

Identity Politics and Resistance: The Case of Mohammad Mounir

Natalie Abou Shakra, SOAS

Revolutionary music can be a means to express the burdens of the national self and an embodiment of mass participation and sentiment in the issues of the nation, provoking the masses to act in their desire for true change¹. We could see this, for instance, during the French Revolution, in the song *Ça Ira*, or *We Will Win*, which targets the aristocracy as its enemy. There was also *La Marseillaise* which became the French National Anthem. Both songs are characterized by their powerful rhythmic ascendancy, and constituted a rousing anthem for people.

During the Egyptian Revolution, Aljazeera began each report on the *thawra* (revolution) with Umm Kulthum's *Ana e-Sha'ab, I am the People*². This song came in the context of Nasser building the high dam as a challenge against British colonialism. Similar to the ascending rhythm of the French revolutionary songs, this piece has a heightened dramatic effect especially after the chorus and entering Umm Kulthum solo with "I am the people, I know not the impossible." However such music ceased to be produced in the Arab world since the mid 20th century³. Critics argued that this was due to the defeatist attitude that swept the Arab world after the 1967 war and the worsening political situation of the region after the Nasser period⁴. The music of the Rahbani brothers and the voice of Fairūz made an entrance at that time and it was not in the aims to awaken the revolutionary consciousness of the Nasser period, but it was to sing for Palestine, the yearning for Jerusalem and the Lebanese civil war⁵. During the Egyptian uprisings in January and February 2011, people began to borrow from the past repertoire songs by Sheikh Imam Issa, Shadia, Abdel Halim, Umm Kulthum and others. Some have mentioned the importance of Hip Hop using western beats and incorporating lyrics defiant of the regime and the injustices people faced, though it remained to be an alternative and related more to youth cultures⁶.

Mistakenly, many commentators on the revolution in the so-called 'civilized world' emphasized the role of social media in spreading the message of the uprisings, but in

¹ Alsabi', Imad M. M. 2011. "Mawqaa' Al Musiqaa 'Ala Kharitat El Thawra Al Arabiyya." Alhewar Almutamadin, 26 May 2011: 3377 <http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=260667>

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Massad, Joseph Andoni. 2005 (2003). "Liberating Songs: Palestine Put into Music," in Rebecca Stein and Ted Swedenburg, eds., *Palestine, Israel, and the Politics of Popular Culture*. Duke University Press

⁶ Alsabi', Imad M. M. 2011. "Mawqaa' Al Musiqaa 'Ala Kharitat El Thawra Al Arabiyya." Alhewar Almutamadin, 26 May 2011: 3377 <http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=260667>

doing so completely ignored the agency and will of the masses who went to the streets⁷. Commenting on this narrative was Iraqi poet and scholar, Sinan Antoon, who argues:

In a very familiar gesture displaying the discursive cargo of colonial mentality, any positive phenomenon has to, somehow, be traced back to this or that white man. As if the inhabitants of the region didn't have a long history of struggles and revolts against all kinds of oppressors, indigenous, but mostly foreign colonizers. As if liberationist inspiration has only one boring trajectory always emanating from the west and then heading east⁸.

Commenting on the uprisings sweeping the region, Palestinian intellectual Azmi Bechara stressed that we are witnessing the end of an era marked by decadence and the degeneration of cultural production in its low aesthetic form during the last decade or so⁹. For the last two decades at least, video clips characterized by nudity, commodification of women's bodies, and Orientalist themes dominated the Arabic music industry. The music companies that produce such video clips monopolize the industry and are controlled by Saudi royalty such as the dominant music company and satellite television channel Rotana owned by Prince Walid Bin Talal. The average Arab woman does not look like the women in the clips and the lifestyles and images in these music videos are not only self-alienating, but manage to distance the audience from their social and political reality. To use Theodor Adorno's words, this popular culture is used as a tool of mass oppression and social control. But, whilst Adorno was convinced that the culture industry is a totality that leaves no space for resistance, Walter Benjamin, in response, saw popular culture as a means to grant self-expression to the masses, but one which does not give them any rights in return¹⁰.

On the 19th of February 2011, Ghassan Bin Jido, a well known and respected Tunisian journalist, opened his first show on Aljazeera after Mubarak stepped down with the song Ezzai (How come?), by the Nubian Egyptian performer Mohammad Mounir. Bin Jido was asking the audience Ezzai¹¹: how come? How did it all happen?

The slogans of the Egyptian uprisings did not come out of nowhere, and it would be simplistic to focus only on the role the Tunisian revolution played in igniting events in Egypt. The song Ezzai was one of many songs that the Egyptian Radio and Television committee censored and prevented from being released¹². The performer, Mohammad Mounir, is Nubian from the capital of the South, Aswan, called "the king of Arab jazz and reggae" by his fans. Mohammad Mounir is the only Nubian that made it in Cairo.

⁷ Antoon, Sinan. 2011. "Singing for the Revolution." *Jadaliyya* 31 January 2011
<http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/508/singing-for-the-revolution>

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Azmi Bechara speaking on Aljazeera, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kjsOAU4WS60>

¹⁰ Benjamin, Walter. 1999 (1993). "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproduction," In *The Cultural Studies Reader* edited by Simon During. London and New York: Routledge p:59-76

¹¹ Aljazeera. 2011. Intellectuals and Journalists during the time of Revolution. 19.2.2011
<http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/4417E7E8-09D5-4242-8345-FF4B8726BF44.htm>

¹² Shorouk News. 2011. "Althawra Afrajat 'aan Alghani Almamnou'aa." 1 March 2011
<http://www.shorouknews.com/ContentData.aspx?id=399396>

Nubians are marginalized in Egyptian society along with the Sa'ayda or the Upper Egyptians. They are ridiculed, are the subject of many degrading jokes, considered the "Blacks of Egypt" and discriminated against because of the colour of their skin.

What makes Mounir different is that he is not Marcel Khalifeh (the bourgeois) in that his song is not part of the *ughniyeh multazima*, or committed political song. And neither is he another Shaaban Abdel Rahim, a performer who is part of the popular music scene, famous for a controversial song about Israel and the US. This provides for a critique of Adorno's argument that mass culture could only be used as a site of control, and that the production of music is centralized to serving the needs of capitalism and the state. Looking at the case of Mohammad Mounir allows us to see how fissures could exist, and so the culture industry is a system that is no longer a totality but which allows resistance to occur.

According to Ad-Dustour newspaper, the youth of the 25th of January crowned Mounir "the King of their hearts, their collective consciousness, and their unified voice"¹³. This urges us to examine how Mounir fits within this industry and yet resist it simultaneously through his dialogue with the past, constituting a historical sense.

In order for us to understand the importance of Mounir we have to understand the historical and political period he emerged in. In 1977, the god of Egyptian music Abdel Halim died and Egypt was in shock. At that time performers were very formal, dressed in suits, there was no dancing on stage, and the main themes of music produced were reduced to love, loss, and betrayal. Mounir came along singing the poetry of the giants who wrote for his predecessors, continuing a common intellectual mood, wearing an unbuttoned chemise and dancing on stage! He chose to sing in colloquial Egyptian but he used upper Egyptian and Nubian rhythmic diversity, which was new and which the Cairene music scene was not used to. The centre, meaning Cairo, was very much resistant to the music of the periphery of Upper Egypt and Nubia and the *ughniya elqahiriyya* the Cairene song, was dominant.

In response to Sadat's neo-liberal economic policies that left many impoverished, there was an extensive migration to Europe and the Gulf at the time. Mounir's first album dealt with this change. From the first song, 'Alimouni 'Eneki, he reprimands this new Sadatist Egypt speaking about *ghurba*, exile, and *hijra*, migration, and *Ya Blad Ya Ghariba*, about the strange land the immigrant arrives to, and the Marxist sense of exile, alienation and self-alienation. This does not only apply to Egyptians migrating, but is existential and *worldly* in the Saidian sense that it is also the condition of workers migrating to large cities: the city does not know them, their values, traditions, their past histories, and they find these cities strange, unwelcoming and feel invisible in them. Mounir's first album was rejected by the censors of broadcasting rights part of the 'listening committee' at the time. Performers such as Arabic pop singer Hany Shaker were allowed to release their songs, but not Mounir. However, it was the cassette revolution that allowed his music to circulate and with that came much success. He now has over 20 albums released and has

¹³ Alhassan, Samir. 2011. "Mounir Naa'naa' Jineina ElTahrir wa Mughanni Thawarat Alamani Elmumkina wa Sawt Elhadoota Elmasriyya." Ad-Dustour, Egypt 12 February 2011: 1235

been called the singer of the revolution after the 25th of January uprisings by Egyptian Ad-Dustour newspaper and Hurriyyati magazine.

His songs are deeply emotional and very closely tied to the lived reality in the Arab world today. If Sheikh Imam was the first performer to lament Che Guevara in the 70s, Mounir was the first to lament Sanaa Mheidly, the 18 year old Lebanese who blew herself up on April 9th, 1985 in an organized operation against the Israeli occupation in Lebanon. Sanaa was preparing for her wedding before the operation, and in a recorded video she asked people to call her *'aarusat el junūb* or the bride of the South. The song was called *At'hada Layalik* or I Challenge the Nights written by the well known Egyptian *sha'abi* poet Jamal Bikhit. It begins with a scene where Sanaa is imagined to be preparing for the operation. She performs her ablution with the warm waters of the South (of Lebanon) and performs her prayers. There is a vivid part of the song describing Sanaa' after the suicide bombing and it is a scene where all of her flesh is scattered on the ground:

Eddami 'ala elard kharita
Bitnadi youm elhurriyya
Ashla 'ik bitlim gra'hi
Yirti 'ish elghadr w tirtahi
W y'ūd elhilm elmaslūb

The blood on the ground forms a map
It calls for the day of freedom
Your scattered guts carry my agonies
Treachery trembles and frees your soul
And the stolen dream comes back

In this case, the stolen dream, *elhilm elmaslūb*, is the liberation of Palestine, the *ghadr* or treachery at the hands of Israel and its collaborators in Lebanon. The poem ends by saying that her act will eventually result in the *israa'*, a word present in the Koran to denote walking in the night towards the Aqsa mosque.

Another important composition is *e-nās nāmit*, or people have gone to sleep. It is a powerful song describing Egypt and its role in the Arab world—particularly towards Palestine. The context is the peace treaty that Sadat signed with Israel considered a huge betrayal. The most striking part of the composition is the bass guitar in the background with a dreary, sad sound that converses with the 'Ud solos of German virtuoso Roman Bonka.

The song is a dialogue between the protagonist and his conscience. He stands by the window which symbolizes hope and waits for the next day to come, perhaps it will be better. His conscience asks him who he sings for, *wa'if bitghanni limīn*, and he answers *lihabibti wi lilattfāl*, for his lover and the children. And his habiba, or lover, here is Palestine, and the children are *attfāl elhijara* or the children who cast stones at the Israeli occupier. Then he tells his protagonist to look beyond the balconies, where he sees horsemen and horses: *tabb buss wara elvatarīn, shayef muhra w khayyāl*. This is a

stunning revelation of Salaheldine el-Ayoubi who fought the crusaders and won, and he is looking for another Salaheldine to come and fight for Palestine too against the new crusaders, the Israeli occupiers, to bring liberation. Most importantly, later in the poem Egypt is portrayed to have a dialogue with the Arab peoples:

*Hal kunt fi yūm ghaddar
Anā nahr en-nīl law fadh
Tabb fen zaraa' el ash'aār
Ana zar'ū hwadh hwadh*

Have you ever been more treacherous?
I am the flooding Nile
Where have you planted your songs?
I have planted them in places everywhere

Egypt is being questioned about this decision, and reprimanded. But, replies that she carried all the burdens and troubles of the region and that she has given plenty of good and sacrificed much. With this sadness and frustration that saturates the poem it ends on a positive note of hope that which tomorrow shall bring.

On the 23rd of February, 2011, Egyptian newspaper, Alahrār, published an interview with Mounir. The newspaper reported that *shabāb el thawra* or the youth of the revolution have chosen his song Ezzai (How come?) to be the revolution's song. Mounir responded in saying that the generation of the revolution was one that was brought up with his music in the background and said 'ana sawt elghalāba' or the voice of the defenceless. The song was released in October 2010, but got censored and later released during the uprisings. It was a song of 'itāb or reproach for Egypt. It contained government criticism and condemnation which rendered it provocative. In another interview published on the 27th of February, 2011 by Huriyyati magazine, Mounir was asked whether his song lead to the uprising. He responded saying he released many songs with revolutionary undertones against oppression and injustice, and what is happening in Egypt now and in the Arab world is far larger than one provocative project or song¹⁴.

Popular music in the Arab world today is undoubtedly different than in the time of Umm Kulthūm and Abdel Halīm. Not only has the change reached the way in which the musical piece and its structure are organized, but the four pillars of Arabic music; rendition, composition, text or poetry, and the listening part, changed dramatically¹⁵. The most important of these four aspects of Arabic music is that of rendition or *adāa*. Music was expected to enchant its listeners. It is the work of rendition or *adāa* to produce enchantment which is the 'sense of having been deeply moved by the music.'¹⁶ Most importantly, *tarab* or enchantment was understood to be the aim of music.

¹⁴ Huriyyati. 2011. "Mounir: Ezzai Haradatt 'Ala Elthawara." Hurriyati, Egypt 27 February 2011: 1096

¹⁵ Danielson, V. 1997. Danielson in The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthum, Arabic Song, and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century. University of Chicago Press: Chicago p: 12

¹⁶ Ibid p: 12

However, having Mounir and his work in the midst of all this, continuing a structure that was before, and innovating it through experimentation is remarkable within a culture industry replete with escapism. The nationalist undertones of his songs are far from chauvinistic, but romantic and sentimental. His songs are light, articulate and witty, in the sense that they are not forceful or just 'words in your face.' Through his art he manages to bring people together reminding them of the nostalgic past but presenting an alternative to the present and a desire for change in the future. He does that consciously and with much admirable conviction and humanism. This paper represents a piece and parcel of the enormous work since 1977. Its depth and aestheticism require further exploration in light of historic and political developments in the region. Though there are many singers who sang for the revolution during and after it happened, it was Mohammad Mounir who planted the seeds before that. His work shows he had a desire for the revolution and that he wanted it to happen.