

COSMOPOLITAN CAIRO OF THE 1920S AND THE QUEEN OF THE "TARAB"¹ MUNIRA AL-MAHDIYYA

Keywords: *Cairo, Munira Al-Mahdiyya, Queen of the "Tarab", "Awama"*

The 1920s were full of drastic changes in Egypt's political, social and cultural life. On the one hand, the new anti-European movement formed in the wake of the 1919 uprising, and on the other hand, the vibrant nightlife of cosmopolitan Cairo, were the two main lines defining the character of this period. In the 1920s, Cairo was also part of the great international disturbance. After the World War I, many people left Europe and moved to Cairo in search of new opportunities. The search for a new life led many of them to Azbakiya (الأزبكية), the center of Cairo's nightlife at that time. In the 1920s, Cairo also proved to be a great place for some African American musicians. In 1923, in a letter published in the American newspaper *The Chicago Defender*, two African American residents of Azbakiya wrote how they were fascinated by the Cairo nightlife where they decided to stay². In December 1922, the news of the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb was covered by the world press. Egypt was on the front pages of magazines and newspapers, which brought even more fame to Cairo and even more people headed to its theaters, cabarets and clubs.

Amid the growing cosmopolitanism of Cairo, Egypt was going through an interesting but difficult political period after the revolution. The country now had nominal independence; The Sultanate was abolished, and the Sultan was replaced by the King. Parliamentary politics was gaining new power and importance in the new country. At the beginning of 1924, the hero of the 1919 revolution, Saad Zaghlul³ (سعد زغلول), won the elections; His party "Wafd" won almost 90 percent of the mandates.

This period was also interesting in terms of the Egyptian women activists. Women became more active in the social, political, and cultural life of the country. However, the victory achieved proved to be disappointing for Egyptian women, as they still found themselves outside the new political process. Despite women's protests, the Egyptian political space remained exclusively male dominated during the 1920s and 1930s, filled with intrigues and power struggles.

Despite this difficult situation, Cairo's nightlife was bustling in the gardens and streets of Azbakiya, one of Cairo's central districts. During this period, downtown Cairo was filled with theaters, cabarets, dance halls, cafes, and salons. Entertainment establishments gave their audiences opportunities to listen to popular singers and offered a wide variety of performances. Unlike the political scene, women were actively performing on the stage of theaters and cabarets of Azbakiya. Thus, a new era of music began, which allowed new musical talents to flourish, such as Dawood Hosni (داود حسني)⁴, Munira Al-Mahdiyya (منيرة المهديّة), Badia Masabani (بدية المصبني)⁵, Fathiya Ahmed (فتحية أحمد)⁶ and many others. Their voices fascinated the guests of cafes and theaters.

According to the old singing tradition, the singer had his/her own orchestra or "takht" (تخت) and a choir or Guqa (جوقة). The composition represented a kind of musical dialogue between the singer and the

¹ Tarab – in Arabic طرب , means entertainment, admiration, enjoyment, music.

² [Cormack](#), Raphael, "How Cairo Became a Cosmopolitan Destination in the 1920s: Raphael Cormack on Egypt's Interwar Nightlife Boom". *Literary Hub*, March 18, 2021. <https://lithub.com/how-cairo-became-a-cosmopolitan-destination-in-the-1920s/>.

³ Saad Zaghlul / سعد زغلول (1857-1927) - an Egyptian revolutionary and statesman. He was the leader of Egypt's nationalist movement in 1918-1919 and the leader of Wafd Party. He held the post of Prime Minister for a short period in 1924.

⁴ Dawood Hosni / داود حسني (1870-1937) - Egyptian singer and composer.

⁵ Badia Masabani / بدية المصبني (1892-1974) - Syrian dancer and actress, for some time lived in Egypt, where she became a famous dancer. She formed her own troupe of dance and theatrical performances.

⁶ Fathiya Ahmed / فتحية أحمد (1898-1975) - Famous Egyptian singer.

rest of the group. However, with the advent of modern musical trends that focused on the singer, the popularity of Guqa and Takht declined. The years of 1900-1925 were considered to be the golden age of "Alimahs"⁷ (عالمه) performers, female singers. In this period dancers, singers, and other nightclub workers created new career opportunities for women for the first time, challenging the difficulties faced by women in the traditional, conservative Egyptian society. One of the most prominent figures of Cairo nightlife in the 1920s was Munira Al-Mahdiyya, who was given a name of the "Queen of Tarab" (سلطنة الطرب).

Zakiya Hussain Mansour (زكية حسن منصور) was born on May 16, 1885 in the village of Mahdiyya in the Al-Sharqiya province of Egypt. She later became known as Munira Al-Mahdiyya and her voice touched the hearts of millions. From the beginning, little Zakiya showed a great interest in theaters and was involved in theatrical performances from a young age. She also received some musical training in theater circles and that's how she discovered her talent. She constantly listened to famous Egyptian singers, for example, she loved the voice of Al-Lawandiya (سيدة اللاوندية) and her influence was also reflected in Munira's way singing⁸.

In 1905, an influential person from Cairo listened to the little girl singing in one of the villages of Al-Sharqiya and, attracted by her voice, offered her to move to Cairo and sing in his cafe. This is how Munira started her musical journey in Cairo. The young talented girl attracted a lot of attention and soon the cafes where she sang were visited by many famous people⁹. Mounira was one of the few women who were already releasing commercial records before the First World War. She was one of the first singers to be recorded by the Baidaphon¹⁰ company. Mounira's first disc was recorded in 1906, on which her name was written as "Sit Mounira" or "Lady Munira" (الست منيرة).

Mounira's early songs were performed in "Alimah" style of (عالمه). She sang qasidas¹¹ (قصيدة), taqtuqas¹² (طقطوقة) and dawrs¹³ (دور). Almost no other genres are preserved in her records. However, it should also be noted that she was one of the artists who made so called "light" music popular even in high society.

Munira Al-Mahdiyya married Mahmoud Jabri (محمود جبر), a music manager who helped her strengthen her position in her musical career. Soon Munira became the most sought-after and acclaimed artist of her time. After achieving success, Munira opened her own salon - "Sala" (صاله) in the famous district of Azbakiya and named it "Nuzhat Al-Nufus" (نزهة النفوس). Until 1913 she performed here herself, and she also sang in the famous clubs like "Al-Hambra" (الحمراء) and "El-Dorado" (الدورادو)¹⁴. Nuzhat al-Nufus became a meeting place for artists, intellectuals, politicians and businessmen. Famous people such as Saad Zaghlouli and Hussein Roshdy¹⁵ (حسين رشدي) visited Munira's cafe. At that time, no other cafe enjoyed such popularity, even British officials recognized the importance of Munira Al-Mahdiyya's "Sala". Nationalist sentiments were clearly visible in her salon and that's why Nuzhat al-Nufus was closed by the decision of the British¹⁶.

⁷ alimah (عالمه pl. عوالم) - singer

⁸ Al-Hafni, R. *Al-Sultana Munira al-Mahdiyya*. Cairo: Dar al-Shoruh, 1968, p.85.

⁹ Haghani, Fakhri, "The "New Woman" of the Interwar Period: Performance, Identity, and Performative Act of Everyday Life in Egypt and Iran". *Al-Raida*, Issue 122-123, Summer/Fall 2008, 39.

¹⁰ Baidaphon (1907- 1930s) - One of the oldest private record companies in the Middle East. It was founded by the Baida family in Beirut in the first decade of the 20th century.

¹¹ Qasida¹ (قصيدة pl. قصائد) - A genre of the classical Arabic poetry.

¹² Taqtuqah (طقطوقة pl. طقطايق) - A genre of Arabic vocal music that was sung mostly in a local dialect. It was associated with female vocalists and became very popular in the early decades of the 20th century.

¹³ Dawr (دور pl. أدوار) - A genre of Arabic vocal music performed in a local dialect. Its popularity declined after the 1920s.

¹⁴ Zuhur, Sherifa, *Popular Dance and Music in Modern Egypt*, McFarland: 2021, p. 35.

¹⁵ Hussein Roshdy / حسين رشدي (1863 - 1928) - Egyptian politician and prime minister of Egypt four times in 1914-1919.

¹⁶ Zuhur, Sherifa, *Popular Dance and Music in Modern Egypt*, p. 36.

Munira's theatrical debut was on the stage of the theater "Printania"¹⁷ (مسرح برنتانيا) on Muhammad Bek Al-Alfi Street¹⁸ (شارع محمد بك الألفي). She is said to have been the first Egyptian Muslim woman to become a professional actress. Before that, Egyptian actresses were mostly Christians or Jews¹⁹. Although Mounira was already a very popular singer, theater brought her even more success.

In 1917, Mounira founded her own theater, dance and music company, becoming the first Egyptian woman to lead her own theater troupe. Her troupe often performed nationalistic songs, which is why a popular slogan was created about Mounira's theater "هواء الحرية في مسرة منيرة المهديّة" which means "The breeze of freedom in Munira Al-Mahdiyya's theatre". For example, her repertoire included the songs: "Beautiful Egypt" (مصر الجميلة), "If you were in the army" (إن كنت في الجيش), "Parliament March" (مارش البرامج), "New Egypt" (مصر الحديثة)²⁰, etc. She was a great supporter of the National Movement, and this was greatly appreciated by Saad Zaghlul and Hussein Roshdy Pasha, who were her great admirers²¹.

In January 1927, Munira's popularity reached its peak with her playing the role of Cleopatra in the play "Cleopatra and Marcus Antonius" (كليوباترا ومارك انطونيوس), also starring Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab²² (محمد عبد الوهاب)²³. Munira did not only perform on the Egyptian stage, but she also often traveled to other countries in North Africa and Asia, was often singing in Morocco and Iraq.

Munira Al-Mahdiyya's success was based on several factors. She was the first Egyptian singer who was promoting so called "Light" music alongside with traditional, classical compositions. She was the first Egyptian woman whose songs were recorded on discs. Munira actively helped female musicians and artists to succeed in the entertainment industry, which at the time was mostly dominated by men²⁴. Munira sang for kings and leaders, she sang at many official celebrations and receptions, for example, she sang in front of Kemal Atatürk at the Turkish National Day celebration²⁵.

Al-Mahdiyya loved to be in the limelight. Her parties were attracting the political and cultural elite of Egypt. She had the so-called "Awama" (عامة) or a boathouse on the Nile, which was a well-known place for the Egyptian elite. Munira Al-Mahdiyya herself recalled in her memoirs that the then Prime Minister Hussein Roshdy Pasha was meeting his ministers at Munira's Nile house to make decisions regarding the state affairs²⁶.

Munira remained one of the biggest names and stars of Cairo's entertainment and nightlife scene in the 1920s and 1930s. However, later her fame began to fade away with the appearance of new stars like Umm Kulthum (أم كلثوم)²⁷. Munira Al-Mahdiyya died on March 12, 1965, at the age of 80.

Thirteen years after her death, Hassan al-Imam (حسن الإمام)²⁸ made the film "Sultanat al-Tarab" (سلطنة الطرب) (1978), which chronicles Al-Mahdiyya's life and career quite well. The producer of the film was

¹⁷ Theater "Printania" / مسرح برنتانيا - one of the largest theaters in Cairo at the beginning of the 20th century. Its construction began in 1906 with the opening of Al-Alfi Street. Later it was called the theater "Tivoli".

¹⁸ Muhammad Bek Al-Alfi Street / شارع محمد بك الألفي - the same as Alfi Bey or Al-Alfi Street is located in the center of Cairo. It has always been known for its cafes and entertainment venues.

¹⁹ [Cormack, Raphael](#), "Life was a cabaret – the Roaring Twenties in Cairo", *Apollo Magazine*, 6 January 2020.

²⁰ "ذكرى ميلاد: منيرة المهديّة. لحظة استثنائية في المسرح الغنائي"، *العربي الجديد*، آداب وفنون، 16 مايو 2021

²¹ Zuhur, Sherifa, *Popular Dance and Music in Modern Egypt*, p. 36.

²² Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab / محمد عبد الوهاب (1898 - 1991) - Egyptian singer, one of the greatest stars of Arab music.

²³ Sharjah Art Foundation (SAF) and The Arab Music Archiving and Research Foundation (AMAR), "Munira al-Mahdiyya", *Min al-Tārikh*, Episode 126, interview with Prof. Frédéric Lagrange. <https://www.sharjahart.org/sharjah-art-foundation/web-radio/rawdat-al-bababel/munira-al-mahdiyya-3>

²⁴ "Remembering Mounira Al-Mahdia: Egyptian diva and revolutionary voice", [Ahram Online](#), 16 May 2020. <https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/369447.aspx>

²⁵ [Ezzat, Dina](#), "Egypt's 1919 Revolution: Women's power, then and now", [Ahram Online](#), 9 Mar 2019. <https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/327836.aspx>

²⁶ فتحي، مصطفى، "العوامات .. تاريخ مصر على ضفاف النيل.. مصير كارثي لعوامات الفنانين.. وهذا ما حدث في عوامة الجاسوسة حكمت فهمي"، *كايرو ريبس*، 18 يونيو، 2022.

²⁷ Zuhur, Sherifa, *Popular Dance and Music in Modern Egypt*, p. 36.

²⁸ Hassan al-Imam / حسن الإمام (1919 - 1988) - Prominent Egyptian film director nicknamed the King of the Box Office.

Sharifa Fadel²⁹ (شريفة فاضل), who also played the main role³⁰. This film clearly shows what life was like in Cairo's theaters and cafes and what the golden days of Egyptian music were like.

Cairo's cafes and salons have always played the role of a kind of cultural scene of the country. It was a gathering place for singers, performers, composers, actors and thinkers amidst the aromas of coffee, cups of tea and enchanting melodies. Unfortunately, most of the buildings and places associated with Cairo's early 20th century nightlife no longer exist. Walking through the streets of Azbakiya, you will no longer find the remains of that old world. The Printania Theater building, where Munira Al-Mahdiyya made her acting debut, still stands on Al-Alfi Street, where the Alfi Bey restaurant and cinema are located.

²⁹ Sharifa Fadel / شريفة فاضل (1938-) - Famous Egyptian actress and singer.

³⁰ "Remembering Mounira Al-Mahdia: Egyptian diva and revolutionary voice".