

Review: [untitled]

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Reviewed work(s):

Asmahan's Secrets: Woman, War, and Song by Sherifa Zuhur

Source: *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Nov., 2002), pp. 777-779

Published by: Cambridge University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3879721>

Accessed: 30/09/2008 15:43

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matics; Shaheen's travels throughout the Middle East have convinced him that the region "accommodated diverse, talented, hospitable citizens" (p. 3); "Mideast Arabs—and Arab-Americans—are more than a bit like you and me" (p. 4).

Overall, Shaheen sporadically discusses the historical trajectory and the political and cultural context in which stereotypes of Arabs could develop and thrive and bases his argument on the presupposition that Hollywood is simply bad. For example, Shaheen argues that Hollywood producers were bent on "falsifying geopolitical realities" of World War II by making films that depict Arabs supporting Nazi Germany as early as 1942, which he counters with the information that many Arab nations actively supported the Allies during the war (p. 21). This kind of approach does not provide a nuanced discussion of World War II, in which some Arab nations supported the Allies and some did not. Obviously, the realities of that era, when the entire region was embroiled in a struggle to rid itself of colonial rule as war was breaking out in Europe, are more complex than Shaheen is willing to concede. By ignoring that aspect, however, Shaheen ultimately serves to undermine his otherwise important argument about Hollywood's production of negative images of Arabs. Similarly, to dispel Hollywood's practice of presenting Muslim women as mute, faceless, and clad all in black, Shaheen schematically presents women as lawyers, doctors, and engineers, thus avoiding delving into the intricacies of gender issues in the Middle East. In his efforts to present women in the Middle East as modern and progressive he misses the opportunity to discuss more complex issues of gender.

By the time Shaheen gets to the letter *T* and to a discussion of the recent film *Three Kings* (1999), which includes a more humanist and complex Arab point of view, the reader has no way to understand how or why that transformation in the depiction of Arabs happened. As Shaheen mentions, the mega-production company Warner Brothers went to great lengths to address his concerns as a consultant on the film with regard to the portrayal of Arabs and adapted the script accordingly. Is this the result of an exceptionally sympathetic vision of an individual executive? Perhaps Warner Brothers' approach must be analyzed as part of a larger trend in which the profit-making potential in growing Arab markets might be examined. This and other more difficult and urgent questions remain largely unanswered by this book.

DOI: 10.1017.S0020743802464070

SHERIFA ZUHUR, *Asmahan's Secrets: Woman, War, and Song*, Middle East Monograph Series No. 13 (Austin: University of Texas, Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 2000). Pp. 257. \$15.95 paper.

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The well-deserved success of Virginia Danielson's consummate monograph *The Voice of Egypt* within an English-language academic culture largely devoid of Arab musical biography has (unintentionally) resulted in the overestimation of Umm Kulthum's centrality in the Arab world within that academic culture. Although Umm Kulthum's mythical reputation has continued to grow since her death in 1975, her legend today is larger than her sound space. Likewise, Umm Kulthum faced stiff competition during her lifetime, particularly in the earlier portion of her career, when her legend loomed less large. Of her competitors none was more formidable than the brilliant and beautiful Druze Princess Amal al-Atrash (1917?–44), better known as Asmahan.

Into the relative vacuum of English-language works on Arab music history *Asmahan's Secrets* thus emerges as a most welcome contribution. Like Danielson's work, this book is much more than biography, using Asmahan's life story to illuminate political and social history. But whereas the Umm Kulthum story, in accordance with her self-composure, propriety, modesty, daughter-of-the-Nile roots, and straightforward rags-to-riches success, naturally represents modern Arab culture as a complex but largely harmonious whole, Asmahan's life, her elite genealogy, subsequent poverty, immodest public behavior, multi-culturalism (Levantine, French, Druze,

Egyptian), migrations, alleged espionage, and psychological instability point to the socio-cultural clashes, divisions, and contradictions of the Arab world during the same period. Where Umm Kulthum's story suggests solidarity, optimism, and progress, Asmahan's points to conflict, depression, and disharmony, all pushed to the snapping points of war, or suicide, because her life was like that, too. These two books are, correspondingly perhaps, totally different.

Classification is difficult; perhaps unnecessary. *Asmahan's Secrets* breaks genre conventions through daring juxtapositions of political and social history, biography, ethnography, musicology, even autobiography and historical fiction—it is none and yet all of these, a heady collage of techniques that can, however, occasionally confuse. Danielson's meticulous scholarship is essentially modernist, solidly grounded in empirical facts, objectively focused on a verifiable public sphere, moving inexorably toward firm conclusions. By contrast, Zuhur's is self-referential, tracing contradictions, probing psychological depth, accepting conflicting versions. Zuhur's stated goal is modernist (to "recover Asmahan"). Yet her method is distinctively post-modern, contextualizing multiple voices, playing with genres and styles, and reflexively displaying (and critiquing) ethnographic and historiographic frames of research. Following Seyla Benhabib's post-modern notion of a "web of narratives," Zuhur says that Asmahan's tales, and those of her critics, form "a story about the formation of popular discourse. I write of her and of myself in the writing" (p. 6). Sometimes this technique almost requires non-linear, hyper-textual reading. The sharp stylistic contrast between Danielson's and Zuhur's biographies echoes the contrast in the lives they traced—or, perhaps, the research they lived.

Asmahan's Secrets consists of an Introduction followed by seven chapters. In the manner of post-modern ethnography, the meandering Introduction reflexively positions the author in her field, problematizes the research, and provides a range of goals, including "disentangling" Asmahan, examining her agency, gendering her biography, and refuting Middle Eastern stereotypes, especially by depicting Arab culture of the inter-war period. Chapters 1–5 trace Asmahan's life story, set within contemporary history, all framed by Zuhur's research process. Portions read like historical fiction, including suspenseful prose, quoted speech (p. 79), and psychological description (p. 82), although sources are often not cited. Personal lives abruptly abut world events. The details of Asmahan's birth; her family's flight to Egypt in 1923; the Egyptian musical scene; Asmahan's personal, social, and professional life; and her migrations and political intrigues are recounted, juxtaposed with political and social history, local and global politics, portraits of Cairo and the Druze, and the biographer's sleuthing. Special attention is given to Asmahan's two films, shown to represent and construct her own biography. The mix is complex; the technique is inventive—a literary challenge to the modernist task of reconstructing *the* history. In the spirit of Benhabib's post-modern "web of narratives," Zuhur presents many of Asmahan's life events in multiple versions (reminiscent of Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, or the multiple endings in John Fowle's novels), culminating in the tetralogy of her 1944 death in a car accident. One imagines these textual movements retracing Asmahan's own reckless and restless life, its multiple public representations. But despite such elegant homologies, the style can be bewildering.

The final two chapters examine Asmahan's musical production and socio-cultural positioning. Although they are ambitious, they are also too short to complete what they set out to accomplish. As a consequence, perhaps, they can seem jumbled. Although they may find some theoretical justification, the tendency to interrupt prematurely interesting lines of inquiry with digressions; the refusal of ideas to coagulate into conclusions; and the jumping among historical biography, ethnographic present, Middle Eastern generalities, and cross-cultural banalities ("a deep-seated sexism pervades most industries"; p. 219), is frustrating.

Chapter 6 reviews Asmahan's texts, genres, repertoires, and musical styles. As in her life story, contradictions constantly appear to muddy the waters, making firm conclusions impossible. Although confronting the complexity of musical reality is salutary, better chapter subheads

might have helped to organize this material. Zuhur usefully deploys the post-modern perspective in critiquing the standard classification of Asmahan as “Western” and in demonstrating how her musical meanings invoke diverse cultural identities. However, too many concepts (“classical,” “Eastern,” “Western,” “modernism”) are used uncritically. Some digressions seem irrelevant (e.g., the Platonic quotation on p. 174), and one wishes that other information about musical production had been included (e.g., how she acquired her command of Arabic in French Catholic schools). Accompanying transcriptions and recordings would have helped to make her points clearer (but see the web site at <http://www.asmahan.com>).

Chapter 7 treats a melange of gender, culture, and political issues. Here Asmahan is definitively situated as a symbol of transitions and tensions of her time and place. But elaborations of this perspicacious insight within a broader social history are unfortunately overshadowed by darting digressions (some relevant, some banal, some misleading) to related issues. In a typical sequence (p. 210), her gendered historiography; contemporary tensions between Islamists and entertainers (the “puritanization of the Middle East” [?]); demographics of contemporary Arab popular culture; sources of Asmahan’s controversy; Asmahan’s musical achievements; musical modernization in her era; the general status of music as “symbolic . . . sensuous” (p. 214); objections to music in the Muslim world; musicians’ special status across cultures and in the Middle East generally. After a brief return to gender issues in Asmahan’s era, another digression to the status of Arab entertainers today explains why Asmahan’s family rejected her career, followed by a turn to questions centered on details of her life and psyche (e.g., “why did she waste her energy in gambling?”). Although Zuhur asks many intriguing questions, her discussions sometimes founder in digressions between details and generalities. Asmahan’s story could have better been used as a springboard for a more focused discussion of tensions and transformations in gender, culture, and politics of the early to mid-20th century.

Some reorganization, bringing related sections together and emphasizing the principal conclusions, would have helped to highlight important insights that the reader is otherwise likely to miss. Many more facts should be accompanied by dates. Far too few statements are attributed, and the sources are not always clear. There are numerous small errors in transliteration, translation, and musicological detail. To take four examples: Farid al-Atrash’s song “al-Mahmal al-Sharif” (“The Noble Palanquin,” formerly sent to Mecca on the occasion of Hajj) is transliterated “al-Muhammal al-Sharif” and translated “the carrier of the holy places” (p. 175). Tawasih were performed by a soloist with a chorus, not two choruses (p. 55). In the famous Egyptian folktale, Goha leaves a nail (*mismar*), not a reed pipe (*mizmar*) (p. 71). “Qada’ and qadar” (different aspects of divine decree) are wrongly associated with free will and fate (p. 220—could Zuhur have been thinking of the Qadariyya?). More careful editing would have greatly increased this work’s scholarly value.

Zuhur’s work is ethnographically rich and includes invaluable oral history based on interviews with Asmahan’s family. But one wishes she had expanded her research to include more archival sources, especially popular periodicals from the 1920s–50s. Too much of the book is a translation and retelling of posthumous Arabic biographies, principally Fumil Labib’s *Qissat Asmahan* (1962) and Muhammad al-Taba’i’s *Asmahan tarwi qissataha* (1962). Given the kaleidoscopic treatment, a timeline, a glossary, and a better index (at three pages, the present one is virtually useless) would be welcome navigational tools. Thankfully, many evocative photos have been included.

Asmahan’s short life was extremely rich. Despite its limitations, this book succeeds in conveying that richness and its multi-faceted relationship to Arab culture, society, and history. Further, there is no doubt that the book helps to fill a vital need for English sources about modern Arab social history that are sensitive to contemporary scholarly concerns about gender, affect, and social conflict. For all scholars and students of the modern Middle East this book is a step in the right direction. If more work remains to be done, this one will surely help to set future researchers on their way.