahar El Zoghbi has about seven thousand. Maryam Saleh has nearly a million likes on her Facebook page which is evidence to her growing fame both in Cairo and across the world. All three of the artists have YouTube channels with varying degrees of exposure and success. El Shazly has under three hundred subscribers on YouTube and has only posted two videos, however she enjoys greater interaction on SoundCloud where she has over two thousand followers and up to twenty thousand hits on her songs.¹⁰ Sahar El Zoghbi's YouTube presence is more successful with three

¹⁰ "Nadah El Shazly." SoundCloud. <https://soundcloud.com/nadah-el-shazly>.

thousand followers and forty-seven thousand hits on her cover of “Bekafi 'Ad” (That’s Enough) which was also recently featured in a Palestinian film, *Between Heaven and Earth*.¹¹ Despite having only twelve videos on YouTube, Maryam Saleh has nearly five thousand subscribers with two and a half million views on her song, “*Teskar Tebki*” (Crying Like a Kid) from her most recent album, *Lekhfa*.

On Instagram, there are many accounts that cover the entertainment sphere in Cairo and feature various artists at their venues. One of these profiles is Cairo Jazz Club, a live music venue that has built their brand around supporting and featuring funky creatives in the music scene. Many of these artists have a sound that combines two or more styles of music into something novel. There are genres like synth-pop, melodic techno, and instrumental hip-hop. The venue offers live music and entertainment seven days a week, meaning artists aren’t confined to weekend concerts and are able to find audiences and exposure every day. While Cairo Jazz Club is closed for the foreseeable future due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the venue has continued to host virtual “Quarantini Sessions” meaning musicians are still able to share their music while social distancing. Nadah El Shazly has been featured on Cairo Jazz Club’s page multiple times and performed a debut DJ set at the club. While Cairo Jazz Club is still a niche part of the music sphere, they have 120,000 followers on their Instagram page and are able to promote underground artists and their music to a much larger audience than artists could reach alone. Despite having a large social media following and being an influential player in the music scene, Cairo Jazz Club is not a space where huge concerts take place. The

¹¹ “Sahar Elzoghbi.” YouTube.
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC6OviC3Ze_F7YiaMJbOtd0g.

space could be considered intimate and can only accommodate a hundred people or less. Additionally, they have curated their brand to cater to the upper and upper-middle class. Drinking alcohol is common and encouraged at the club, and the curated set lists and featured artists are chosen based on this limited social clientele. Although their target audience is a niche group, platforms like these are still important to female singers because they are generally getting less exposure than their male counterparts. Through online endorsements and performances at the club, artists gain recognition and acceptance from the club's clientele.

5. Popular Culture and Politics

Because of their unique position in society as public female creatives, these artists are often able to inspire political action in their audiences. In his book on Egypt's pop music, Daniel Gilman points out the intimate relatedness of Egyptian commercial pop music and politics. In particular, the strategies through which politicians and musicians communicate resemble each other in that both attempt to employ rhetoric to inspire a call to action for their audiences. "Music—of any variety, not just commercial pop—is capable of moving listeners by playing on their emotions on a mass-media scale, and thereby inspiring them to commit one act or another. Such exhortation is, of course, also a common goal of political rhetoric."¹² This rings particularly true in the case of the artists I've chosen to research, because in addition to having emotional lyrics, these

¹² Gilman, Daniel J. *Cairo Pop: Youth Music in Contemporary Egypt*. University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

artists often employ the use of screams, sighs, and yells to hyper focus their audience on the emotions their song addresses. In her music, Nadah El Shazly often addresses themes of homesickness and feeling lost making her audience think critically about what it means to call a place home and what “home” really means. Maryam Saleh tends to have a more direct approach to her music, often referencing politics and using biting wit and sarcasm to get a response from her audience. Both of these themes, homesickness and political unrest, fit neatly into the discussion about Egypt’s cultural dissonance and the issues that have accompanied life in Egypt post-revolution. While their songs may not be aggressive calls-to-arms, they do speak to the hearts and minds of their audiences, and particularly to the Egyptian youth who are coming of age in a confusing mix of freedom and repression. The topics that young female musicians are addressing are a form of social and emotional solidarity with their audiences. They are aligning themselves with a disillusioned youth and putting a melody behind feelings of *al-ghurba* (estrangement from one’s home) that young people struggle to process on their own.

Although female participation in the music and entertainment industry has increased over the past 50 years, when one examines popular singers and performance artists in Cairo’s sphere of music, it is glaringly obvious that women are in the minority, and all-women bands or stand-alone female artists are few and far between. Given that previous greats like Umm Kulthūm and her contemporary, Asmahan, were ultra-successful stand-alone female artists, there is a discrepancy between these women and the contemporary artists participating in the music world today regarding their ability to be independent musicians. Even within the group of performers I’ve chosen, I’ve noticed a trend of all three women collaborating with more established male musicians initially to

find either acceptance or a way into the field of entertainment. Though Umm Kulthūm and Asmahan collaborated in some of their musical endeavors, they were two female artists working together, while the singers in my research often collaborate with male creatives. Creative collaboration is generally enriching for all involved parties; however, it is important for female artists to have the ability to operate singularly and maintain their creative and financial autonomy over their product.

6. Post-Revolution Conditions for Middle-Class Women in Entertainment

The obstacles that women must overcome to do public work in the art scene are often issues regarding gendered expectations and social stigmas. The women who work in this type of entertainment today – and especially when it comes to “indie” music – are usually in the middle to upper-middle classes in Egypt. These women creatives need to have both disposable social income (in the form of cultural capital, such as a highly regarded reputation in their community), as well as financial income to be able to launch a viable career in the entertainment industry. Another contributing factor is family support— especially for women, they often need the approval of their family unit before they can successfully act in the field entertainment. Of the musicians I chose to research, the most successful is Maryam Saleh, the daughter of a respected theater director. Her status and exposure to the entertainment sphere through her family’s connections provided her a strong foundation upon which she was able to build a successful career in entertainment. Her talent as an artist is indisputable, but from an anthropological point of view, it is important to recognize her socioeconomic status: she is a middle-class woman

with previous exposure and connections in addition to having the advantage of name-recognition.

Overcoming obstacles like gendered expectations can be particularly difficult because they're often embedded in the social norms of a society. According to Mervat Hatem, the middle class in Egypt was in a crisis in late 1980s — struggling to reconcile expectations of the Islamic social system with Western influences due to colonialism. With these incoming influences of capitalist development and secular ideas about gender equality, the Egyptian middle class was facing an issue incorporating these influences while still considering the traditional Islamic social system and its sexual division of labor.¹³

These contrasting and conflicting ideas and the distinctions between “modern versus traditional” cultural norms are clearly visible in Egypt’s entertainment scene and have made it difficult for female artists to find their footing in the music field. This is because women are often expected to strike a balance of tradition and modernity in the music they produce and be the perfect mix of west and east — they must be “cool” and trendy while also staying true to their Egyptian roots to avoid being deemed as “posers.” In his study on modernism in Egypt, Walter Armbrust discusses this model of modernity that picks the best from the West and the best from tradition to create a “just right” Goldilocks-type medium. Armbrust argues that “the purpose of such discourses has not been to reinforce cultural dichotomies. Rather it is to transcend them, or at least to create a hybrid form of modernity, conceptually linked to the local past, but fully conversant

¹³ Hatem, Mervat. "Egypt's Middle Class in Crisis: The Sexual Division of Labor." *Middle East Journal* 42, no. 3 (1988): 407-22.

with imported technique.”¹⁴ His argument here is that it is not the influence of the West that makes Egyptian society more or less “modern,” it is how and what Egyptians choose to incorporate aspects from other cultures in addition to their own traditional cultural values that creates a novel and modern idea of “Egyptian-ness,” and that Egypt has complete ownership over their hybrid culture.

Maryam Saleh and Nadah El Shazly have found this “just right” blend of east and west by covering traditional songs with a modern twist and blending American and Egyptian styles of music. Saleh is not only a singer and songwriter, but she is also an actress. Her cinema career has permitted her to increase her visibility and audience as a musical performer. One of her most notable songs is a political one, “Nixon Baba,” satirical commentary on American politics, Watergate, and the West’s dealings with Egypt. The song was written by Sheikh Imam, a leftwing singer who often sang about political issues in the sixties and seventies. Despite the song being over fifty years old, its message resonates in the 2020 because of current American-Egyptian foreign relations. Despite Egypt’s poor record of affording their citizens human rights, and the fact that 32% of Egyptians live below the poverty line, while President Trump has praised President Sisi calling him a great leader who has brought order.¹⁵ In her music, Nadah El Shazly balances aspects of east and west by blending traditional Arab instruments like the ‘*oud* with synthesized beats that are characteristic of American Electronic Dance Music (EDM) and Hip-Hop tracks. One of the best examples is her experimental, indie version

¹⁴ Armbrust, Walter. “Mass Culture in Egypt.” *Isim Newsletter*.
<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/15604814.pdf>

¹⁵ “President Donald Trump and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi Hold Joint Media Availability before Meeting,” Congressional Quarterly (CQ) Transcripts, Sep. 23, 2019.

of Sayed Darwish's famous "Ana Ashaqt" (I Once Loved). Darwish is considered the father of modern Arab music and recorded the original song under the title "Ana Hawet wa Entahat" (I Loved and It's Over). Darwish modernized the sound of Arab music and began a new era of creative and artistic innovation. She is taking Darwish's modernized sound one step further and putting her own 21st century twist on his already expanded version of Arab sound.

Not all indie female artists blend eastern and western trends, but it seems that the most successful women in the field of entertainment are those who hit the aesthetic "sweet spot" of Egyptian modernity. To make a name for themselves as serious artists, composers, and musicians, they also address political unrest, the disillusionment of the Egyptian youth, and write music that Egyptians can connect emotionally.

Maryam Saleh does exactly this through her song *Ana Mesh Baghanni* (I Don't Sing). Over a backdrop of a piano melody and a funky rock beat, she sings "I don't sing, I don't speak, I don't sleep... I don't do anything all day!" She's both poking fun at the expectations for celebrities to make a difference in politics while at the same time potentially addressing economic issues, namely unemployment. Though there is not clear evidence of this assertion, the release date of the song was in 2012, just a year after the tumultuousness of the revolution that rocked Egypt's social, economic, and political foundation. The song could be interpreted as underscoring the lack of work for youth amidst rising unemployment rates which spiked to 12.7% in 2012 and remained in the double digits until 2019. The song could also be a response to political repression in Egypt which renders people unable to sing, speak, the evidence for this being that President Sisi has been subject to repeated international criticism for his inhibition of

freedom of expression and “the Egyptian government rejects foreign criticism of its human rights practices as illegitimate interference in Egypt’s domestic affairs.”¹⁶ It is through humor, wit, and grit that Saleh was able to reach her audience, even in a time of unrest and uncertainty, and it is artists like her that make a difference in the music scene. She is not “The Voice of Egypt”, but she is a voice for her audience, for aspiring female singers, and for the people that hear her message.

7. Financial and Creative Autonomy over Production

Part of the issue in reconciling modern and traditional norms, particularly regarding music, are the historical expectations of music in the Arab world and the particular relationship music has with culture and society. Much of what was sung and performed throughout history and continuing into the 19th century was for a very specific reason, such as a wedding, or a special holiday. Music wasn’t performed merely for music’s sake; it served a purpose and fulfilled a role in a formal ceremony. This is why there was a heavy emphasis on and appreciation for skills like Quranic recitation and singing religious repertoires. Singers like al-Hajja al-Suwaisiyya, one of the most successful singers in the 19th century, performed in this way: singing at coffee shops and holding private concerts sponsored by patrons to perform at special events. “The female professional singers of Cairo during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were usually identified as ‘*awalim* [dancers]... they maintained their own trade guild and

¹⁶ “Egypt calls on US not to interfere in its Affairs,” The Middle East Monitor, March 15, 2019.

performed under contract to individual patrons for specific occasions.”¹⁷ The word ‘*awalim*’ is a derogatory word that refers to women who danced as a form of entertainment, like belly dancers who typically catered to the male gaze, instead of to an audience’s ears. Although female singing in public was still not widely accepted in society, as women like al-Suwaisiyya gained fame and recognition, they expanded the capacity of women to participate in the sphere of entertainment. This expansion translated into a new set of expectations for female performances that placed a heavier emphasis on musical skills and less on the female body as the main focus of entertainment.

Another predecessor of Umm Kulthūm, Na’ima al-Masriyya was raised in a lower-middle-class neighborhood before rising to fame through vocal performance. By 1927 she had the financial ability to purchase her own venue, a casino called Alhambra, and she managed herself as the main entertainer on the property. Artists like al-Masriyya, however, were somewhat exceptional. Virginia Danielson asserts that “a critical problem for Umm Kulthūm and her contemporaries was that of control, artistic and financial, over the circumstance of their work.”¹⁸ There is an inherent contradiction in interests between those artists who generate cultural capital in the form of music and those who control production like the Egyptian Musician Syndicate, which holds the power to ban certain types of music and can bar performers from public performances. As Egyptian society has become more westernized, there has been social disagreement on whether or not western culture has a place in Egypt. This social tug-of-war has created a divide between

¹⁷ Keddie, Nikki R. “Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender.” *Yale University Press*, 2008.

¹⁸ Danielson, Virginia. *The Voice of Egypt Umm Kulthūm, Arabic Song, and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1997.

creatives who want to produce music without censorship and state approval, and some citizens and organizations who believe that some topics need to be censored, regardless of the desire for individual freedom of expression.

For women in particular, westernization has made it more difficult to present themselves in the “right” way. Artists need to appear modern and “in” with current trends in the global music scene to stay relevant, but also still need to present themselves as Egyptian women who are proud of their culture and heritage. Regarding self-management and financial autonomy, globalization has also made it more complicated to simply own a music venue and perform there, like al-Masriyya did with Alhambra. Now, musicians are collaborating with other artists from different countries, performing at concerts across the world, and signing record deals with companies that may not be based in Egypt. In Nadah El Shazly’s case, she has three different contacts for bookings: one for the EU, one for North America, and one for the rest of the world. Because of the extended reach to audiences, artists now need to be hyperaware of who they are interacting with, and how they manage themselves has changed dramatically since the 1920s.

In addition to being careful about financial management, artists also need to be aware of censorship and issues regarding personal expression in their music. On February 17th, 2020, “Egypt’s Music Syndicate head Hany Shaker issued a decree banning all mahraganat (electro-shaabi) singers from performing in any festivals, clubs, cafes or other concerts”¹⁹ due to the “promiscuous” nature of the music. Bans such as these can significantly limit the types of music that can be popularized on a national level because musicians found in violation of policies issued by entities like Egypt’s Music Syndicate

¹⁹ “Egypt’s Music Syndicate Bans Popular Mahraganat Music.” Egyptian Streets, February 17, 2020.

can face penalties ranging from being barred from performing concerts to serving jail time.

According to Hessen Hossam, an Egyptian writer, artists are being restricted through “censored songs, cancelled concerts, and prison sentences— punishments varied, but were all driven by the same force: the triple efforts of the security apparatus, the Censorship Board, and the Musicians Syndicate, often fueled by a conservative society adamant on keeping its so-called morals and values intact.”²⁰ In particular, this ban on popular, mainstream music like mahraganat is concerning because this style of music is both well-known and favored by much of the Egyptian youth.

Recent artists in the electro-shaabi scene include Mohammad Ramadan, who was formerly an actor, and Oka and Ortega, a duo that specializes in making this special type of “party” music that has a carefree feel and is popular with the youth. Both of these artists are B-list celebrities and are not a part of the indie music scene. Unlike Mohammad Ramadan and Oka and Ortega, neither Maryam Saleh nor Nadah El Shazly are classified as electro-shaabi singers. Instead, Saleh is a psychedelic rock and trip-hop artist while El Shazly is best classified as experimental. Neither of the women are directly affected by the syndicate’s ban on electronic-folk music, but it is important to note that both artists are attempting to work in a domain that is policed by a restrictive force. It is clear that if artists want to be allowed to participate in entertainment, they must be careful to abide by the regulations of censorship boards, the Musicians Syndicate, and varied security forces across the nation of Egypt.

²⁰ ElNabawi, Maha. “Cairo's New Wave: A Fresh Contingent of Underground Musicians and Artists Forge Escape Routes from the Harsh Realities of Life in the Egyptian Capital.” *The Wire*, July 2018.

8. Nadah El Shazly

El Shazly began her career in music as a punk singer and has since explored other avenues of musical creation including DJing. Using her previous training in piano and voice lessons in her adolescence, she has experimented with many different genres including jazz, and has made a name for herself in Cairo's indie music scene as an experimental artist who utilizes electronic synthesizers in her music, whether she's singing or DJing a set. It is important to mention that her status as a middle-class woman contributes significantly to her ability to work in the field of entertainment, and by having had private music lessons, she is leagues ahead of other aspiring female artists who don't have this luxury.

She has a grunge-y, alternative vibe that is a little rough around the edges, which sets her apart from some of her ultra-feminine, mainstream counterparts. Of the three artists I discuss here, El Shazly is definitely the most experimental and her music reflects this through the use of cymbal clashes, strange synthetically produced sounds, and heavy bass.

When writing and composing her music, Nadah El Shazly collaborates with another indie artist, Osama (Sam) Shalabi and occasionally with a mutual creator, Maurice Louca. Through this mutual creative collaboration, El Shazly released her most recent album, *Ahwar* or "Marshlands" in November of 2017. El Shazly's partnership with Shalabi is unique because he is a Canadian artist of Egyptian background who spends most of his time in North America, while El Shazly resides in Cairo. Shalabi himself is an Egyptian-Canadian musician and composer who specializes in experimental orchestral arrangements and directs Land of Kush, an orchestra that Shalabi assembled himself. He

participates in number of Avant Garde rock bands and plays the electric guitar as well as the ‘*oud* in a number of jazz and improvisational ensembles.²¹ Her collaboration with him is, in and of itself, a hybrid of their Egyptian background and Western influence. The music they create together is beautiful and unique, often combining traditional melodies and instruments with a modern, electronic sound.

Because the album was a mutual creation, with Shalabi both producing the album and playing the ‘*oud*, he is credited by name on nearly every song on her album *Ahwar*, though he doesn’t appear on the album’s cover art. The fact of this collaboration begs the question of whether El Shazly’s music and participation in entertainment is in fact contingent on her relationship with male artists. In an article by Kazoo, a non-profit arts organization that supports emerging artists, Shalabi praises El Shazly and her voice, her personality, and her orientation towards music. He emphasizes in particular her confidence as an experimental artist and pushing the limits of what is accepted. Shalabi’s orchestra is an amalgam of jazzy sounds, and the music El Shazly produces centralizes on these instruments and particular styles of experimentation as well, likely because many of the musicians that accompany El Shazly’s tracks are members of Shalabi’s orchestra. Just like El Shazly’s music and branding is an example of Egyptian modernity, Shalabi’s Land of Kush project also plays into the blending of East and West. His orchestra includes over twenty musicians playing instruments of all kinds: piano, guitar, *darbouka* (a goblet drum), ‘*oud*, and synthesizers. In March 2018, the orchestra played at the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto, and his musical endeavors are an extension of the thread of

²¹ “Sand Enigma, by Land of Kush.” Land of Kush, November 8, 2019. <https://landofkush.bandcamp.com/>.

musical connection between Canada and Egypt. While their collaboration is admirable and results in unique, groundbreaking sounds, it's interesting to see that Shalabi is both contributing to writing music with El Shazly and using members of his own orchestra in her songs. One wonders whether in their partnership, the music produced is more heavily influenced by Shalabi's than by El Shazly, even those hers is the name on the album.

The experimental nature of her music has opened doors for other indie artists and helped create a more diverse, gendered music scene. On February 18th, 2020, El Shazly performed at the Cairo Jazz Club, a live music venue where musicians ranging from singers to DJs can come and perform. She was the opening DJ set for INSIN, a Jordanian electronic producer. Other women including Sara Moullablad, a Moroccan singer, have performed and been featured on Cairo Jazz Club's Instagram page, evidence that El Shazly and her fellow female artists are a part of the growing number of women who get to play at venues like the jazz club.

Though El Shazly's music does not directly address political issues, it is easy to draw parallels between her lyrics and the disillusionment of the youth in Cairo. The first song on *Ahwar* is "Afqad al-Dhakira" (I Lose Memory). The song is disjointed and almost unpleasant sounding in its sharpness and angularity. It is of course meant to be unnerving and unsettling and to capture the feelings of Egyptian youth during a time of near-consistent political strife and cultural revolution. This same year of release, 2017, Egypt experienced multiple drastic events including a suicide bomb killing in April, the government's decision to support a Saudi-led campaign accusing Qatar of terrorism, and an attack on a mosque in Bir al-Abed in North Sinai that killed 305 people.²² Taking

²² "Egypt Profile - Timeline." BBC News. BBC, January 7, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13315719>.

these tragedies and dramatic political events into account, the cynical lyrics and harsh style of El Shazly's music start to make sense. The title of her album means marshlands, and El Shazly describes it as a place where people get lost. In an interview with *The Wire*, a British Avant Garde music magazine, El Shazly said "Ahwar" is meant to make the listener feel overwhelmed and unbalanced. "It's about this place you're totally lost, and you don't know what the past is, the future is, you're also losing your memory... You're feeling it could all go down the drain."²³

El Shazly's explanation suggests that she is in fact writing and singing about the current political issues in Egypt. The idyllic days of Umm Kulthūm's angelic voice and expansion of Egyptian socialism are long gone, and the 2011 revolution left in its wake a people without governmental support for public goods like transportation and housing. In addition, citizens of all ages, but especially the youth, are experiencing frustration at a lack of political freedom under sitting President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's dictatorship. El Shazly, it seems, is writing response to these frustrations and putting music to many people's qualms. In the second song on her album, "Barzakh" (Invisible Barrier), she sings about being a wanderer who is uncertain and lost. "Gather your memories / Throw them to the wind. I am and have everything, but my certainty wavers / my doubt is sore." She gives a voice to the disillusionment, the inability of the people to dissent against their government, and the dashed revolutionary hopes that have left people disoriented.

This year, El Shazly was set to perform at the Music Creek Festival in Iowa as the official Artist in Residence for MCF2020 at The Mill, a restaurant and venue for creative

²³ ElNabawi, Maha. "Cairo's New Wave: A Fresh Contingent of Underground Musicians and Artists Forge Escape Routes from the Harsh Realities of Life in the Egyptian Capital." *The Wire*, July 2018.

artists.²⁴ Although the concert and residency were cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, her expected participation in this music festival speaks volumes about her ability to reach audiences across the globe, and the interest abroad in Egypt's experimental music scene. It is important to note here that not only is El Shazly having an impact in Egypt and Canada, but the United States as well. In March of 2019, she announced a North American tour with performances in 30 cities across the United States including Chicago, New York, Boston, and Memphis. She has also played at the 2019 Copenhagen Jazz Festival and La Dynamo de Banlieues Blues in Paris.²⁵ In this way, she attempts to transcend boundaries of language, culture, and geography and extends her reach to a foreign audience. As evidenced by her growing popularity worldwide, it seems that this notion of Egypt as a hybrid culture and the music that has been produced in this age of Egyptian modernity is appealing not only to Egyptians, but outside audiences as well.

9. Maryam Saleh Saad

Maryam Saleh Saad is an Egyptian singer, songwriter, and actress. She creates music in the genres of psychedelic rock (think Pink Floyd and Tame Impala) and trip-hop (punk rock with a bluesy twist), and the result is a musical marriage of EDM bass drops and hip-hop beats punctuated by electric guitars and the brightness of the *'oud*. Maryam

²⁴ "Iowa City Music since 1962." The Mill. http://icmill.com/?page_id=79.

²⁵ Courtney, Ian. "Nadah El Shazly Announces North American Tour." CelebrityAccess, March 15, 2019. <https://celebrityaccess.com/2019/03/15/nadah-el-shazly-announces-north-american-tour/>.

Saleh's father, Saleh Saad, was a theater director, and which gave her unique access to the entertainment sphere as a little girl. Her interest in music was sparked by her father's participation in arts as well as by her firsthand encounters with famous leftwing Egyptian singer Sheikh Imam. He was proficient in Quranic recitation and studied under Sheikh Darwish al-Hariri, where he learned *muwashshah* song performance, an Andalusian-derived art form, and he also practiced Quranic recitation throughout his career as a singer. Sheikh Imam was an instrumental figure in bringing political issues to light through music, and he and poet Ahmed Fuad Negm wrote and performed music together. Their songs often addressed the issues that face working-class Egyptians and they were very popular in the 1960's and 70's among working-class citizens and in leftist circles. Saleh's exposure to these very important artists, coupled with her experience as an actor and director, helped pave the way for her career in the music industry.

To date, Maryam Saleh has produced three albums as well as numerous extended plays (EPs) and singles. In 2008 she founded two bands, *Jawaz Safar* (Passport), and *Baraka* (Blessings). In *Jawaz Safar*, Saleh's band used two instruments: the *'oud* (a lute-like string instrument) and the *tabl* (a type of drum used in traditional Arab music). Her first album was *Ana Mesh Baghanny* (I'm Not Singing). The album has 12 tracks, the most popular of which on SoundCloud is *Roba'iyat Shagar el Tout (El Donia)* (A Series of Blackberry Trees (The World)). The album gained a lot of traction and popularity with her audience, and *Ana Mesh Baghanny* has over 464,000 hits on her SoundCloud profile. She signed with record label Mostakell Records for this album and their website describes her as "a major creative force and a powerful voice for her generation, Egyptian singer and songwriter Maryam Saleh composes and performs music that is personal,

political and philosophical; intense, intelligent Egyptian music with Arabic language and influences of Trip Hop and Psych Rock.”²⁶ Mostakell Records is based in Cairo and also supports emerging artists in Palestine, Lebanon, and Jordan. By partnering with Mostakell Records, artists are able to achieve more exposure and connect with other artists in the countries in and around the Levant.

After the production of *Ana Mesh Baghanny*, Saleh began working with the Lebanese artist and producer, Zeid Hamdan in 2010. Hamdan has produced many other artists including another female indie singer Marie Abou Khaled. He is best known for his group Soapkills, an electro-pop band that he established with Yasmine Hamdan, a Lebanese singer who was also based in Beirut at the time. The two share a last name and are both of Lebanese origin but are not related. Soapkills has since broken up, but it was a hugely successful band with a cult following in the indie electro scene in Lebanon and across Europe. Both Zeid Hamdan and Yasmine Hamdan have since split from the band to focus on solo projects, and both have found success in their respective careers

Zeid Hamdan has also helped direct music videos for Saleh, early in their partnership. Their homemade YouTube music video for her song “*Eslahat*” has over 130,000 hits, and “*Valerie Giscard D’Estaing*”, a cover of another Sheikh Imam song, has 30,000 hits. The song by Sheikh Imam criticized the empty promises of the West to help lower class Egyptians as well as the Egyptian upper class for mimicking foreign high society.²⁷ The criticisms hold true today as nearly a third of Egypt’s population is

²⁶ Mostakell Records, “Music موسيقى.” Maryam Saleh, <http://www.maryamsaleh.com/music-موسيقى.html>.

²⁷ Linden, Neil van der. “Album Review: Zeid Hamdan and Maryam Saleh's Halawella, an Impressive Collaboration.” *The National*. The National, October 1, 2015.

living below the poverty line and receive no benefit for their nation's alliances with wealthy Western countries.

Maryam Saleh and Zeid Hamdan's creative partnership resulted in another album in 2015 titled, "*Halawella*" (Wow, How Beautiful). At this point in her career, Maryam Saleh's popularity had grown, and she began to perform in destination cities worldwide. The duo was featured in the Lebanese Underground, an independent music promotion company based in Beirut, which covered their Arabic Trip Hop tour in Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, and across Europe.²⁸ Saleh's success, both on her own and working Hamdan, has earned her notoriety among fans of the experimental indie scene as well as favor in the mainstream pop culture.

On her most recent album, *Lekhfa*, Saleh collaborated with Maurice Louca, a mutual friend and collaborator with Sam Shalabi, both of whom also work with Nadah El Shazly. Louca is a composer and musician based in Cairo who has produced two solo albums and also collaborates with other artists in the field. His most recent album, *Elephantine*, is a sweet, slow, and jazzy album that wordlessly explores the limits of a 12-piece ensemble. The album is described as a series of "pensive lulls through its stretches of hard-grooving hypnosis and moments of Avant-jazz catharsis... present striking self-contained landscapes."²⁹ His affinity for jazz and blues-y tones has added even more depth to Saleh's robust and developed sound, making her an even more interesting artist to listen to. Her most popular song on *Lekhfa* is "*Teskar Tebki*" (Crying like a Kid) which

²⁸ Maalouf, Ibrahim. "Maryam Saleh – Zeid Hamdan." Lebanese Underground. <https://www.lebaneseunderground.com/music/arabic-electro/maryam-saleh-zeid-hamdan/>.

²⁹ "Elephantine, by Maurice Louca." Maurice Louca, February 1, 2019. <https://mauricelouca.bandcamp.com/>.

has two million views on YouTube and is her second most popular song on Spotify. The song talks about someone being a drunken mess while nothing in their life is going right. “You get drunk and weep like a kid / Because your education was a joke... You say your country has a taste for sorrow / That’s why your mother died young.”³⁰ Saleh sings for those who are drinking away the pain of loss and repression yet still hold hope in their hearts that their situation can improve.

In her rise to fame, Saleh has explored and found success in a wide variety of sounds. From the rawness and simplicity of the *oud* and the *tabl*, to the heavy buzz of the electric guitar overlaying a bass-forward beat, she’s proven herself to be masterful at all types of music. Saleh mostly collaborates with men in her musical endeavors, as do El Shazly and El Zoghbi, which may be evidence that female singers struggle to form female collaborations. It appears that women are the ones who are singing while men are usually playing instruments in the background. I intend to keep following her career to see if she will establish a female partnership with other indie creatives in the future. In her career thus far, her music has been widely appreciated by trip hop fans from Egypt to France to Canada, and she set a precedent that women can become successful nontraditional singers no matter what their genre of choice is.

³⁰ “Teskar Tebki (Drunk You Weep Like a Kid), by Maryam Saleh, Maurice Louca, Tamer Abu Ghazaleh.” Maryam Saleh, Maurice Louca, Tamer Abu Ghazaleh, September 22, 2017.

10. Sahar El Zoghbi

Sahar El Zoghbi is an Egyptian singer and model who specializes in covering songs and putting her own unique spin on music by artists like Souad Massi, an Algerian Berber singer and songwriter and Maysa Daw, a Palestinian indie artist. El Zoghbi is based in Alexandria, Egypt's second city and an important cultural hub in its own right. Her cover of "Bekafi 'Ad" (That's Enough) by Maysa Daw was featured in the Palestinian film, *Between Heaven and Earth* that won the prize for best script at the Cairo International Film Festival, a film that highlights the imbalance in power between Palestinian activists and the Israeli occupation. In addition to being featured in a prize-winning film, El Zoghbi also performed at Alexandria Stadium in Marsa Matruh during the Alexandria Marathon in 2018 at a concert sponsored by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), an organization that strives to end child marriage. In 2018 El Zoghbi also performed at a Music for Development concert in Alexandria that promoted female empowerment and gender equality in Egypt. She was one of many artists to perform, including High Dam, an Alexandria-based Nubian band as well as Daniela Dimitrovska, a Macedonian artist who spoke about family planning and early marriages.³¹

In 2019 she released a list of tour dates in Egypt performing in cities from Qena to Cairo to Beni Soueif. Her tour is partnered with UNFPA and is subtitled Music for Development. Her most recent song, a cover of Souad Rassi's "Raoui" (Storyteller), has nearly seven thousand hits on SoundCloud and features Omar Aly Abou on the piano and

³¹ Tawfeek, Farah. "Music for Development' Concert Aims to Promote Women Empowerment." Egypt Independent, July 19, 2018.

Adham El-Habashy on the ‘*oud*. The song is asking a storyteller to weave them a tale of a land far away, about heaven or hell— anything to distract them from reality. Though she didn’t write the song, she continues the trend of addressing themes of escapism, giving her audience music to distract them from the harsh realities of life for many who are living in Egypt.

In another song she covered, “*Qassy*” (Cruel), originally by Hakeem, she throws bass guitar and the ‘*oud* over swung, blues-y beats reminiscent of 1970’s American techno-funk. Her music video on YouTube has over eleven thousand hits and features a closeup of her face adorned with both a lip and eyebrow piercing, singing in front of a color-changing rainbow backdrop. The song talks about a cruel man who hurt her feelings, but she goes on to say that she isn’t going to waste her tears on him.

El Zoghbi uses Instagram as her main outlet of promotion and communication with her audience. On her personal profile, El Zoghbi has 11,400 followers and she uses her page to promote her modeling shoots as well as highlight her musical involvement. She is yet another example of the multifaceted approach that female indie singers often take to find success in the entertainment field. Like El Shazly and Maryam Saleh, she also collaborates with male musicians and producers. In fact, none of the musicians she collaborates with are female, which could be evidence that female producers are few and far between in Egypt’s music scene. As she gains fans throughout Egypt, I hope to see her write her own music, in addition to covering other artists’ songs. Although she is an artist that is just beginning to garner recognition, she has already used her platform to promote gender equality and female education in Egypt.

10. Conclusion and Discoveries

Throughout my research for this project, I found that the indie music scene in Cairo is home to rich discussion about issues like freedom of expression and the disillusionment of the youth in their government in Egypt. While the women who inhabit this sphere aren't regarded with the same reverence as their sisters from the 1950s and have nowhere close to the same level of access and fame, it is clear that the way these contemporary artists are interacting with the entertainment scene is changing the field for those to come, because more and more female artists are promoting themselves and their music through social media platforms, collaborating with artists across the globe, and performing at clubs and music festivals worldwide. Maryam Saleh, Nadah El Shazly, and Sahar El Zoghbi are pioneering 21st century social and political activism through their music, the events they choose to perform at, and the creative partnerships they pursue. No longer are these artists, unlike those of the 1950s and 60s, promoting a nationalist agenda, instead they are using their collective creative strength to give a voice to the causes like freedom of expression, political dissent, gender equality, and female education.

Globalization has played a large role in affording these artists the ability to reach out to different audiences and promote their music across the world. Through the use of SoundCloud, Bandcamp, and YouTube, and Spotify, artists have been able to express themselves more freely and find a loophole through restrictive state forces like the Musicians Syndicate. By connecting with other artists in other countries like Palestine, Jordan, and Lebanon, these artists have been able to reach expanded audiences regionally as well as success abroad in France, Canada, and the United States. Maryam Saleh has toured throughout Europe, Nadah El Shazly was set to be the Artist in Residence of an

Iowan music festival, and Sahar El Zoghbi has expanded beyond performing in Alexandria and can now be found from Luxor to Beni Soueif.

These fierce female creatives have found success, appreciation, and a platform to promote their music and address the social, economic, and political issues at work in Egyptian society today, and they did it without the state's approval and support. Although they come from middle-class families in Egypt, there was no need to align themselves with President Sisi's policies, nor any need for ultra-wealthy patrons to support them in their creative journey. All three artists have been able to make a name for themselves by reimagining what it means to be a woman in the entertainment scene and using music as an outlet for protest and creative experimentation.

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