

.....
A Trade like Any Other: Female Singers and Dancers in Egypt, by Karin van Nieuwkerk, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995. 240 pages, \$21.95

REVIEWED BY DALILA MAHDAMI

anyone who has read Naguib Mahfouz's *Cairo Trilogy* will remember the low esteem in which female entertainers in Egypt were held. To many, this went hand in hand with prostitution, alcohol and drugs. Mahfouz's novel may have been set many years ago, but it seems such attitudes were still prevalent in the late 1980s and prompted Karin van Nieuwkerk to undertake her study of female singers and dancers in Egypt. On the whole, she is successful. Her ethnography fuses together issues important in the fields of feminism, ethnomusicology, dance and anthropology, whilst remaining appealing for non-academic audiences.

Van Nieuwkerk spent around 15 months in Egypt conducting her fieldwork: interviewing Egyptians from every stratum of society, staying with entertainers, watching performances, and attending weddings throughout the country. During her stay, she formed solid relationships with men and women involved in the entertainment industry and, in particular, those on Muhammad Ali Street in Cairo. Her friendly relations with her subjects and immersion into their lives gave van Nieuwkerk unparalleled access to the world of Egyptian female entertainers and her study has a unique perspective, mixing theoretical concepts with personal experience.

According to van Nieuwkerk, no wedding or festivity in Egypt is considered complete without singers or dancers. In fact, such celebrations provide an opportunity for families to display their affluence, as reflected in the number of performers hired. It is therefore a puzzling paradox that those entertainers, in particular female entertainers, are met with disrespect and ignominy by Egyptian society at large. One question guides the course of the study: "Is the tainted reputation of female entertainers due to the fact that entertainment is a dishonorable profession or that it is dishonorable for women?" (pp. 2-3). By way of reply, van Nieuwkerk examines the history of the

trade in Egypt, the status of performers in society, personal accounts and opinions, and intellectual debates, in the hope that her study of female Egyptian entertainers will “create more understanding of their livelihood...and...generate more sympathy for” them (p. 1).

Examining Islamic views on Egyptian entertainment, van Nieuwkerk mentions in her introduction that whilst some Islamic scholars and *hadiths* frown upon music and dancing altogether, “the acceptability of the place and occasion of the performance is...an important factor in judging the legitimacy of...entertainers” (p. 11). However, female dancers and singers are unequivocally opposed, since their voices and bodies are considered more seductive than those of men’s. This belief recurs throughout the study, backed up by historical and cultural evidence. The introduction, like the study as a whole, is clearly structured, with the author outlining her methodology and learning process. Her ability to recognize flaws in her early stages of research, with the help of her Egyptian assistant, exemplify the long process she went through in doing justice to her research and subjects.

In chapters two and three, van Nieuwkerk clarifies the relations between entertainers and religious and national authorities, outlining their legal status and various socio-economic and political developments which had an impact on the organization and professionalisation of female entertainers over the past two centuries. These chapters are fascinating, well researched, and highly informative. In her chapter on the 19th century, Van Nieuwkerk describes the fiscal regulation of entertainers and clarifies the original difference between two types of entertainers, the *awalim*, educated and respected women who performed for women in the harem, and the *ghawâzî*, plebian dancers who performed unveiled in streets and at saints’ day celebrations. A particularly informative section describes Muhammad Ali’s 1834 ban on female entertainers and prostitutes in Cairo, which marginalized public women in society and forced many into prostitution, blurring the distinction between *awalim* and *ghawâzî* entertainers. The 1834 ban was probably instrumental in formulating contemporary attitudes towards female entertainers.

Perhaps the most interesting and enjoyable part of the book are the entertainers’ personal accounts, which appear in chapter four. Those stories provide valuable insights into the women’s experiences and opinions, and bestow human faces on figures who would otherwise have remained anonymous entertainers. The accounts also serve to explain why women entered the industry. While some women were attracted as young girls to the trade, most were driven into this profession by economic necessity. A large number come from poorer segments of society and have little or no education, and decided on entertainment because it paid better than factory, domestic, or other menial work. From their accounts, one also notes that most women in the entertainment industry share the larger Egyptian ideal that women should be housewives; it is simply their economic situation which forces them to work. The majority of women stay in the profession only to guarantee a better future for their children, by saving enough money to send them to school or university. The inclusion of photographs of female entertainers, although sadly left anonymous, gives Van Nieuwkerk’s case work a personal and refreshing touch so often missing in academic studies.

For all her emphasis on providing a platform for entertainers to voice their opinions, Van Nieuwkerk remains a critical observer, pointing out any inconsistencies or blatant lies told to her. She furthermore reveals the divisions within the entertainment industry, dismantling ideas of it as a monolithic profession, and instead shows it to be just as internally diversified and hierarchical as Egyptian society at large.

A chapter on marginality investigates whether entertainers, by virtue of their profession, constitute a marginal community in Egyptian society. In assessing this, van Nieuwkerk scrutinizes the spatial, linguistic, social, economic, and cultural realities of entertainers. She also considers their secret language, or *sîm*. It seems many communities in Egypt make use of such a secret language, ranging from goldsmiths or pickpockets to homosexuals. Nieuwkerk provides some interesting examples of the vocabulary of entertainers and their use of the *sîm*, and though she stresses that this is not important to her study as a whole, the topic is so fascinating it well deserves a study of its own.

Chapters six to eight explore the concepts of honor, shame, and gender, and seek to find out whether the poor reputation of females in the entertainment industry is because their profession is considered dishonorable, or due to prevailing 'gender ideology'. Presenting theoretical discussions on shame and honor (defined as "the presence of personal virtues" , Van Nieuwkerk maintains that shame, or 'eb' ('ayb), is the main concern of Cairenes, especially amongst the poor (p. 117). She goes on to demonstrate that most people's objection to female entertainers lies in the concept of shame, which, after everything mentioned previously, comes as little surprise. It is their profession, rather than their character, which society considers a disgrace. Putting all the different pieces of the puzzle together, van Nieuwkerk concludes that although certain sectors of society consider female Egyptian entertainers with disapproval, they are mostly seen as working in a 'trade like any other' like everyone else, in order to put food on the table.

A Trade like Any Other is a highly commendable study that is accessible to all readers. Van Nieuwkerk's approach to writing and explaining theory and history is gratifyingly simple and yet does not underestimate the intelligence of her readers. Her book will therefore appeal to anyone from the high school student to the anthropologist or dance enthusiast. Yet it needs to be said that since her research was conducted in 1988/1990, her conclusions may now be out of date. Egypt today is experiencing both high levels of unemployment and poverty, and a surge in radical Islam. These factors may well have changed popular opinions about women and entertainment. Nonetheless, *A Trade Like Any Other* remains a comprehensive and well written study, and relevant to feminist and anthropological research. It is to be hoped that someone picks up where Karin van Nieuwkerk left off.

Dalila Mahdawi is a graduate in Arabic Studies of the University of Manchester.
Email: dmahdawi@hotmail.co.uk