



Women in the Singing Business, Women in Songs

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Abstract

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In nineteenth-century Egypt, female singers were known as *Almah*, and enjoyed very little public consideration, except for a few upscale artists. The twentieth century brought numerous changes to this rigidly codified world: public scenes and music halls replaced the private space, and the advent of commercial recording blurred the boundaries between male and female repertoires, as well as between learned art music and the light popular entertainment. Women became important actors of the musical

scene in the 1920s. At the same time, popular songs began to express the questions and anxiety of a changing society, dealing with conflicting perceptions on modernity and the colonial age. This article aims to analyze how women are portrayed in the lyrics of popular Egyptian songs of the 1920s, and compares this portrayal with the actual situation of female performers.

The aim of this paper is to draw a parallel between on one hand, the advent of women in the field of music during the pre-radio and pre-cinema era (1918–1935), and on the other hand, women as characters portrayed in commercial popular songs called *ṭaqāṭīq* during this same period.

A remarkable constellation of phenomena in the musical sociology of Egypt took place during the first half of the twentieth century. First, the formerly gendered production of music was deeply modified by the introduction of 78rpm disc recording technology, and subsequently in the late twenties by the appearance of the first commercial radio stations. Secondly, women *as vocalists*¹ managed to challenge the men's almost monopolistic domination in the field of art music, and eventually took the lead as 'media darlings' when the first artistic magazines were issued in the 1920s. The art, lives, and secrets of Munīra al-Mahdiyya, Faṭḥiyya Aḥmad, Umm Kulthūm, Nādīra Amīn, and others were newsworthy items, whereas the most renowned male vocalists of the same period, with the exception of young Muḥammad 'Abd al-Wahhāb, a protégé of poet Aḥmad Shawqī, failed to draw the same sort of attention.

In the last third of nineteenth-century Egypt, all female professional singers were called *'awālim*, and usually performed in the private sphere, essentially for other women, with an all-female limited *takht* (instrumental ensemble), except for special performances, like public ones, in which a male *takht* could be summoned, as when the famous vocalist Almaz was hired by the Khedive to sing for the people.² A male audience could occasionally attend the concerts of the most famous upscale artists, provided the singer would perform behind a curtain or avoid appearing unveiled before unrelated males. The boundaries between low-scale *'awālim* and *ghawāzī*, public dancers who were often of gypsy origin and might have been occasional prostitutes, and who performed before a male audience, are indistinct, as is the difference between upscale *'awālim* and a *muṭriba* (female singer), a term in use at least in the late nineteenth century. What is, however, quite obvious is that the most renowned female singers of the second half of the nineteenth century, Almaz and Sākneh are usually described as famous *'almas* and not *muṭribas*.

Some information on turn of the century *'awālim* can be obtained from 78rpm discs (recorded since 1903 in Egypt), record company catalogues, and modern fiction, particularly some of novelist Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm's works, in which he hints at the *'awālim*'s repertoire, social status and peculiarities of language. A standard *'ālma* was a woman respectable enough to be invited as a guest in an upper-class household and become a friend of the

family. She might be a married woman but one who lived in a large household hosting all (female) members of her troupe, which usually consisted of three or four people. Such respectability was marked by some sort of a theoretical training and ability to distinguish modes (*maqamāt*). An *alma's takht* would be limited to the 'ūd and percussion instruments. The repertoire of a turn-of-the-century 'alma, as reflected by 78rpm records catalogues, generally included *ṭaqāṭīq* (light ditties) in their primary pre-war form, although some of them, such as Bamba al-'Awwāda, Asmā al-Kumsāriyya, or al-Sayyida al-Lāwindiyya (unrecorded) included as well the masculine learned repertoire of *adwār*, although neither *qaṣā'id* nor *mawāwīl*, provided record catalogues genuinely reflect the actual practice.³ This presence of a double repertoire that can be played in accordance with what was demanded by the public conforms with al-Ḥakīm's recollections in literature.

It is obvious that the first world war dramatically changed the musical scene and the place of women in it. From 1925 to 1930 only popular entertainers performing at wedding parties still bore the title 'alma, and the phrasing 'upscale 'alma' would have become a contradiction in terms.⁴ By this time women had conquered the whole spectrum of public entertainment, and could now perform with an all-male *takht* at public concerts, attended by both males and females, their faces unveiled even before the *sufūr* (the term of art at that time for unveiling) wave of the second half of the 1920s had gained momentum. The respectable *mutriba* (singer) had appropriated the male learned music repertoire since the early twentieth century, and later imposed her own modernist repertoire as the new mainstream music. Umm Kulthūm, Faḥiyya Aḥmad, Malak Muḥammad, Nādira Amīn took over male singers' undisputed predominance over the music industry, which had been the rule until World War I. Former 'awālim, traditionally trained in Egypt and in the Levant, acquired a new status when they became recording artists for the booming 78rpm disk industry, and sometimes bought concert halls (*ṣālāt*) in central Cairo ('Imād al-Din street) or leisure districts (Rōḍ al-Farag). They erased traces of their past as mere 'awālim of ill-repute, and promoted an intricate image of sophistication and gentle debauchery. The best known models for this kind of 'neo-'alma' are Munīra al-Mahdiyya, Na'īma al-Masriyya.

An integral part of this transformation in the image of the 'alma was the spread of the phonograph, which had blurred all the boundaries between musical types and modes of consumption. Families gathered at home could now listen, fathers and daughters alike, to music and lyrics that had previously been limited to one gender, forcing both singers and lyricists to adapt to this new reality.⁵ Cairo's 'roaring twenties' ushered in a decade of adaptation to new rules, and a redefinition of which words could be put to music and which themes were acceptable to sing and broadcasted in the public space, whether in concert halls or on 78rpm

records played in the cafés and in homes. Whereas the press echoed intellectual debates on the place society should grant to *al-mar'a*, a 'generic woman' amounting to a hypothetical construction essentially designating middle class urban Muslim women, a particular type of commercial song, the *ṭaqtūqa*, echoed those debates in the comic or the tragic mode. *Taqāṭīq*, ostensibly 'light' entertainment, in fact addressed such serious themes as the reconstitution of family around the nuclear model, the dangers of polygamy, the right to get acquainted to the bride or the groom before marriage, the dangers of girls' autonomy for a family's wealth, the minimum age of marriage, the way spouses should deal with their husbands' misconduct, working women and women in the police and the army. All those issues were 'debated' through music, as a new class of independent women gained power in the economy of music. Male and female singers would play the parts of the husband, of the wife, of the bride to-be, of the polygamous man or the unabashed philanderer, the coquettish girl or the loose woman, the corrupt man of religion, or simply would express what the lyricist considered to be the voice of public opinion. Performance, public or on the disc medium, took place regardless of the singers' personal opinions and sometimes regardless of their actual gender. A male singer like 'Abd al-Laṭīf al-Bannā (1884–1969) was famous for impersonating the coquettish girl, this gender inversion therefore enhancing any comic material already contained in the lyrics; but even *baladī* singer Muḥammad al-'Arabī sang the part of a victimized peasant girl, and shaykh Amīn Ḥasanayn (1889–1968) that of a cunning girl scheming with her beloved behind her parent's back. The female artists' position was, in the greater scheme of things, quite ambiguous. Often the lyrics they sang carried a clear anti-emancipation message, and even advised women to remain at home, in stark contrast to their 'real world' status as financially independent women, many of whom had escaped from family or clan control through work, achieving fame and presence in the public sphere. Nonetheless they were expected to reassure a slightly jeopardized male domination in order to ensure the commercial success of their productions. Of course, female singers who didn't venture in the field of the 'social' *ṭaqtūqa* were unconcerned by such ambiguities, although one is obliged to note the contradiction between the character sung by Umm Kulthum (c. 1900–75), who was quickly raising to stardom in this very decade, and her 'real' musical career. She rose to prominence in this very decade. In performance she was a character crushed by passion and dependence on an ever-absent other. The actual Umm Kulthum Ibrāhīm al-Baltāgī, by contrast, was a quick-witted provincial girl who managed in the decade of the 1920s to get rid of her father's and her brother's control over her life and her art, learn French, mingle with intellectuals, become the protégée of the powerful 'Abd al-Rāziq family, and eventually embody the country's aspirations to a reconciliation between modernity and authenticity.

I have already dealt, in a 2001 article,⁷ with the origins of the Egyptian *taqtūqa*, the evolution of this musical form from a folkloric multi-strophic pattern sung by *'awālim* at weddings (and in rare cases by professional male vocalists) toward a standardized quadri-strophic pattern, set by the record industry, sung by female and male performers alike, on discs and at public concerts. In this publication I analyzed the lyrics of a number of songs pertaining to the same theme: the dangers of moral dissipation. This theme is mainly embodied by three recurrent characters in those songs. First, the loose woman, a negative portrait (although usually quite comical) that helps defining what the ideal woman in the postwar era should be like. Second, the confused and undeserving heir, dissipating the country's wealth in cabarets, gambling, and foreign girls. Finally, the *fiqi fāsed* (corrupt jurist), a turban-wearing ignorant man of religion, shame to his country and his faith, a standard target of the *muṭarbishīn* (turban-wearers, or *efendiyya*) in a discursive culture war.

In this article, I would like to concentrate on three other current themes in *taqāṭīq* songs of the immediate pre-war era and the 1920s: the bride to be; conjugal crisis; and woman at work.

The Bride to Be

There was hardly anything more foreign to Egyptian society in the 1920s than a wedding based on love. A couple's stability resulted from the parents' wisdom in choosing an ideal partner. Mothers were guided towards the perfect girl for their sons through socially sanctioned gatherings of women, such as friends and relatives, seamstresses or saleswomen bringing their goods from house to house (*dallālas*). Choice for grooms was often limited to approval or refusal, and girls usually followed their parents' recommendations.⁸ In a 1920 issue of a women's magazine, a young man complained that he could be assured of his bride's acceptance of his marriage offer, for her parents always spoke for her.⁹ It is these kind of girls who are portrayed in *taqāṭīq* from the pre-war era until the mid-1920s. In those songs, recorded by either *'awālim* or former *'awālim* who had gained some new respectability after the war by virtue of their financial independence, the 'bride to be' made the groom pay, on a symbolic level, for the unveiling of her body. These older songs function as if the female singer was a spokesperson for the young woman and renegotiated, in her own comical wording, the terms of the dowry agreed upon. The famous wedding song '*Ya nakhletēn fel-'alāli*' (Two tall palm trees) followed this pattern, with two different series of strophes quoted in text books or heard in recordings, the '*en kān beddak*' series and the '*gāb-li*' series:

En kān beddak fe sha'ri / hat-li ṣ-ṣafa wara ḍahri
Afarragak 'al-bahli / ya ḥabībi ana

En kān beddak fe ṣedri / hat-li midalyūn yeḍwi
Afarragak 'ala nahdi / yalli nshabakna sawa

En kān beddak fih howwa / yalla bīna ‘ala gowwa
Afarragak ‘aṣ-ṣorra / yall-ana wenta sawa

Gab-li l-fostān / we-’āl yalla ‘al-bostān
’olt-e-lo ma baruḥshi / wana māli ana

Gab-li ṭ-ṭarḥa / yabn el-’arḥa
Di lebs ommak / yabn el-mara

An erotic gradation follows a vertical order, detailing the bride’s body from her hair to her most intimate parts, euphemistically referred to as ‘*howwa*’. The song sets demands according to masculine desire, which add up to a perfect *shabka*: a golden hairnet, a shiny medallion, bracelets by the hundred, a belt from Cairo’s fancy commercial street al-Muski, opened during the reign of Ismā’il Pasha. But these items appear to be the naïve wishes of a provincial girl more than those that a seasoned coquette would ask for. Sung by women in front of other women, in the *ḥaramlik*, this song presents the bride’s body as a merchandise offered to male desire, but a precious merchandise only women know the value of. The bride learns from the ‘*alma* how to obtain the most in exchange for the man’s pleasure, since he is ready to accept any condition. The second series of *Ya nakhletēn* (*gab-li*), interestingly recorded *c.* 1910 by a famous male vocalist, ‘Abd al-Ḥayy Ḥilmī,¹⁰ illustrates the revolted feelings of a lower-class Cairene girl being insulted by gifts she finds unworthy of her status. She receives a black cotton veil (*ṭarḥa*) to which she would probably prefer a silk veil *izār* or a *milāya*; wooden clogs (*qobqāb*), too old-fashioned, to which she would maybe prefer leather *bulḡha*, although she wouldn’t accept high heel shoes either, for they would be ridiculous. The coarse language and insults used in the recording, by a renowned male vocalist obviously enjoying playing the part of the ‘*alma*, are a recorded reproduction of what in a real wedding party would have been an interlude of acceptable transgression of the speech level deemed respectable between women. Such coarseness was made possible by the ‘*alma*’s inferior social status and the fact that the song was to be heard strictly between women – ‘Abd al-Ḥayy’s rendition plays on breaking this taboo. The phonograph era overturned these conventions, and a man could choose to sing such lyrics, perhaps even exaggerating their coarseness, but more importantly, would sing them without any justification provided by the special context a nuptial evening provides.

It is quite likely that in the interwar era, such texts as *Ya nakhletēn* were already seen as anachronistic depictions of gender relationships, and were mainly heard a source of amusement, and of bewilderment at the ‘*awālim*’s freedom of tone. In many songs, such as *En-nabi yamma to’zorīni*¹¹ (Please forgive me, mother), the young woman has already seen a man she has fallen in love with. In a weak position, she implores both parents to grant

her the one she cherishes. Interestingly, the depiction of the male beloved plays on the same clichés used in the description of a pretty girl and in homoerotic *ghazal*. He sashays as he walks, he has black or honey-colored eyes, rosy cheeks and so forth. In *Ya bu sherīṭ aḥmar* (You with the red ribbon),¹² however, a novelty appears with the mention of a formerly unknown ‘erotic’ character: the handsome soldier. This new character perhaps was the result of influence from French and English ditties of the time, but also came as a consequence of the army’s opening its doors to young Egyptians of the middle class (cf. the main plot in Nagīb Maḥfūz’s novel *Bidāya wa-Nihāya*, the events of which take place in the early 1930s). But the soldier of Egyptian *ṭaqāṭīq* is far from the strong and virile legionary of French *chansons realistes*. The *koḥl* color of his eyes is comparable to his female lover’s, he is as handsome as the moon’s crescent surrounded by stars (on his shoulders obviously, a pleasant semantic renovation for such a worn out cliché). Maḥfūz placed this very song on the lips of ‘Ā’isha, al-Sayyid Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Gawwād’s dreamy daughter in his Trilogy.

The young girl occasionally threatens her parents and sets her price by herself, as in *Be-sette ryāl gawwezni ya bābā* (Marry me away, Daddy, and ask for six riyals),¹³ a pre-war song recorded in many versions, in which the maid asks her father various presents so as to complete her *shabka* and sets her own dowry at six *riyāl* = 1.20 pounds, a huge sum for a peasant family but a modest amount for the urban bourgeois family which was likely to buy the record. The idea of a girl setting her dowry is highly comical in the context of the pre-WWI period, when such matters would have been discussed by fathers alone.¹⁴ By contrast, Baheyya al-Maḥallaweyya’s rendition of the song is replete with indecent language that informs us on the type of transgressive discourse which could be expected from an ‘*alma*. Since the girl’s only weapon is her virginity, she demands that her father take her to the *ḥammām* (*ḥammām al-zaffa*, the ritual pre-nuptial bath) like other married women (*neswān*), and threatens to deflower herself with a nail if her wish is not answered.¹⁵

The image of the bride-to-be in the second part of the 1920s is quite different. There is in the first place a purely ‘technical’ reason for this: record companies during the decade progressively stopped recording a pre-existing repertoire, whether popular or learned, and commissioned lyricists, composers and musicians to produce and broadcast new lyrics and songs that were known by the public in the form of records even before they were sung on the stage. The ‘bride to be’ remained a popular item in the lyrics, but whereas former songs were *actual* wedding songs, even if outdated, the new ones were songs *about* marriage or *about* brides, gauging society’s evolution (or corruption) in its many aspects, which was a new function assigned to popular songs.

The bride-to-be’s image evolved into more comical and caricature-like figure. Songs of the 1925–30 period seem to delight in ridiculing some of the timid social evolutions that had taken place, and at the same time

expressed the anguish of fathers and future husbands, who witnessed some of their prerogatives being taken away from them by the westernization of women and new laws on personal status.

The first evolution (which might be more a literary one than an actual social one) is the respectable girl's adoption of attitudes formerly associated with the *khalā'a* and *dalā'a* (dissoluteness and coquettishness) of libertine women.¹⁶ The difference is quite noteworthy: playing the part of a coquette and teasing one's admirers tautologically implies that one has met said admirers. We might detect here the timid beginnings of a gender mixed society. Literature witnesses the same changes: young Saneyya, the main female character in Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm's novel *'Awdat al-rūḥ*, living in 1919 Cairo, seldom enters the outside world but receives visits of the author's echo-character, Muḥsin, a 16-year-old to whom she gives piano lessons, and she is observed by Muḥsin's uncles, and ultimately manages to snatch away from Aunt Zannūba the spinster the neighborhood's most handsome bachelor, Muṣṭafā.

A *ṭaqṭūqa* sung by 'Abd al-Laṭīf al-Bannā, in a very feminine way (he was the only non-mustached male vocalist of this period), entitled '*Ala 'ēnak ya tāger*' (You can see it all),¹⁷ can be read as a mock-manifesto for those 'new brides':

'Ala 'ēnak ya tāger / ana kheffa ana dahḥa ana ḥelwa we-mahri ghāli ya shāṭer . . .
Ed-dala' da 'andi gheyya / da reḍa mahūsh aseyya eṣ-ṣabr-e lak wet-to'l-e leyya
El-gamīl ya'mur we-yehkom / wel-'abīd tesma' we-tekhḍa'
Adi ḥokmi 'ala kēfi ana ḥorra 'ala 'ēnak ya tāger

Unlike the libertine women, there is no mention in the lyrics of drinking alcohol or of sexual misconduct. However, the young woman wishes to exert a right to seduce a certain number of men, and to choose precisely the one that suits her. The title of the song in itself announces a revolution of mentalities: the bride-to-be is visible, exposed, and proud of being so, and as she puts it, the 'merchandise' is open to appreciation, which supposedly does not belittle its value. The prominent feminist Hudā Sha'rāwī had only decided to leave her *yashmak* and *burqu'* (face veils) in 1923 while returning from a feminist congress in Rome. At the very beginning of the 1920s, middle and upper class women of the cities wore a long veil, white or black, with the notable exception of artists. Obviously, the women portrayed in songs are indifferent to the press's debates on *sufūr* (unveiling); public opinion, prepared by modernists, and by the presence of European women in the streets of Cairo and Alexandria, is probably ready for such an evolution.¹⁸ Could a middle-class young woman freely show her face four years after Hudā Sha'rāwī's founding gesture? Song-writers acknowledge changes in mentalities, although the girl walking in the streets '*al-bahli* (with unveiled face) is often described as a teaser, as in *Lessa tal'a men el-bēḍa / we-'amla l-'ashara we-zemmetha* (She's fresh out of her shell / And already behaving badly), sung by Ṣāliḥ 'Abd al-Ḥāyy

c.1929, a song in which one can hear ‘*al-bahli mashya men ghēr bēsha / tetghammez-li shmāl we-yemīn*’ (she’s prancing about without a face veil, winking all around),¹⁹ as if walking without a veil should be immediately associated with immodesty.

Who are the women those songs refer to? What allows me to qualify the post-1925 heroine of *ṭaqāṭīq* as ‘middle-class’ is the fact that women described in those songs are more or less the receptive audience of those pieces. Multiple allusions to westernized attitudes and the use of French words imply at least some familiarity with such attitudes and an ability to decode the vocabulary, which could not be the case for the uneducated lower class. But if the songwriters make fun of women’s aspirations to such a frivolous way of life, it is because they hint at the fact that they are considering a way of life that is not theirs to live, and nor is it the intended audience’s. Between the *burqu*’ upper-class women were abandoning and a complete *sufūr*, there was an intermediary solution for coquettish girls: the popular *bēsha*, described by Aḥmad Amīn in his dictionary as ‘*burqu*’ *meshakhla*”, a veil of the ‘naughty type’, which was actually more of a net loosely attached to a golden *qaṣaba* and more of a pretext than a veil, usually associated with a head kerchief adorned with pompoms. Some polemicists advocating for decency were not amused. Lawyer Muṣṭafā Ṣabrī reproached women with ‘dancing as they walked’ and ‘wearing the veil as if it didn’t exist’.²⁰ It is this type of coquetry that singer Muṣṭafā Amīn denounces (or rather feigns to denounce) in his *ṭaqtūqa* ‘*fel-balad neswān shalaq*’ (There are some pretty loose women in this country),²¹ in which he mentions those women with ‘*el-bēsha tamalli mkharraqa we-mḥandaqa / wesh-sha’r-e bāyen menha*’ (their veil always coquettish with a loose netting / and the hair protruding out).

But in al-Banna’s piece ‘*Ala ‘ēnak ya tāger*’, the bride-to-be expresses pride at being observed (in the streets?) and appreciated, and therefore asserts her high price: ‘*mahri ghāli yā shāter*’ (my dowry is expensive, big boy). This use of childish vocabulary is naturally an erotic turn-on: the woman becomes a child, and advertises her youth, her fake innocence and virginity. Ratība Aḥmad, a plum female singer in her thirties during the mid-1920s²² shamelessly exploited this theme of infantilism in ‘*Ana lessa nunu*’ (I’m still a baby), but also infantilizes her male suitor, calling herself ‘*dahḥā*’ (yummy yummy) referring to an object a child can put in his mouth. The man is addressed as *yā shāter* (Big boy), as one would address a ten-year-old, so the woman can assert her sexual power over him. Were women really fond of grown-up children or infantilized men? Such lyrics sound like an expression of a male fantasy (for there were no female songwriters), a fantasy ready to transform in childish games the early premises of women’s entry into public space.

But could women really be trusted to know their own value? *Ṭaqāṭīq* make it clear that brides-to-be should not be left alone to hunt for a husband, and even less left to take care of dowry matters, for they are

easily seduced and cannot protect their own interests. This is at least the message that can be read in one of the most famous texts of the decade, ‘*Ew’a tkallemni bāba gay warāya*’ (Don’t talk to me, my father is right behind me).²³ On a superficial level, the young intrigante appears to be highly manipulative. She sets a rendezvous with her lover, warns him of the danger, and takes the initiative of plotting to render her lover acceptable in the view of her parents (the duped father appears as a Molière-like character, or one of the fathers in Feydeau’s vaudeville, a plausible influence knowing that many of the popular works of playwrights Nagīb al-Rīḥānī’s and ‘Azīz ‘Īd were adaptations of French theater). The girl decides to sell her authentic jewels and buy fake ones instead, and to give the price difference to the young rascal so he can pay for her *mahr*, proving to be unconscious of the huge risks such a scheme exposes her to. The whole plot of the song is pretty amusing, but the message is a serious warning to fathers: a ‘free’ girl might be ready to dissipate a family’s wealth and honor. On the other hand, we can perhaps spot a secondary message between the lines: exaggerated demands by fathers concerning the *mahr* are an obstacle to marriage and drive girls to such ‘deviant’ behavior. Was the right to choose one’s husband perceived as an indication of acculturation to Western ways? This seems implied in a savory *ṭaqṭūqa* Muḥammad Ismā’īl wrote around 1927 for Ratība Aḥmad. In *Ādi l-gamal w-ādi l-gammāl* (This is the camel and this is the cameleer ≈ Take your responsibilities),²⁴ a seducing young woman dreams of a bourgeois life and refers to Parisian luxury: Paris, ‘menthe à l’eau’, Bon Marché, ‘pendentifs’ are key-words of her speech. She short-circuits the usual negotiations that should take place between her family and the groom’s and directly lists her demands. Her discourse certainly does not put into question the conception of Islamic marriage as a contract, that can be annulled in case of inability to fulfill a clause, but unlike the old *ṭaqāṭīq* of the ‘*awālim* with their outdated or naïve demands expressed by the bride-to-be, the ‘new’ conditions set by the modern girl are very much up to date and show some economic awareness: ‘my conditions are clear, and if your income is not sufficient, take a girl of your class’. Gender roles are not transformed, but the husband should not be content to supply merely food and a home: he is expected (comically) to provide a life of leisure. It is quite likely that the audience of this song during the decade perceived in its lyrics an implicit critique of the 1920 legislation which transformed the *nafaqat al-zawja* (alimony given to one’s wife), a merely advisable measure in shafi’ite law, into a compulsory measure, giving a right to immediate divorce in case of failure to comply. The song writer and the male audience see themselves as victims of blood-sucking spouses, confusing rights and pleasures, and condemn laws enforced with the approval of the colonial authorities. Indeed, the pretty woman in *Ādi l-gamal* demands one pound of pocket money per day, a ridiculously high sum, in addition to fifty more pounds per month; she wants to ‘have fun all night long’ and refuses the natural

masculine jealousy in the name of her 'freedom'. Hence the songwriter is quick to equate liberty with lack of morality.

Western modes of consummation had become common in Cairo and created the new desires this song expresses: she needs an open account at the *Bon Marché*, an indication of the success of department stores with the local bourgeoisie. She drinks 'mint', a light and sweet alcoholic beverage favored by continental women of the era, which attests to tolerance for the consumption of 'feminine' liquors among some circles of a 'Westernized' upper-class²⁵), but one should remember that the status of liquor, and particularly the use of liquor by women, was much different from what it is these days in Egypt. *awālim* were particularly known for their shameless drinking. A sound engineer working for Gramophone recalls:

The amount of raw spirits, cocaine and other drugs absorbed by artistes and their entourage throughout sessions lasting from early evening till two and three in the morning [...] rather alarmed me until I got used to it . . . I remember one obese lady consuming the best part of a bottle (full-sized) of Martell's Three Star Brandy at a single session, neat, mind you.²⁶

There are also many pictures of singer Na'ima al-Masriyya carelessly sipping a glass of Arak during her tours of Lebanon in the late twenties and early thirties, in spite of her being a married woman, a successful entrepreneur and a mother, in other words, a 'respectable character' by her time's standards even if she was working as a singer. In *Ādi l-gamal* the young girl will eat cherries, probably a very expensive item imported from Lebanon or Turkey for they are not grown in Egypt, and will spend her vacation in Louxor in the winter, to escape the cold of Cairo, and in Paris during the summer. The notion of 'vacation' and 'resort' were obviously a novelty in Egypt, as they were in Europe and particularly in France (before the 1936 law on paid holidays). Popular songs were to be one way that the media popularized this habit of traveling for leisure instead of necessity. Female singers themselves were a social class primarily concerned with this new *art de vivre* and therefore imitated European actresses. Munira al-Mahdeyya had already sung in a 1914 record '*Ya maḥla l-fosḥa fe rās el-barr*' (How nice to take a trip to Rās al-Barr),²⁷ in which she praised the charms of the first Egyptian sea resort. Only spouses of the upper class had the rare privilege of traveling, going to Europe with their husbands, where they could take off their veils, on the boat, and by tacit agreement put them back on before walking on the national soil, as recorded by Hudā Sha'rāwī herself. But the comic element of this song lies in claiming such liberties and privileges by a middle-class woman.

It must be noted that such claims, ridiculed in these popular songs, are very far from the actual demands of early twentieth century feminist movement, which were for the right to education, the amelioration of personal status laws, the suppression of *bayt al-tā'a* legislation (a husband's right to force his wife to come back to the conjugal household), the

limitation of polygamy and banning prostitution. Songwriters and the female vocalists who worked as their accomplices depicted middle-class women who, while proving to be futile and morally corruptible, flattered male prejudice more than they really expressed a claim for equal rights. Women in songs are usually depicted as materialist and light-headed beings who wish to access new spaces of liberty only in order to enjoy more frivolity.

In his turn, male vocalist Zaki Murād, in his *ṭaqṭūqa* ‘*Tūt hāwi tūt ma aggawwezsh illā bent bnūt*’ (Tralala, I’ll only settle for a virgin),²⁸ recorded c. 1927, expressed male anguish at women’s claims in an original protest against arranged marriage. The character he interprets confronts his family, who wishes to marry him off to a rich widow or a divorced woman with children. The young man claims his legal right to a virgin spouse. The last stanza in the song lists her ideal qualities: she should adapt to her husband (and not the opposite); she should ignore any disposition of the personal status in her favor (law mentions the *maskan shar’i* obligation²⁹ and the possibility of canceling repudiation); she should not spend money on make-up. This expression of anxiety by an average Muslim young bachelor (a mere character, since Zaki Murad at that date was a famous Jewish singer, a married man and a father of three children) reflects debates in the Egyptian society. An allusion to *ṭalāq rag’i* in the song is harder to decipher. It is probably a hint to a problem solved by the personal status code of 1929 that suppressed any legal value of the *ṭalāq bil-thalātha* (definitive repudiation), the old ḥanefite disposition stipulating that repeating three times the formula ‘*Anti ṭāliq*’ was a firm and definitive repudiation that could not be undone without the woman’s contracting a (fictive) wedding with a *muḥallil*, a one-night-husband who renders the repudiated wife licit for her previous husband, when the *muḥallil* repudiates her in his turn. This custom was nullified by the new law,³⁰ and it is probable that this very question provoked discussion at the time of recording.

The ideal woman in Zaki Murād’s song was supposed to be utterly uninformed of such debates. It seems the highest risk for men resides, according to lyrics of popular songs, in women’s access to information via education. The 1923 constitution stated for the first time that instruction was compulsory for boys and girls between the ages of six and twelve. The first public secondary schools for girls opened in 1920, and in 1928³¹ the *baccalaureat* was granted to six young women. Girls of the upper-middle class were already educated, until the age of 14, before leaving school to learn piano, housekeeping, French and rudiments of religious education.³² Once women were able to read they could know the details of the scandalous lives of actresses and singers, both local and foreign, in the artistic press (*Alf Şinf*, *Rose al-Yūsuf*, *Al-Masrah*, *Al-Laṭā’if al-Muṣawwara*) and the daily papers which opened their columns to contradictory stands on contemporary social issues, not to mention the specifically feminine press. The extent to which middle-class women were concerned by those

debates is open to research; but *ṭaqtūqa* songs essentially reflect a conservative middle-of-the-road public opinion stance, eager to caricature the aspirations of the elite *and* distance themselves from the backwardness of classes lower than themselves.

Salih 'Abd al-Hayy's *ṭaqtūqa* '*Abūha rāḍi w-ana rāḍi / mā-lak enta we-malna yā qāḍi*' (Her father agrees and so do I / Why should you interfere, judge?),³³ recorded c.1927, is a clear allusion to one of the primary goals of Hudā Sha'rāwī's campaign: fixing a minimum age for marriage. She herself had been forced to marry at the age of 13, was separated from her husband the following year, and had only returned to marital life when she reached adulthood. In July 1923 her *Union des Femmes Egyptiennes* presented a petition requesting a minimum age for marriage to Prime Minister Yaḥyā Ibrāhīm, and a law was promulgated on December 11 of the same year. Contrary to common opinion, the law did not set 16 years as a minimum age, but simply forbade judges from considering 'claims based on marriage contracts concluded between persons below the age of 16 for women, or 18 for men'.³⁴ Egyptian law lagged behind Ottoman legislation of 1917, which forbade contracting marriage below the age of 17 for women and 18 for men. But even this timid evolution in Egyptian legislation was emptied of its substance by a decree of 1924 allowing the *qāḍi shar'ī* ('religious' judge, in charge of personal status affairs) to admit the mere testimony of parents concerning their daughter's age.³⁵ In 1928, when the song was recorded and became a huge success, the law demanded at last a certificate of birth or at least the testimony of a two doctors. False testimonies were however the plague of Egyptian courts of law, as witnessed by the Ratība Aḥmad and Aḥmad Sherīf's comic dialogue of 1930 '*Eḥna l-gamā'ā shuhhād ez-zūr / fe koll-e maḥkama nōqaf ṭabūr*' (we are the troupe of false witnesses / Standing in line in every tribunal).³⁶ This law voted in 1928 apparently took much time to be seriously enforced.

As for the song '*Abūha rāḍi w-ana rāḍi*', the arguments developed in it by lyricist Yaḥya Muḥammad's character, an adult who wishes to marry a thirteen-year-old girl, are organized around three main points:

First, marriage is a private matter that should not concern anyone else than the guardian (*walī al-'amr*) and the groom: *abūha rāḍi wana rāḍi* (her father agrees and I agree), since the *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) sets no restriction once puberty is achieved. But one can notice that the woman's approval, also a *shar'ī* condition, is a moot point in the song.

Second, a 13-year-old girl is physiologically an adult: her face is as beautiful as the moon on the 14th day, and she is so plump that her body cannot even pass through the door of the Qadi's house. Overfeeding girls, with *mefattaqa* (a mix of spices, nuts, and molasses used as a fattener), to render them desirable, was a common practice that decreased only with the fashion of thin European ladies.

Third, refusing to marry a young girl is unfair to her (*ya sett abūki ḡalamūki*, Papa's little darling, they treat you unfairly) and not merely to

the male partner. The third strophe develops the theme of a girl anxious to marry ever since childhood, envious of her married older sister (*'arīs okhti kheffa*, my sister's new husband is a nice good-looking guy), impatiently awaiting the *qāḍī*'s arrival to united to a man (*tebīd 'ala ma yīgi l-qāḍī*), the phrasing playing on an unconscious level on the image of the hen coveting her eggs, hence the reproductive function of women since puberty. The subtext hints at the fact that the advent of puberty is also the advent of desire, a desire enhanced by the exterior world (*bel-manāẓer bahalūki*, all those sights have altered your senses), so irrepressible that it can only be satisfied through marriage. Even in *Al-Nahḍa al-Nisā'iyya* (Women's renaissance), one can find a 1924 article opposing this limitation to the age of marriage based on the very same argument:

Ever since puberty, a girl is moved by a desire for marriage, for God gave women a capacity for desire much greater than men's . . . A girl aged 12 who has been deprived of marriage will see her sexual organs touched by illness, which will contribute to sterility and push her towards hysteria.³⁷

Salih 'Abd al-Ḥayy's song presents a comic version of this pseudo-scientific argument, coated with some popular 'common sense' and humor that accounted for the success of the record.

Marital Issues

In the second half of the 1920s, record companies launched the domestic squabble and conjugal unhappiness as favorite themes for *taqāḍīq*. All the major recording artist joined in the new fad. Ratība Aḥmad, who in real life was still unmarried in 1926, played the role of the oppressed wife in many songs. Ṣāliḥ 'Abd al-Ḥayy, a bachelor all his life, was the exasperated husband. Men's alcoholism, polygamy, problems with the mother-in-law: many troubles of the middle-class's every day life are mentioned in those songs. But whereas the 'prenuptial' *taqtūqa* presents a caricature of clueless coquettish young girls, implicitly siding with males, the 'post-wedding' *taqtūqa*, interestingly, often points an accusing finger at the oppressive male. Some songs are in a comic mode and indeed ridicule the shrew-like woman, but many actually convey a complex social message that reflects a change in perspective concerning the situation of women in the country. There are two particular types of female characters expressing themselves in those *taqāḍīq*: the mismatched woman, and the one who wishes to bring back a neglectful husband through complaints or magic spells.

Responding to men's insistence on marrying barely pubescent girls, some songs (although obviously written by other men, or even the same songwriters) condemn the consequences of forced unions, and the subsequent distaste for sexual intercourse or even the psychological trauma caused by such unions. Very far from the soothing words of a traditional *'alma*, Saneyya Rushdī stigmatizes unions between young girls and old men in

Shāyeb we-‘āyeb (dirty old man).³⁸ The young bride breaks the taboo of silence, and clearly states she wasn't given a choice: '*ghaṣabom ‘alayya qāl ekmenno ghani*' (they forced me, under pretense that he is rich). The wedding night is an ordeal, she has to close her eyes, and her older husband is uglier than a monkey '*shaklo fashar el-qerd*'. The ugliness of the man's physique is tantamount to the ugliness of the act of marrying a much younger girl in itself; comparing the husband to a monkey is a way of describing men's desire to possess and tear young bodies as a basically animal desire. The songwriter's use of the phrase '*fe shar' mīn*' (in who's [sacred] law is this?), which doesn't necessarily bear a religious meaning in everyday talk, nevertheless negates any religious legitimacy to those early arranged weddings, since all schools consider as null and void a forced marriage.

Polygamy and Daily Life

The *Union des Femmes Egyptiennes*, in the interest of practicality and respect for religion, never ventured to demand a ban on polygamy. The movement officially saw in it a solution to cases of sterility, and merely asked that it should be limited to situations in which it was justified (such as sterility). But contrarily to the 'age of marriage' campaign, in which the movement obtained some satisfaction, at least on a moral level, this battle was lost. The 1929 law on personal status did not modify anything concerning polygamy. In spite of this, reformist ideas had progressed in public opinion, and it is quite clear that the message sent by *fāqāḥīq* of the late 1920s era is hostile in tone to polygamy. Whether the lyrics take the male or the female point of view, the *ḍorra* (co-wife) is nothing but a source of trouble for the husband, and of bitter tears for the first spouse as well as the second. Songwriters were not reform-oriented intellectuals, and what they convey in their lyrics was more a general feeling than a performative message. In '*Yekūn fe ‘elmek ana mosh fādi a‘mel-lik qādi*' (You should know I have no time to act as a judge between you women), Ṣāliḥ ‘Abd al-Ḥayy takes the role of a bigamous husband unable to impose himself on his second wife, who has returned to her parents' home. He refuses to play the part of a judge between both wives, and thus needs to lower himself to ask for the intervention of his recalcitrant second wife's family. His marital problems have ruined his reputation in the neighborhood (*fe wust-e girāni bahdeltīni*, you ridiculed me in front of the neighbors) and the piece is concluded with a cry of powerlessness: '*ashki le-mīn ya muslimīn*' (to whom should I complain, good people?). The underlying message does not seem to be an implicit condemnation of this uneasy and vindictive second spouse, but rather an assessment of the issues triggered by polygamy in modern life. If the husband cannot get his wife back to the conjugal home and finds himself forced to coddle her (*adadīki*), this is essentially because he cannot afford a separate place for her, and knowing her rights, the wife will simply not obey.

In ‘*Khallaṣni mennak bel-marra*’ (Get me shed of you once and for all),³⁹ Ratība Aḥmad advocates for first spouses whose husbands take a younger second wife. The fact that the original marriage was a forced one had, in this 1927 song, become a commonplace argument: ‘*khadtak men auwel bakhti / naqāwet abūya we-nenti*’ (you were the first man destiny gave me / chosen by my father and my mommy). She continues, saying that she feels ‘fire’ because of the second wife’s presence, a fire of anger and humiliation, which pushes her to ask for divorce. This situation reflected a very real debate. Botiveau quotes a 1933 court case in which a wife whose marriage contract stipulated that she refused a *ḍorra* had filed a case against her polygamous husband, and demanded divorce and indemnity.⁴⁰ But the right to divorce (*taṭlīq*) in case of polygamous marriage wasn’t recognized in either the 1920 or 1929 law (indeed, it was only recognized in 1979 by the ‘Jihan al-Sādāt’ law, which was then abrogated in 1985). The character played by Ratība Aḥmad in this *ṭaqtūqa* is therefore forced to implore her husband’s pity: ‘*erḥam ya khūya ma ‘ād feyya*’ (Please brother (husband), I can’t take it anymore) and moreover, she suggests a bargain that totally disadvantages her: ‘*baryāk be-haqqi we-mostahaqqi*’ (I cease claim to all my rights and advantages). Worse, this first wife is ready to abandon her own children’s guardianship, since this right is invested in the father according to *fiqh*. Hence the song says ‘*khud welādak*’ (take your kids). To assure adequacy between the lyrics and the music, the composer sets Ratība’s complaint on a moving *maqām bayyāti* phrase, and gives it a clearly melodramatic touch.

The opposition to polygamy in songs is not merely confined to middle-class characters. In parallel to Ratība’s complaint, al-Ḥagga Zaynab al-Manṣūriyya and Muḥammad ‘Awaḍ al-‘Arabī, two successful singers of the *baladī* (peasant-oriented) genre targeting popular classes and the rural society, also drew tears from provincial low-classes with this *ṭaqtūqa*.⁴¹

Men ba’d-e farāhi be-gom’etēn / etgawwez gōzi ‘alayya tnēn
We-mīn ya nās yeṭī’ narēn / ana baddi akhallaṣ w-abrīh bed-dēn
 Two weeks after our wedding / my husband married two other women
 Who could bear two fires / I’ll abandon my rights and let’s end this

This song also mentions a forced marriage ‘*abūya w-ommi ṣalamūni / homma s-sabab wa-la sa’alūni*’ (my father and my mother were unfair to me / they’re the cause of all this and they never asked me), a verse that sounds quite reminiscent of the dying Zaynab’s famous monologue at the end of Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal’s novel.⁴² This *ṭaqtūqa baladī* translates the complaint of urban women into terms of extreme pathos, deemed suitable for the audience. Written by semi-literati of the popular quarters of Cairo (lyricist Yūnus al-Qāḍī expresses his admiration for them in one of his articles),⁴³ the *ṭaqtūqa baladī* transmitted to the rural world some of the new reformist values, through an allegorical *mise-en-scène* of conjugal unhappiness.

The Vanishing of the Submissive Spouse

In a 1920 issue of *Al-Mar'a al-Miṣriyya*, useful advice was given to newly wedded women: 'Do not show a nervous temper and forgive without delay. Do not be stubborn. Do not confront violently your husband if he has a vice (gambling or drinking), you will get to him through gentleness'.⁴⁴ Obviously, female singers of 1927 were far from putting such advice into action, since picking an argument with an alcoholic husband was a favorite item of popular songs. Those vindictive pieces were sometimes seen as amoral. 'Ali Imām 'Aṭiyya, the author of a collection of song lyrics,⁴⁵ qualifies one of those pieces, namely *taqtūqa* 'Kollo kōm we-da kōm' (Anything but that), as '*min al-naw' al-qabīḥ*' (of the indecent type). Was the song indecent because it depicted a husband staggering on his way back home, or because it portrayed a woman complaining of being woken up in the middle of the night to repulse her inebriated husband's undesired assaults? Semḥa al-Boghdādiyya's *taqtūqa* '*Lessa barra wel-adān qarrab yeddan*' (still out while the prayer of dawn is about to be called)⁴⁶ pictures a similar female character revolting against a life of clausturation. As portrayed in songs, the middle-class woman at the end of the decade does not feel she should take her orders from her husband anymore: '*houwa ana garya ya ḍanāya tay'a l-'amrak?*' (Am I a slave, good grief, answering your orders?). Add to this that in this song employing a word like '*garya*' evoked a different resonance than it would today. In the 1920s the term was still reminiscent of an actual institution, which the grandmothers of such women might have personally experienced. Freedom as expressed by lyricist and famous *zagal* (colloquial poetry) poet Badī' Khayrī in this song is no longer equated to the licentious escapades or futile spending-sprees of the early twenties, but simply as a desire not to remain silent any longer. A teetotaler message seconds the feminist stance: an alcoholic husband is even worse than a second spouse. Had public consumption of liquor really turned into a social problem? This song is one of the firsts in which spirits are not 'positively' presented as a necessary element of the *khalā'a* and *dalā'a* thematic, but as a source of shame and humiliation for the family. Obviously, the more the 78rpm record entered the private sphere, the more it stopped reflecting songs of the cabarets, imposed its own themes, and reflected middle-class values. But such a liberty of tone, reproduced even in a comical mode by singers, is a consequence of the end of feminine seclusion. While promoting a westernized conception of a nuclear family, centered around two parents and their children in a household, reformist ideology, as far as it can be reflected in songs, turned the household into the center of private life. If for us the household as center of private life seems a 'natural' conception and might seem hard to contest on moral grounds, for Egyptians of this period it represented a significant change in traditions. It is quite impossible to use such concepts as 'private' and 'public' when dealing with pre-modern societies without

at least being conscious of the epistemological issues at stake, but it would be fairly accurate to say that in nineteenth-century Egypt, while the woman was sovereign over her home, men ‘owned’ the exterior, the masculine world of the city, of streets, of cafés, and of institutions. A man’s own private universe was also lived out of home. What the 1920s *ṭaqāṭīq* show us is that at the same time women were conquering the right to go out, to mix with men, in the streets, in public transportations, at work, men are simultaneously asked to reintegrate the family space. The woman’s cry ‘*lēla waḥda lam tebāt ma’āya*’ (you haven’t spent one night with me) is not merely, I would submit, a classic indignation because her legal right to sexual pleasure has not been fulfilled, but also a reminder that in the modern order a man’s place is at home, *too*. A submissive attitude is not felt as a conventional obligation any longer (*enta khadtaha ‘āda*), but a simple token of good will, which could end in case of bad treatment.

A logical consequence of this evolution toward the nuclear family in the middle-class is that the mother-in-law becomes an obstacle to women’s emancipation. These are not mere mother-in-law jokes, common to many cultures, but an indication of the difficulty to maintain the habit of a common household in which different generations of a large family coexist. Conceiving of family as a limited unit became a necessity with the generalization of new forms of habitat – apartments and small houses – in early twentieth-century towns. In this vein, Badī’ Khayrī chose a tone of social satire in his *ṭaqṭūqa* ‘*Yāna yammak*’ (It’s either me or your mother),⁴⁷ written for singer Ratība Aḥmad, c.1929. The female character she interprets demands her husband to choose between her and her mother-in-law, for a modern wife cannot live with such an old-fashioned creature as the mother-in-law represents. A wife’s traditional role is clearly refused by her character. Cleaning the house and cooking are tasks only worthy of a maid from *al-Ṣa’īd*, the underdeveloped South known for its harsh traditions, or acceptable for a peasant girl who would ‘sift flour and knead the dough’. Submission and passivity are rejected. Whereas the mother-in-law is *taqīla* (self-controlled, showing no emotions), the modern woman flaunts her impatience, as is evoked by the line ‘*ana ‘aṣabeyya*’ (I have a quick temper). Khayrī’s caricaturist intent is patent, but one should note, beneath layers of mocking and implicit criticism, the coming of age of an urban identity, a ‘new urban woman’ to whom the rules that actually controlled the lives of most Egyptian women during the 1920s did not apply. This song’s young woman wants to wear ‘a dress in which the sleeves stop at her elbows’. The older woman criticizes her for this. It seems that she is referring to an outdoor garment, and we might guess that she wants to let her arms show under the *melāya* that covered her dress when walking in the streets, for walking in the streets with completely bare arms seems unlikely before the 1930s. The old woman’s musical tastes also highlight the younger woman’s social aspirations: she

cannot stand the piano, a symbol of westernization and also an emblem of bourgeois education for girls. As for the younger woman, she casts out the *mizmār*, an instrument linked to folk (*baladī*) music, as opposed to urban art *takht* music, and a sign of backwardness in her world view. Freedom to choose one's own music, dance, make-up, and costume are all superficial exterior signs of gentrification and westernization which the middle-class woman characters in songs wished to adopt. This character of popular *ṭaqāṭīq* does not consciously wish to adopt a 'foreign' way of life. It is rather the local aristocracy's habits, revealed (and at times encouraged) by the artistic press, that she is looking up to, and being mocked for doing so.

Women at Work

Ṭaqāṭīq of the 20s proved to be extremely conservative concerning women's entry in the world of work. Egyptian women of the 20s were not by any means strangers to *work*, but those who actually had an *occupation* did not belong the *ṭaqṭūqa*'s world of reference or the feminine public that could afford records or might find them at home. Whether peasants or salaried industrial workers, obviously immensely different situations, women represented between 25% and 30% of the working-class in 1930⁴⁸; but working-class women are simply not discussed at all in popular songs. It is rather the aspirations of middle and upper-middle class women, formerly in social seclusion, which the authors discuss or satirize. Middle- and upper-class women were targeted both as a consuming public and as a matter discussed in songs. Women in the police, or in any other position as public servants, were the limits of acceptable modernization, limits which seemed unbreakable. The possibility of women entering the army, or becoming policewomen must have seemed so highly comical to lyricists of the 20s that the artists performing these texts presented an extremely caricatured and grotesque rendition of 'women at work'. See for instance Badī'a Maṣābnī and Aḥmad Sulayman's dialogue '*Amma ḥettet fekra dūn*' (What a gross idea!),⁴⁹ and Aḥmad Sharīf and Faḍīla Rushdī's '*Tawzīf en-nisā*' (Woman as public servants).⁵⁰ Policewomen and female accountant characters depicted in those songs think of nothing but make-up, dresses, grace and delicateness. The same arguments and vocabulary are common to both pieces. The feminine body is deemed unfit for the uniform, since 'women's breasts would pop out of it'; the police would become 'hybrid and chaotic', an insult to the natural order of the world, expressed by the term '*bazramīf*'. The mere idea of policewomen is qualified as '*dūn*' (vile) and the government is warned that it would lose all credibility and honor by trying to enforce the entry of women into the profession. Was the thought of doing so actually considered? I have not come across any mention of this, but the matter needs research, and the vehemence of the attack can only be explained by the fact it was at least

suggested at some point. As for the tax administration, it would be sabotaged by women exchanging taxpayers' files with "*awāṭef gharāmeyya*" (love feelings). But when scorned by their supervisors, the female civil servants in Aḥmad Sharīf's song reply with an interesting feminist manifesto: 'Do you want to send us home after we've changed our condition? We won't be able to buy clothes anymore, but if only we could escape the rule of men'. However grotesque this portrayal might seem (women's desire for independence is only explained by their will to buy new dresses), the lyrics nevertheless imply that the middle-class had a clear feeling that women's condition had changed dramatically since the end of the war. But both songs' conclusions are identical: send women back home. Particularly puzzling is the fact that female recording artists, a special category ever since the preceding century, were ready, if not eager, to carry such a message. The new family model to be followed, according to these songs, is that of the European bourgeoisie. Women should have new rights and security, but should remain at home. *ṭaqāṭiq* certainly do not advocate a complete reshaping of gender identities. Some lines in Badī'a Maṣābnī's song suggest that policewomen would soon be confronted with hard realities. Private Zakeyya, she sings, is absent without leave at the morning review of troops because her husband has forced her to remain at home, using his right of *bayt al-ṭā'a*. Such a contradiction between military obligations and (legal) personal status clearly does not bring the lyricist to think men's rights should be limited, but in the opposite case, suggests that women in the military is an absurdity.

Participation of women in political life, on the other hand, did not raise the same issues. Quite the contrary, such demands are much more acceptable, as shown in '*Da waqtek da yōmek*' (This is your time, this is your day), sung by Ratība Aḥmad in 1929.⁵¹ Mockeries on the evolution of women's status are not intended in this case. One can certainly imagine the singer's gestures and mimics at the end of the first couplet:

Lēh ma nkunsh-e zayy el-gharbeyya / we-ngahed fe ḥayatna be-ḥorreyya
Shaṭāret shaṭrīn, 'adāret 'adrīn / we-mīn fe dardaḥetna we-kheffetna dī mīn?
'andena shahadāt we-dublumāt / we-ne'raf bulitika bes-saba' lughāt
lēh man nkunsh-e ya bēh / zayy er-rāgel lēh
qulū-l-na howwa zāyed 'anna 'ēh?

Why shouldn't we be like the Western woman / and fight freely in our lives?
 We're mightily cunning and able / no one is as sophisticated and worldly as
 we are

We have all necessary diplomas / and can talk politics in seven languages

So, my Bey, why shouldn't we be the equals of man?

Pray tell us: what more does he have that we don't?

Nevertheless the progress achieved in the field of education must have left a big enough impression on public opinion to make such a reformist call possible. The British suffragettes' recent victory (they had definitively obtained the right to vote in 1928 after a first step in 1918) had made a

lot of noise in Europe and in the whole British Empire. Remarkably, any reference to Britain is disguised under the vague phrasing ‘women in Europe’, an obvious fraud since at that time British women were the only Europeans who had been granted such a right. But this discursive camouflage was a necessary device to acknowledge a positive element coming from the hated colonial power. Egyptian men themselves had not been granted the right to vote for such a long time that they could consider giving it away to women, but the song’s tone does not present the idea as shocking *per se*, even if suffragettes were considered a comical sight and conception in the 1920s, in Egypt as well as in Europe. Even if women were to be granted the right to vote, no other role than the housewife’s seems possible, even though ‘love of the nation’ was to have been expressed within the family unit, and it is through their reproductive and educative roles that women should participate in the building of the nation, as the song’s conclusion emphasizes. Probably, the right to work for women would have been perceived as an open door to jeopardizing the feminist movement’s policy of getting more rights for married woman and asserting their financial interests against those of their husbands. Feminists, who were upper-class urban women, probably conceived the aim of consolidating the protection the husband owed to his wife, and pushing women at the same time to earn their living, as mutually contradictory. Since the *ṭaqtūqa* lyricists knew there was a large consensus in society against women entering the world of work, they chose to ridicule an evolution which was bound to take place anyway, although later, and without their consent. But women’s participation in public life, on the other hand, provided it served the nationalist movement, could only help to strengthen it. Lyricists’ stand on the role of women in society was as ambiguous as the female vocalists’ position concerning their gender. *Ṭaqāṭīq* of the 1920–30 period expressed a sincere desire for reform, a desire that permeated almost all the educated classes of society and found its way in these ‘popular’ songs written by commissioned poets and playwrights who generally also published ‘serious’ vernacular poetry, wrote articles for the press, and participated in the national movement. But these songs also revealed conservative fears and anguish, as they observed the rapid changes in everyday life caused by Cairo’s evolving into a modern metropolis, influence of the European way of life, and women’s penetration of the public sphere.

I would like to conclude this article with a somewhat oblique interrogation. It is quite obvious from the preceding analysis that, during the 1920s, popular commercial songs performed by professional artists trained in the field of art music and commissioned by record companies were assigned the task of expressing popular concerns about the rapid changes Egyptian urban society was experiencing, the place women should occupy in the public sphere being one of the most significant of these anxieties. But

what did all this lead to? Why did mainstream commercial music abruptly cease to talk about the present?⁵²

None of the musical genres that made the 78rpm record a success (*qasīda*, *dōr*, *mawwāl*, *taqtūqa*) survived the fourth decade of the twentieth century in terms of commercial diffusion and popular interest. The first three genres I quoted pertained to the learned repertoire, and had been in fashion before the invention of commercial recording, whereas the modern *taqtūqa* was an artifact of modernity. It is quite possible to explain why those three musical forms became unfit to express the new aesthetic values of a nation in formation, but the disappearance of the ‘social’ *taqtūqa* is a rather more puzzling phenomenon. The nationalist historiography of music has insisted that the *taqtūqa* era was an all-time low in Egyptian music: vulgar lyrics, bad music, unrefined musicians, dissolute singers, drunken British soldiers roaming the streets of Cairo for cheap entertainment in ill-reputed cabarets. But one cannot fail to notice, when listening to these recordings, reading the catalogues and confronting the lyrics with the social evolutions of the time, that those songs obviously were not tailored for the entertainment of the colonial troops in sleazy brothels. The same lyricists who wrote the most audacious, candid or crudest texts also wrote nationalist pieces hailed in Egyptian historiography; the same composers (Muhammad al-Qasabgī, Zakariyyā Ahmad) were to participate, in a later stage, in the birth of the refined and romantic modern sentimental song that is supposed to be, in the nationalist historiography’s Darwinian perspective, the natural and positive outcome of former imperfect genres. So could it be that the main reason for the disappearance of the *taqtūqa* does not lie in its coarse contents, nor in allegedly vulgar renditions that actually prove to be quite remarkable almost a century later, but in the mere fact that songs, in modern Egypt, are not supposed to deal with the real world? That refined music should be severed from any narrative perspective, should never tell a *story* but merely the joys and agonies of love? That the expression of society’s torments, uncertainty and paradoxical ambitions should be left to other vehicles (written essays, fiction literature, theater, and later cinema), excluding music? The thematic restrictions imposed on ‘respectable’ music in modern Egyptian culture, with the remarkable exception of the *taqtūqa* era, raises a question that remains open to investigation.

Short Biography

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Notes

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¹ Women's presence in a learned repertoire orchestra as instrumentalists is a very recent phenomenon in Egypt, that cannot be traced back further than the 1980s. Women as instrumentalist before this period can only be encountered either as pianists, since the piano was a fashionable upper-class instrument, either in all-female ensembles of folk music, and the instruments played are usually membranophones, with a single exception for the 'ūd. The Egyptian Qanūn player and singer Samīḥa al-Qurashī, who performed in Beirut in the 1960s, is the exception that confirms the rule.

² On Almaz, see Qastandi Rizq, *Al-mūsīqā l-sharqiyya wa-l-ghinā' al-'arabī* (Cairo: Al-Matba'a al-'aṣriyya fī-l-Faggāla, 1936–1947); on her public performances, see Charles Douin, *Histoire du règne du Khédive Ismaïl* (Rome: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato/Société Royale de Géographie d'Égypte/IFAQ, 1933–1961), 114.

³ An important part of this article is based on record catalogues (1906–32) of the following companies: Zonophone/Gramophone/His Master's Voice; Columbia; Polyphon; Baidaphon; Odeon; and Pathé. Some of these catalogues are available at the EMI Music Archive in Hayes, Middlesex, while others are part of my private collection, acquired in Cairo in the late 1980s. While the standard Gramophone and Odeon catalogues would usually only mention titles, most Baidaphon, Polyphon, and Pathé catalogues also included lyrics and the occasional mention of lyricists and composers.

⁴ Since Egyptian sources hardly refer to female singers, most information on early 'awālīm comes from colonial-era French and British sources. The precise phrasings used in nineteenth-century Arabic to distinguish low-scale from upscale artists remain unknown.

⁵ I do not imply here that families *did* listen to those songs together and that gender boundaries within the family dissolved in the presence of novel technologies, but merely that the risk was there and had to be taken into account. The *Pater Familias* could pretend to ignore what 'awālīm sang, whereas he was bound to read the labels of records in his household and frown at their 'uncomely' content.

⁶ *Baladī* usually means 'rustic', 'unrefined', and in terms of music refers to a hybridated form of folk music using countryside instruments (mizmar, argḥul) but recorded and sung by urban musicians.

⁷ See Frédéric Lagrange, 'Une Égypte libertine?', in F. Sanagustin (ed.), *Paroles, Signes, Mythes, Mélanges offerts à Jamel Eddine Bencheikh* (Damas: IFEAD, 2001), 257–300, with an extensive bibliography of sources used in the present article.

⁸ Soha Abdel-Kader, *Egypt: Women in a Changing Society 1899–1987* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Miener Publishers, 1987), 39; Irène Fenoglio-Abd al-Aal, *Défense et illustration de l'Égyptienne, aux débuts d'une expression féminine* (Cairo: CEDEJ dossier 2-1988, 1988), 53–6.

⁹ Fenoglio-Abd al-Aal, 1988, 53, quoting «•al-mar'a al-miṣriyya•», 5/1920, 160.

¹⁰ Among recorded versions of this song: 'Abd al-Hayy Hilmī on Odeon 45645, Amīna al-'Irāqiyya on Gramophone 4-13418, Bahiyya al-Mahallāwiyya on Odeon 45040. Whereas the refrain does not vary from a version to another, the order of verses, number of repetitions and junction between the verses and the refrain are different in each rendition.

¹¹ Recorded by Munīra al-Mahdiyya on Baidaphon 23040/41, c. 1914, unknown lyricist, music by Muhammad 'Alī Li'ba. Lyrics mentioned by Habīb Zaydān, *Al-Aghānī l-sharqiyya al-qadīma wa-l-hadītha* (Cairo: Dār al-Hilāl, 1938), 300.

¹² Lyrics by Yūnus al-Qādī, music by Sayyid Darwish, I haven't come across any recording of this song mentioned by Zaydān, *Al-Aghānī l-sharqiyya al-qadīma wa-l-hadītha*, 380.

¹³ Author and composer unknown, text established upon audition of disc Odeon 45015, by Baheyya el-Mehallaweyya.

¹⁴ Soha Abdel Kader, op. cit.

¹⁵ Bahiyya al-Mahallāwiyya, Odeon 45015. Different (and more decent) lyrics are quoted by Bahīga Sidqī Rashīd, *Aghānīn misriyya sha'biyya* (Cairo: Al-Maktaba al-Anglo-misriyya, 1982 [1958]), 84–5.

¹⁶ Those two terms appear together in a number of songs of the early 1920s, see my 2001 article.

- ¹⁷ Recorded by ‘Abd al-Latīf al-Banna on Baidaphon 85205/06, c. 1927, lyricist and composer uncredited.
- ¹⁸ See Sara Wassif, ‘L’évolution de la condition de la femme en Egypte au XXe siècle’, unpublished mémoire de maîtrise (Université de Paris IV, 1980), 67.
- ¹⁹ Lyrics mentioned in the Polyphon catalogue (1929, 8). See as well the lyrics of ‘Ya ‘āqel rūḥ ‘ala l-‘ataba l-khaḍra’ by ‘Azīza Ḥilmī, Pathé 18387/88, c. 1926, lyricist unknown, composer Gamīl ‘Uways, in which men are victims of alluring women in the ‘Ataba district.
- ²⁰ See Fenoglio-Abd al-Aal, 1989, 60, quoting *Al-Nahḍa al-Nisā’iyya*, 11/1922.
- ²¹ Sung by Mustafā Amīn on Pathé 18363/4, c. 1926, lyricist and composer unknown. The lyrics are mentioned in the Pathé catalogue (1926, 76).
- ²² She appears as so in her photograph, published in *Al-Masrah*, December 13, 1925, p. 23.
- ²³ Sung by Amīn Hasanayn, on Polyphon 42580/81, c. 1927, reissued on CD AAA099, *Cafés chantants du Caire vol. 1* (1994), lyrics by ‘Abd al-Hamīd Kāmīl, music by Zakariyyā Ahmad, lyrics quoted by Bahīga Sidqī Rashīd, *Mi’at ughniya min wādī l-Nīl* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Anglo-Misriyya, 1971).
- ²⁴ Sung by Ratība Aḥmad on Baidaphon 85127/28, c. 1927. Music by Muḥammad Ḥilmī, lyrics by Muḥammad Ismā‘īl, text mentioned in the Baidaphon catalogue ‘Nouveau catalogue général des cantatrices’ (1928, 13).
- ²⁵ See for instance the young aristocratic ‘Ayda, who freely drinks beer in Maḥfūz’s novel *Qaṣr al-Shawq*, Maktabat Miṣr, 197–8.
- ²⁶ Oscar C. Preuss, ‘Around the Recording Studios, N°1 Songs of Araby’, *The Gramophone*, March 1928, pp. 411–12.
- ²⁷ Sung by Munīra al-Mahdiyya on Baidaphon 23010/11, c. 1914, lyrics by Yūnus al-Qādī, composer unknown.
- ²⁸ Sung by Zakī Murād on Columbia D13373/4, c. 1927, music by Dawūd Ḥusnī, lyricist unknown. The lyrics are mentioned in the Columbia catalogue (1928, 37).
- ²⁹ A man has to provide a decent furnished home for his wife. If this condition isn’t met, she is entitled to demand divorce.
- ³⁰ Bernard Botiveau, *Loi islamique et droit dans les sociétés arabes* (Paris/Aix-en-Provence, Karthala/IREMAM, 1993), 194, footnote 6.
- ³¹ Wassif, ‘L’évolution de la condition de la femme en Egypte au XXe siècle’, 42.
- ³² Abdel-Kader, *Egypt*, 24.
- ³³ Sung by Sālih ‘Abd al-Ḥayy on Columbia D13324, c. 1927, reissued on CD AAA099, *Cafés chantants du Caire vol 1*, 1994. Lyrics by Yaḥyā Muḥammad, music by Zakariyyā Aḥmad. The lyrics are mentioned in the Columbia catalogue (1928, 4).
- ³⁴ Botiveau, *Loi islamique et droit dans les sociétés arabes*, 195.
- ³⁵ Fenoglio-Abd al-Aal, *Défense et illustration de l’Egyptienne*, 49.
- ³⁶ Baidaphon, recorded c. 1930–33, with Sayyid Sulaymān.
- ³⁷ Fenoglio-Abd al-Aal, *Défense et illustration de l’Egyptienne*, 50, quoting *Al-Nahḍa al-Nisā’iyya*, 7/2 (1924): 240.
- ³⁸ Sung by Saneyya Rushdī on Polyphon 43833, c. 1929, music by ‘Izzat al-Gāhili, lyricist unknown. The lyrics are mentioned in the Polyphon catalogue (1929, 52).
- ³⁹ Sung by Ratība Ahmad sur Baidaphon 85079/80, c. 1927, lyricist and composer unknown. The lyrics are mentioned in Baidaphon’s ‘Nouveau catalogue général des cantatrices’ (1928, 19).
- ⁴⁰ Botiveau, *Loi islamique et droit dans les sociétés arabes*, 198.
- ⁴¹ Sung by Muhammad ‘Awad al-‘Arabī on Baidaphon 85219/20, c. 1927, lyricist and composer unknown.
- ⁴² See Muhammad Husayn Haykal, *Zaynab* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1983 [1914]), 305.
- ⁴³ See Muhammad Yūnus al-Qādī, ‘Al-aghānī, al-muwashshahāt, al-mawāliya, al-‘adwār, al-taqātiq’, *Al-Masrah*, 24/05/1926, pp. 23–4. See his series of articles on lyrics, 29/03/1926, 12/04/1926, 26/04/1926.
- ⁴⁴ Quoted by Fenoglio, 1989, 54.
- ⁴⁵ ‘Alī Imām ‘Atiyya, *Majmū‘at al-mūsīqā wa-l-‘aghānī* (Cairo, 1928).
- ⁴⁶ Sung by Semḥa al-Boghdādeyya on Pathé 18253/4, c. 1926, music by Zakariyyā Aḥmad, lyrics by Badī‘ Khayrī. The lyrics are mentioned in the Pathé catalogue (1926, 64). The same theme is found as well in ‘kollo kōm we-da kōm, ṣaḥḥetni men ‘ezz en-nōm’ (That tops it all, now

you wake me in the middle of the night), sung by Ratība Aḥmad on Baidaphon 85083/4, c. 1927.

⁴⁷ Sung by Ratība Aḥmad on Polyphon 43743/44, c. 1929. Music by Zakariyyā Aḥmad, lyrics by Badī' Khayrī. The lyrics are mentioned in the Polyphon catalogue (1929, 41–3). Identical theme: 'Ma'a ḥamāti ma d'odshi, ana khol'i dayya wa-la aṭi'shi' (I'm not staying with my mother-in-law, I have a quick temper and can't take much), sung by Saniyya Rushdī on Polyphon 43821.

⁴⁸ Sara Wassif, 'L'évolution de la condition de la femme en Egypte au XXe siècle', 61.

⁴⁹ Sung by Badī'a Maṣābnī and Sayyid Sulaymān on Polyphon 51355, c. 1931. Lyricist unknown [Ḥusayn Ḥilmī or Muḥammad Ismā'īl?], music by Ḥasan Mukhtār. The lyrics are mentioned in the Polyphon catalogue 'supplément octobre' (1931, 7–9).

⁵⁰ Sung by Aḥmad Ismā'īl, Faḍīla Rushdī, Wagīda ḥamdī on Columbia GA 58, c. 1930. Lyrics by Muḥammad Ismā'īl, music by Aḥmad Sharīf. Lyrics mentioned in the Columbia catalogue [c. 1932], 58–9.

⁵¹ Sung by Ratība Aḥmad on Polyphon 43711, recorded c. 1929.

⁵² I do not claim that 1920s social *taqāṭiq* are the only example of songs being either narrative or dealing with daily life or concerns in Egypt: comic songs in 1950s films such as 'monologues' by Shukūkū or Ismā'īl Yāsīn, political songs of Aḥmad Fu'ād Nigm and Shaykh Imām in the 70s, 'microbus' songs of the early 21st century such as Sha'bān 'Abd al-Rehīm's certainly deal with social issues. The point I wish to make is that those are not *mainstream* songs, are not performed by upscale artists, do not represent the main genre commissioned by the recording industry, and are not consumed by all classes of society, which was presumably the case for the 1920s *taqṭūqa*.

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