



Asmahan's Secrets:

Art, Gender and Cultural Disputations

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Asmahan, born Amal al-Atrash, of the Suwayda' branch of the Druze al-Atrash clan of southern Syria, achieved fame in Arabic music and cinema from 1938 until her death in 1944. My general acquaintance with Asmahan dates from my late teenage years, when I went mad for Arabic music. I learned one of her songs in the early 1980s from a gifted musician, my friend Simon Shaheen — "Imta Hata'raf Imta". Later I began work on a paper on her first film, *Intisar al-Shabab*, which was an exploration of themes of social mobility. I searched for funding to do a film version of her life in 1990 and at that point began to notice discrepancies in the sources and certain aspects of her mystique that intrigued me. In 1993 and 1994 I spent a Fulbright year on this project, interviewed her family members in the Jabal and in Cairo, consulted the various archival sources and private memoirs which shed some light on her activities during World War II, and have since tried to visit every physical location mentioned in her life-story.

For any listeners unfamiliar with her life story, Asmahan was the daughter of Fahd bin Farhan bin Ibrahim bin Isma'il bin Muhammad al-Atrash of Suwayda' and Alia al-Mundhir of Hasbaya, Lebanon. The birth dates of Asmahan and her brother Farid were not recorded accurately - a common problem earlier in the century. In her passport, Asmahan's birthdate appears as 1912, but is given elsewhere as 1915, 1917 and 1918. Her father was educated in Istanbul, and his marriage with Alia was his second. Fahd's return from a governmental posting in Anatolia to the Jabal Druze coincided with the end of World War I.

By 1927, Alia had already fled Syria with her sons Fu'ad, and Farid and her daughter Amal (whose stage name later on was Asmahan), first to Beirut, then to Haifa and on to Cairo, where she set up a household. But after being divorced and without funds, she began to sing for private musical parties with musician friends she had acquired in Cairo. Alia played the 'ud, and sang in both the Arabo-Ottoman and Lebanese folk genres. Asmahan and Farid learned these forms and were able to synthesize them with quintessential Egyptian vocal genres in their respective careers.

Their Cairene milieu included family friends like the composer Da'ud Husni who gave Amal her stage name, Asmahan; the pianist and composer Madhat Assim who established the first music programs on Egyptian radio and the 'awwadi Farid

Ghush. In this atmosphere, the young Farid and Asmahan were encouraged to perform first in private and later in public settings, the young man as an instrumentalist and Asmahan as a vocalist. She reportedly debuted at the Opera in a concert in 1931 and then began performing in the salon of Mary Mansur until her fledgling career was interrupted by a marriage with her cousin Hasan al-Atrash of Suwayda.

She spent six years in Syria with Hasan, but returned to Egypt to give birth to her daughter Kamilia and resumed her career which blossomed through performances of the compositions of Muhammad al-Qasabji, Riyad al-Sunbati, Madhat 'Assim and eventually her brother Farid al-Atrash. Hasan divorced Asmahan either before or after the appearance of her first film *Intisar al-Shabab* ("The Triumph of Youth") directed by Ahmad Badrkhan. Badrkhan fell in love with Asmahan and they contracted an 'urfi marriage. But the marriage quickly disintegrated under the pressure of their two families.

At this time, in 1941 the German Afrikan Korps under Erwin Rommel had bolstered the Italian forces earlier commanded by Rodolfo Graziani and had pressed into Egypt's western frontier. The Allies were very concerned about German intentions in Syria and decided to invade Syria and Lebanon. British agents hired Asmahan to travel to Syria as a courier to the Druze to forewarn them of the June 1941 invasion by the Free French and British forces.

Asmahan traveled to Jerusalem and then up to the Syrian/Jordanian border where she transmitted messages to her family through her half brother Talal. Hasan al-Atrash made use of the occasion to ask Asmahan to remarry him - remarriage was forbidden by the Druze, but the clan hoped to reclaim her from her sinful life in the world of entertainment. She was briefly reconciled with Hassan, divided her time in this period between Damascus, Beirut and Jerusalem, tried unsuccessfully to obtain funds from the British and the French, attempted suicide and managed to return to Egypt as the wife of Ahmad Salim, later a Studio Misr director; in 1944 in order to complete her film contract with Studio Misr in the production *Gharam wa Intiqam* ("Passion and Revenge") released after her death in 1944.

According to her family, her marriage to Salim was contracted solely to secure a visa to Egypt, but apparently Salim

was not willing to release her. According to other sources, their's was a sincere if raucous relationship - both were out of control. Salim shot himself during one of their quarrels and while he was still hospitalized, she was killed in an automobile accident along with her friend Mary Qiladah on the road from Cairo to Ra's al-Barr, where the car went into an irrigation canal on the side of the road.

Rumors arose concerning her death, particularly that the chauffeur had survived the accident, having jumped from the car. These rumors concerned the singer Umm Kulthum, who saw Asmahan as her one worthy rival, the British, the Germans, and others. Her family members did not come under public suspicion in Egypt, but the Syrian side had already threatened to kill her because of her wild behavior, drinking, gambling, and associations with men. Sir Edward Spears wrote just prior to her return to Egypt:

So the Druze wrote to me saying they had heard of goings-on which were a disgrace not only to the Atrash family but to the Druze in general: would I please inform the High Commissioner that their honor was sullied and they were going to send to Jerusalem and have her killed. This missive I sent on to Sir Harold MacMichael, and in due course I forwarded his short answer to the Atrash. "Palestine is governed under British Law," it ran. "Anyone committing murder is, if convicted, hanged. Please inform your correspondent of this, and that the law is strictly enforced."¹

Asmahan's dabbling in espionage was far less important than her artistic output. Yet journalists and her public made much of this dabbling. Why? Espionage held great significance in her era and later - collaboration with the British was a means of discrediting various elements of the Egyptian elite, accurately or inaccurately. Although Egyptians could understand that Vichy control in Syria had created different perceptions of the Allies and that Asmahan might have been patriotic toward her own homeland, entertainers who collaborated with the British, or who sought favors from the Palace were simply living up to their reputation for patron-seeking. She received a great deal of money for this mission, 40,000 pounds according to one source.

The British and the French were much less interested in Asmahan than in her relatives although they did become nervous that she might contact the Germans on a trip she attempted to make to Turkey, and thus promptly arrested her. By the time of her death, there is little she could have known that could have compromised policy, although perhaps information concerning individuals might have been somewhat compromising.

Asmahan did not leave substantial correspondence, but there are two early biographies written in Arabic, both by men

with particular agendas, who claimed to reveal her secrets and uphold her honor: Muhammad al-Taba'i, a journalist and entertainment critic, and Fumil Labib. The latter to whom her elder brother Fu'ad al-Atrash apparently dictated information about her life that contested some of al-Taba'i's claims that her family, and Fu'ad in particular had exploited and mistreated her and caused her to "go wild".

Al-Taba'i, entitled his book, **Asmahan Tells Her Story** (*Asmahan Tarwi Qissataha*) to entice prospective readers with the promise of an autobiographical account (this was an interesting new genre of Arabic literature that developed in the Twentieth Century). Asmahan does not actually tell her own story within this book. If the author had access to Asmahan - between 1939 and 1941 - he gives the impression of being a close friend, who was attracted to the uninhibited young artist. Both he and Labib make numerous mistakes, discrepancies which appear to be based on reports from other journalists. Asmahan also appears in the memoirs and notes of Sir Edward Spears, General Pauax, several British officers, and in two subsequent biographies in Arabic, one by al-Aynayn and in al-Jaza'iri's *Asmahan Dhatiya al-Istakbarat* both of which borrow very heavily from the two earlier books. She appears in the few musicological sources in Arabic in Fikur Sahhab's **The Seven Great Ones** which also contains some inaccurate biographical information, and in Samim al-Sharif's book in a chapter on al-Qasabji, and briefly in the analysis of *Layali al-Uns* by Jihad Racy.

Due to the transformation of Arabic music over the century, an appreciation of her prodigious vocal talents evidenced in some 45 songs and in two films is lost to those unfamiliar with the music of the era. Very few of the songs performed by Asmahan are remembered or performed in the repertoires of contemporary entertainers.

In terms of her art, a few comments are necessary:

1. Composers, performers and musicians of Asmahan's era participated in the modernization of entertainment - meaning both new musical forms and attitudes about music. For example, one can mention novel tempi, musical genres, instruments and efforts to play in sectional unison under a conductor. In film, new camera techniques were introduced, methods of lighting, better sound production, and the creation of highly paid stars, like Asmahan.
2. Asmahan acquired excellent sight-reading skills, and seemed by the late 1930s to have had better vocal technique and a wider range than Umm Kulthum, in terms of singing a composition as the composer intended it.
3. Asmahan's repertoire reflected several different styles - modernist compositions such as those of Muhammad al-Qasabji, others by Farid al-Atrash that moved from *lawn baladi* to *lawn gharbi* to *lawn tarab* — linear compositions with segments inspired by country melodies, Western themes or rhythms, and sections closer to the Arabo-Ottoman structures.²



Among her most memorable songs were

- compositions by Muhammad al-Qasabji: "Laita Barraḡ Aina Fitra", "Asqanina bi Abi Inta wa Ummi" (with lyrics by Bishara al-Khuri) "Farraq Ma Baina Leh al-Zaman?" with lyrics by Ali Shukri — "Imta Hata'raf Imta" and "Tahgrid al-Balabil" known as al-Tuyur. This song with its coloratura section perhaps caused listeners to incorrectly identify Asmahan with the Westernizing of Arabic music.
 - Madhat Assim's "Ya Habibi Ta'al al-Hiqni" and "Dakhilit Marra fl jinaina"
 - Farid al-Atrash's "Raja'at Laka Ya Habibi" to the words of Yusuf Badrus "Ya Illi Hawak Shaaghil Baal!" sung in I.S. and "Layali al-Uns fi Fienna" to Ahmad Rami's lyrics in G I Sunbati's "Dama'at'ala Habibi" in the same film
- The Studio gave her space to include her own unique style of singing in film, with the inclusion of the songs - "Ahwa Ahwa" and "Ya Dairati Malak 'alayna" in Gharam wa Intiqam.¹

Asmahan's public saw her as a mysterious outsider who was part of the professionalization of music. A certain stereotype of performers had developed within the tradition of Arabic music history. If they came from outside the "trade" as Asmahan and Farid did, their hunger for and devotion to art was so overwhelming as to outweigh social distaste for entertainers. Both were part of a movement to characterize music as a calling rather than a trade — this is very apparent in Farid al-Atrash's lifelong emphasis on the musician as a symbol of modernity. Such artists were according to journalists or historians, often child prodigies. There was Umm Kulthum who sang for weddings and religious occasions when still a child. Layla Murad is also supposed to have made her first stage appearance at age twelve in 1930, and to have begun singing by 1934 on the radio.⁴ Najat al-Saghira is said to have sung Umm Kulthum's songs at the age of seven (in 1940).⁵ Fayza Ahmed reportedly sang Asmahan's and Umm Kulthum's songs at the age of six.

Dates are a problem in Asmahan's biography, but if we accept the idea that she became an "artist-in-spite-of herself" then stories of her perfect mimicry, as a child, renditions of Umm Kulthum's songs and professional debut at about age 13 fit in. There is some evidence that she was a bit older than the others. Muhammad abd al-Wahhab commented on the maturity of her voice and womanly delivery, and her brother Fu'ad became intent upon the idea of marrying her off when he saw men admiring her. However, far from being a wunderkind at the height of her fame in the late 1930's and early 1940's, she was a woman who absorbed lessons concerning achievement, frustration, isolation, and mastered many technical aspects of vocal music.

Her public associated her with eternal youth. Asmahan never aged — her untimely death preserved her image with its appeal and sexual allure intact. This was best remembered through her two films as Nadia, the lissome outsider who

sought success in a foreign land, Egypt, and encountered social prejudice against entertainers in *Intisar al-Shabab*, and as the stunning Suhair in *Gharam wa Intiqam*, where in vowing to use a woman's weapons she ensnars both Anwar Wagdi and herself. Even today in Egypt, young people who may never have seen this film, use the expression "ey da? gharam wa intiqam walla ey? when, for instance one partner is too intently pursuing the other.

Besides her eternal youth, Asmahan steadily reflects a strong female power, attracting women who identify with her and men who desire her. If we contrast the image with Umm Kulthum, we find that the latter also dressed glamorously in these years and had various affairs, including that with Sherif Pasha. Nonetheless, Umm Kulthum managed to create and uphold a very respectable image for herself as she aged in full view of her public.

Asmahan's story expressed a deep conflict between her ascent in the entertainment industry and her natal family's insistence that only marriage to another Druze was an acceptable union. Her own mother's escape from her husband, and her brother Farid's support for her career were significant factors that encouraged her flight away from social reformation, after dutifully though unsuccessfully attempting to live as Hasan's wife.

For the history of women her story is important as a project of recovery, of revision (in my reshaping of the male accounts of her life) and of displaying the nuances of women's transition into the public sphere of the celebrity.

Her disruptive mystique as a woman 'who did it her way' in opposition to the norms of Middle Eastern society was tempered by her cinematic message of romance and danger, her musical import as an artist performing transitional genres, and by her vulnerability — she paid the price in several failed marriages, in a reputation for being "fast" or racy and in at least three attempts at suicide.

A different way of understanding the importance of her gender is to compare her experience and popular image with that of her brother Farid, who achieved great success after the first of nine films that he made with the dancer Samia Gamal, was regarded by his Druze relatives as a cultural emissary. However, he began his career, under his sister's shadow and benefited from her renditions of his compositions and from his onscreen appearance with her in *Intisar al-Shabab* where she was the known star and he the novice.

Her demeanor was of greater interest to the public; her beauty was commented on far more often than his physical appearance. Unlike his sister, he was free to avoid marriage; he claimed that he was married to his art and included this notion in his films. His sister was not similarly free. To her Druze relatives, she remained a beautiful and troubling

memory. Abdullah al-Atrash said to me: "We hear her voice with regret; we were very conservative in those years." Even her friend, al-Taba'i made much of her drinking and smoking, and her public sensationalized and sexualized her, while perceiving her brother as a romantic figure.

Asmahan's performing status went hand in hand with many rumors: Tal'at Harb, King Faruq, and Ahmad Hassanain Pasha who was also supposedly enamored of Queen Nazli and others.

Was Asmahan, essentially respectable, but part of a 'fast' social circle that included her friend Amina Barudi? Or was she, as her relatives suggested to me, maligned? "Do you think that if she did anything, and I say, if, that she would let anyone know — both of her brothers were very conservative!"⁷

My quandary in characterizing Asmahan — whether to reclaim her honor or celebrate her escape from respectability — was complicated by some of my feminist colleagues as well. For example the Moroccan feminist Fatima Mernissi, saw Asmahan as a symbol of Arab women breaking free from tradition:

Asmahan entranced both men and women with the idea that failure or success did not matter in the adventurous life, and such a life was much more enjoyable than a life spent sleeping behind protective doors.⁸

In all honesty I could not verify that this was Asmahan's primary intent — too much ambivalence and ambition co-existed with her wild side.

I also disagreed with one family version of Asmahan's story, which went something like this: Farid al-Atrash actually taught and encouraged his sister, composed for her and made her famous. He or Fu'ad made the contacts for her with the British. Lies were told about her because that is inevitable for women in entertainment. As a matter of fact, she was always in love with her husband Hasan.

This particular version claims Asmahan as the vessel or voice for her brother's compositional genius through which she communicated her undying love for Hasan, and is certainly a way of reclaiming an errant woman.

But another even wilder version of Asmahan is given by a certain British officer who claims that Asmahan was a wild vixen, holding orgies. Muhammad al-Taba'i's exploration of Asmahan's personality is the most sensitive, although he too combines stereotypical ideas of women and artists. The artist to him, is an immoderate, sensitive, ego-centered personality, insecure or jealous of other women, and uncomfortable in elite society. Al-Taba'i failed to see that Asmahan's early poverty created a certain materialism, and

hunger for success, and a need to spend wildly and gamble. He believed that she was incapable of real love because as an artist she has nothing in common with the ideal woman who needs a man and children for fulfillment.

The idea that all women share a monolithic nature, and aim at love and marriage rather than a career, could not but affect popular writing and thinking about Asmahan. And so those who tried to uncover Asmahan's secrets wrote most consistently about her problematic search for love, rather than her very evident satisfaction with her musical achievements, her fulfillment on-stage.

The public considered Asmahan a "man's woman," based on her cinematic character, the lyrics she sang, and the information they could glean about her life. However, she was not a loner, and she cared deeply for female friends and relatives, including her daughter, and non-amorous friends. Popular culture rarely views a femme fatale as a daughter, mother, or friend of other women.

Perhaps her greatest secret was her ability to shape her insecurity and those of others into expressions of emotion in her vocal and cinematic performances — after all these were the arenas in which she controlled breathing, rhythm, syllables, tones far more closely than in the events of her own life.

Endnotes

1. Spears, *Fulfillment of Mission*, 172. Spears heard little about Asmahan from this period until her death. He relays a garbled version of her death — writing that she died on her way back to Cairo accompanied by "a Hungarian countess."
2. A list of Asmahan's songs appear in Sherifa Zuhur, *Asmahan: Woman, War and Song*. (Austin, Texas: Center for Middle Eastern Studies, distributed through University of Texas Press, forthcoming, Fall 2000) Chapter Six.
3. Sherifa Zuhur, "Asmahan: Arab Musical Performance and Musicianship under the Myth," in *Images of Enchantment: Visual and Performing Arts of the Middle East* edited by Sherifa Zuhur (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1998).
4. Mustafa Fathy Ibrahim and Armand Pignol, *L'extase et le transistor: Apercus sur la chanson egyptienne contemporaine de izrande audience*. (Cairo: Centre d'etudes et de documentation economique juridique et social, 1987) 17.
5. Fathy Ibrahim and Pignol, *L'extase*, 49.
6. Sherifa Zuhur, "An Arab Diva in Gendered Discourse." In *Iran and Beyond: Essays in Middle Eastern History in Honor of Nikki R. Keddie* Edited by Beth Baron and Rudi Matthee. Costa Mesa: Mazda Press, 2000.
7. Personal interview with Abdullah al-atrash, Suwaida, summer 1993.
8. Fatima Mernissi, *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*. (New York: Addison Wesley, 1994) 107.