Raphael Cormack: Midnight in Cairo: The Female Stars of Egypt's Roaring '20s

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Midnight in Cairo relates the history of Cairo's nightlife during the 1920s, as well as the life stories of some of the women who played a prominent role in those years—lives that were rarely recorded by the women themselves. In terms of resistance studies, there are three main insights from the book. The first is the cosmopolitan character of Cairo during the 1920s, which clearly had certain darker sides, yet ultimately brought a diversity of people together through art and entertainment. Secondly, there are the struggles of the women themselves against the gender expectations, patriarchal norms and misogyny of the time. Thirdly, some of the female stars' activities, alongside the wider artistic scene, contributed directly to the resistance against British colonialism and ideals for an independent Egypt.

The first four chapters of the book cover the broader history of Egypt and Cairo's entertainment scene—specifically in the area of Cairo called Ezbekiyya—beginning concertedly in the 1890s and moving into the 1920s. Part two of the book, titled 'leading ladies', comprises of chapters five to eleven that are more orientated towards providing greater detail about particular female entertainers' lives, while continuing to tell the story of Cairo's nightlife.

Regarding cosmopolitanism, by the 1920s Cairo's population 'had come from an amazing variety of places across Europe, Africa and Asia' (p.4), with 'Even a cursory attempt to list the stars of this period reveals the huge variety of their backgrounds, whether religious, national or cultural' (p.4). Cormack sums the richness of the culture in the introduction:

> The story of this world from the late nineteenth century to the 1950s is often mythologised in Egypt but largely overlooked in the West, where the Middle East is usually seen only as a political problem to be solved. Yet it is full of surprises. It includes, at different points, a gay English Arts and Crafts designer, several cross-dressing actresses, a belly dancer

> involved in underground left-wing politics, and an unsuccessful attempt to make a film version of the life of the prophet Muhammad, directed by the man who went on to make *Casablanca* (p.5).

Of course, there is a risk of romanticising this period—Cormack shows that many British and European visitors continued to hold dehumanising, degrading or objectifying attitudes towards Egyptians and the women working Cairo's nightlife. However, it clearly provided a more tolerant space, for instance for African-American and West Indian jazz musicians, such as the Americans Billy Brooks and George Duncan who were 'relieved to have escaped the racial segregation of turn-of-the-century America—as well as the dangerous "circus" acts of Europe' (p.94).

Moreover, Cormack is careful to point out that the people and their actions of the time should not be assumed to fit contemporary conceptions of progressiveness. For example, one of the characters of Ezbekiyya, Ibrahim al-Gharbi, challenged British 'notions of gender […] Western visitors who first saw al-Gharbi declared themselves almost universally disgusted. His race was seldom passed by without comment […] but his sexuality and gender fluidity concerned the visitors most' (pp.76-77). However, Cormack notes that:

> Without being able to hear directly from al-Gharbi, it is hard to know how he thought of himself—or what gendered pronouns we should even use. It might be hard to fit him into current conceptions of transgender identity or current ideas of gender more generally. However, Ezbekiyya at that time certainly included transgender people, and the concept was not unknown (p.78).

Yet such open challenges to dominant norms certainly warrant acknowledgement. As Dabashi (2012) has noted, this cosmopolitanism is part of the history of the WANA region that needs recovering and reasserting, in addition to being a shared history that transcends 'East' and 'West' binaries. While aspects of such cosmopolitanism seemed to diffuse from liberalising attitudes in Europe and beyond, Cormack's book shows how much can also be located in the space of transgression and resistance to colonial, class and patriarchal expectations rising in the cultural spaces of Cairo.

Regarding the struggles of the female stars, alongside their contribution to Egyptian and indeed international feminism, Cormack emphasises in the

conclusion that 'An uncomfortable pattern often emerges in the biographies of extraordinary, independent women regardless of their nationality, age, class or profession. With a tragic force that sometimes feels inescapable, their lives end in decline, loss and humiliation' (p.300). He suggests this common narrative veers 'close to misogyny' (p.300). However, without being 'the story of a lost golden age, nor of great lives that end in tragedy', Cormack suggests that 'Egypt offered something intangible but vital: possibility. The female stars whose lives are set down in this book represent the promise, hope and opportunity of the interwar period. There was a space for women to make their voices heard' (p.301).

Yet Cormack at various points reminds the reader that our contemporary understanding of these female stars' lives is complicated by their lack of personally recorded accounts. Many of the women's early lives are obscure and indeed bleak, not far from the incredibly dark side of Cairo's nightlife such as the trafficking of women and children that Cormack relates. This means that, for instance, 'Among the British stories of pimps, rowdy Australian soldiers and moral decay, the women who worked in Cairo's red-light district usually only appear as faceless victims or temptresses' (p.78). These reminders are important because the more widely known contemporaneous perspectives of this period have been orientalist accounts—colonialist administrators and European observers who were often disapproving yet fascinated—or male viewpoints. The very act of trying to recover the story with a focus on women, and from the women's own viewpoints when possible, is a worthy endeavour.

From Chapter 5, the stars focused on are primarily Rose al-Youssef, Fatima Rushdi, Fatima Sirri, Oum Kalthoum, Mounira al-Mahdiyya, Aziza Amir (Isis), Badia Masabni and Tahiyya Carioca. Despite suffering impoverishment and exploitation when young, unscrupulous collaborators, abusive relationships, religious and colonial censure, violence and disputes with fellow stars (such as the acrimony between Oum Kalthoum and Mounira al-Mahdiyya), they achieved considerable fame, wealth (if often fleeting) and independence which was quite remarkable for the period. Some were able to use their positions for political work and female emancipation. To give some examples, Rose al-Youssef established an eponymous publication covering the arts but subsequently greater political and current affairs material (pp.121-122,139), albeit with the content becoming less progress in the mid-1920s compared with the initial "staunchly feminist agenda" (p.141). Fatima Sirri faced a protracted divorce and custody battle with Muhammed

Shaarawi Bey, which she ultimately won in a case with significance for class and women's rights issues (pp.181-183).

The rivalry between Oum Kalthoum and Mounira al-Mahdiyya was, Cormack suggests, 'really a clash between two versions of an Egyptian woman' (p.217). While Oum Kalthoum is far more famous today as 'the queen of Arabic music', it was Mounira who was more 'transgressive', embodying 'the edgier and more provocative parts of Egyptian identity that had been pushed out of the mainstream in recent decades' (pp.224-225). However, Chapter 11, which tells the story of the comic actress, singer and dance Badia Masabni, also relates the disturbing incident in 1936 of dancer Imithal Fawzi's murder by a gang to who she refused to pay protection money and, 'in the wake of Imtithal's death, a wave of violence against female dancers and performers was unleashed' (p.267). This revealed 'that the glamorous façade of Cairo's *salas* and cabarets masked a dangerous and unstable underworld, particularly for women who lived at the margins of celebrity and would never achieve the fame of women like Badia' (p.263).

Regarding Tahiyya Carioca, Cormack provides two intriguing anecdotes about Edward Said. One concerns the 14-year-old Said being 'extremely impressed' when seeing Tahiyya dancing in 1950 and Said's recollection of the evening decades later (p.275), which from any 'Western' observer would smack of objectification and orientalism. The second relates to Said meeting Tahiyya in 1990 and, like so many others before him, asking 'that old question' about how many times she had been married (p.294). It might have come across as merely cynical for Cormack to include these anecdotes about Said when they seem at odds with his critique of Western orientalism's objectification and reduction of the WANA region and its people. However, Cormack presents them and leaves them unremarked, meaning they actually work highly effectively in raising the question of the problematic male gaze. Tahiyya's response in the same meeting to her friend Nabiha Loutfy, a filmmaker, is amusing and representativeness of the strength of character of many of the female stars, when he asked her: 'which of her husbands she had loved or which ones had influenced her, she gave a damning answer: "None at all", she said harshly, '"They were a shabby lot of bastards"; a declaration followed by a string of expletives'.

The third insight from the book relates to some of the female stars' direct involvement in open resistance and revolutionary activities. Again, the history of such actions are regularly overshadowed by dominant narratives and

prominent political actors, which is the case for both Egypt's 1919 and 1952 revolutions. Cormack notes that the 1919 revolution 'remains an example of unprecedented national unity. Barriers of class religion and gender dissolved' (p.82), while women's contribution was of 'huge symbolic importance'. This included two significant women's demonstrations organised by Hoda Shaarawi, a notable feminist activist (p.85). Those involved in Cairo's entertainment scene also organised 'carnivalesque' protests 'in outfits raided from their troupes' costume stores and sang nationalist and anti-British songs' (p.86). Perhaps of further significance is how the theatres and cabarets amplified the messages of unity in the months following the revolution, and Cormack points to one particular song that has endured in public memory; Naguib al-Rihani and Badie Khayri's 'Stand Up, Egyptians', which:

> Is still considered one of the most powerful statements of Egyptian patriotism. It was sung in Tahrir Square during the Arab Spring and is even sampled in modern hip-hop songs […] One line explicitly called for the religious unity that had been on display in the streets of Cairo a few months before. [']Why are you talking about Muslim, Christian, or Jewish? They all mean the same thing: one family back to our grandfathers['] (p.87).

Such visions were part of a more grassroots creation of 'models for a new Egypt', which Cormack effectively relates through the entertainment scene—in contrast with typical analyses of this 'enormously complex' political period that it 'usually' explained as a competition between three poles: Parliament, the king and the British' (pp.97-98).

During the increasing militancy against the British in 1951-52 and the subsequent 1952 revolution, Ezebekiyya fared badly—I am reluctant to reveal the details here because it surprised me, which I think is testament to Cormack's storytelling. However, the post-war period 'was a vital time for Egypt's feminist movement', and Cormack also relates Tahiyya Carioca's increased involvement in left-wing politics. She was part of the Partisans of Peace, 'a Soviet-sponsored endeavour' which in Egypt 'hardly resembled a communist cell. If anything, the organisation looked like a prototype of non-aligned third-world politics whose members did not see why they had to be dragged into the West's growing conflict with the Soviet Union' (p.285). It was also quite an umbrella movement of communists, 'liberals, leftists and even Islamists' (p.286). Tahiyya Carioca, along with many other

political activists, was arrested after Nasser came to power, and Cormack suggests the Egypt that emerged in the years following 'became a much less diverse society and Cairo a much less diverse city' (p.294), seemingly despite the ambitions and character of the ordinary lives of many Egyptians.

References

Dabashi, H. 2012. *The Arab Spring: The End of PostColonialism.* London: Zed Books.