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## **Female Rap Artists in Palestine**

By Marianna Conserva

*“I see Arab hip-hop as the elected representative of the people, with me as its First Lady”*

-Shadia Mansour

### **Introduction: Palestine and Rap Music**

Historically, females have been portrayed as the less dominant gender. Being portrayed in this light has caused women, around the world, to struggle to find their voice. Now in the twenty-first century these ideals have begun to change, mainly in Western cultures. Certain countries have yet to break the mindset of submissive women, especially those with patriarchal governments. These governments act as social systems that primarily give power to men rather than women. The Middle East is known as one of the more male power concentrated areas of the world.

Islam is prominent in most Middle Eastern Countries. Those who follow Islamic masculinity view “the colonial ‘West’ as an emblem of decay to the values of family and society” (Monterescu 2006, 137). This has led Middle Eastern countries to be apprehensive about steering away from patriarchy. The Qur’an, the religious Islamic text, is often thought to be the basis for male dominance for the religion. Many of the popular interpretations of the Qur’an prioritize the male voice, which makes women seem to be the compliant counterparts in any male female relationship. These relationships are often those that involve family structures, such as motherhood and being a wife. Middle Eastern women are beginning to use non-

traditional artistic methods to participate in discourse for change. Palestine is one of the best examples of a Middle Eastern country where women are using new methods, such as music, to be heard.

The people of Palestine, called Palestinians, have had an extremely controversial past. Palestine is a country located within the Gaza strip that has had a prominent role in both ancient and modern history of the Middle East. Since the second millennium BC, the territory of Palestine has been a battleground in attempts to gain its control. Palestinians have fought for centuries to attempt to create a strong and independent state separate from surrounding countries. In the past century, attempts to control this region have been controversial and violent. Palestine has been ruled by several groups, including the Greeks and Babylonians, but the most recent attempt to control this land has been by the people of Israel.<sup>1</sup> In 1948, Israel became an independent state, which included the area of land considered Palestine. The Israeli government forced hundreds of thousands of Palestinians to leave their homes or alternately stay as second-class citizens. The Israeli ruling of the region of Palestine has continued to cause issues to this day. One of the many ways Palestinians have been marginalized is the requirement that they must carry both Israel and Palestine identification cards. "Palestinian citizens of Israel - a trapped minority in a Jewish state' who have continued to stay in their homeland live lives of minimal rights and voice for change (Monterescu 2006, 123). In attempts to create a voice of change, many Palestinians have turned to creative expression, such as hip-hop music.

Rap, a genre of hip-hop music, has historically been a way of musical expression to inform audiences about social, political, and economic oppression that the artists have

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<sup>1</sup> Albright, W. F. (n.d.). *Palestine*. Retrieved from Encyclopedia Britannica: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Palestine>

experienced. This genre of music originated in the United States, specifically with African-Americans who were denied opportunities for more formal musical training and instruments. Rap music is a mix of rhythms and beats with vocals, which does not require long-term musical training to produce. Feelings of frustration and anger are voiced through lyrics by rappers, which are often directed towards their oppressors.<sup>2</sup> Eventually the genre of hip-hop travelled to all parts of the world and the people of the Middle East realized its potential. The population of Palestinian hip-hop artists sky rocketed with the realization that they had the ability to reach not only a local, but also a global audience. Hip hop in Palestine has not only allowed artists to express concerns that are typically undermined, but also enabled artists to interact with others across borders in a way that would not be possible in physical actions.

While hip hop has been a useful way of expression for struggling populations it still has its fair share of setbacks. One of the biggest problems with this genre of music is how male oriented it is. The ratio of male to female artists has made it difficult for females to make an actual impression in the industry, therefore minimizing their voice when it comes to social activism. The genre was originally marketed by and through male artists, which is why the population of males is so much higher. Women in countries that have prominent gender hierarchies and strong male dominance have an even harder time becoming well known in the hip-hop community. Palestine's rap scene has been one of the quickest developing scenes in the Middle East, but female artists are still struggling. Overall the lack of media coverage, participating in a genre dominated in males, and having restricted time to pursue music due to domestic expectations has led Palestinian female rappers to have limited public exposure.

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<sup>2</sup> Genius. (n.d.). *The History of Hip Hop Music*. Retrieved from Genius: <https://genius.com/Bmxe-the-history-of-hip-hop-music-annotated>

## **Female Rap and Minimal Media Coverage**

Music as a strategy of expression in Palestine is now becoming a more frequent topic for scholars to research. Scholars have come to the conclusion that “the Palestinian hip hop subgenre represents resistance to the norms of both Palestinian and Israeli society” (Kahf 2007, 365).

When it comes to the groups/individuals that are the focus of scholarly research, males have the majority of the coverage. Female rap artists tend to be obscured when it comes to popular media outlets covering music and/or stories of the hip-hop genre. Shadia Mansour, a child of two Palestinians, has begun to break through the media that typically shines light on male hip-hop artists (see Appendix A). Mansour began her career in 2003 and has earned the name as the “First Lady of Arab Hip-Hop.” While she can be seen as one of success stories of Palestinian female rappers, there are still many others who have not had the opportunity to be recognized.

In cases where female rap artists in Palestine have had success, in the form of media coverage, they are commonly criticized by the “norms” that are being broken through their musical performances. In Mansour’s case, she wrote her first song, ‘*El Kofeyye 3arabeyye*’ (The Keffiyeh Is Arab), about a traditional scarf called a Keffiyeh that is recognized as symbol of Palestinian struggle. This song was in response to replica Keffiyehs being reproduced as sporting flags in Israel. The reason why this song and many of Mansour’s others have gained success is because of the risk that was taken when they were released. Other big-name hip hop artists in Palestine that have male members face minimal problems when gaining attention from the media.

Palestine’s most famous hip hop group goes by the name of DAM (Da Arabian MC’s). This group has had mainly male artists. DAM has easily gained success in both Palestine and

internationally. Compared to female artists they have had much quicker success that has included minimal backlash. DAM became internationally known after the release of their first single titled ‘*Meen Erhabi*’ (Who’s the Terrorist?). This song “was released in 2001 and reportedly downloaded more than 1 million times from their website in 2008” (Maira & Shihade 2012, 13). Not only did DAM quickly gain exposure from this song, but they also had their music produced into a video by Jackie Salloum (a filmmaker who has had work in the Sundance Film Festival), which circulated YouTube. Female rappers in Palestine often have to self-promote their music and voice, while males have been known to have quick support from media outlets and other platforms.

### **Male Dominance in Rap**

As a genre, Rap has been male dominated. Since rap began with only male artists, it has been an uphill battle for female rappers to make a name for themselves. In order to make a name for themselves, female rap artists including Mansour, have had to perform in controversial ways or speak about “taboo” topics in their music. Social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, Myspace, and YouTube have started to help female artists broadcast their music on a global scale.<sup>3</sup> While there has been an improvement in female accessibility to audiences, there are still issues with the reliance on big name male artists to bring these ‘unknown’ females on tour with them in order to gain exposure. Mansour has vocalized that her goal has been to tell the world that “Palestine is on the map,” but her importance in this process has been shadowed by her male counterparts.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Lee, Lara. 2010. *Hip Hop as Global Resistance*. July 27. [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/iara-lee/hip-hop-as-global-resista\\_b\\_660608.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/iara-lee/hip-hop-as-global-resista_b_660608.html).

<sup>4</sup> Lee. *Hip Hop as Global Resistance*.

When analyzing the male dominance in rap it is important to make clear that there are different factors that affect the genre, which depend on the location of its performance and creation. The issue of gender within Arabic culture in Palestine is one of the main reasons why women find it so difficult to have high levels of success in the music field. Female artists have a “particular responsibility when it comes to challenging the misogyny in some strands of Arab conservatism.”<sup>5</sup> During her tour of the West Bank, the Palestinian territory under Israeli occupation, Shadia Mansour had to fight against performing in front of homosocial audiences. It is traditional for many Middle Eastern countries to have strict rules for gender separation, making it difficult for women to perform to the same level of prestige to male artists.

By viewing Shirin Neshat’s 1996 two-screen video installation called “Turbulent” it becomes clear how different male and female vocalists are viewed and accepted in Middle Eastern societies (Neshat 1996). There is an issue with the separation of male and females in the creative sphere and this video installation shows how men are praised for their creative vocal expression and women are seen to be acting in a non-traditional way. This can directly relate to why Mansour was so against performing for gendered audiences. In multiple interviews she emphasized how her music was meant for all audiences, which meant that attire and gender should not have any effect on her overall message.

It is important to not only compare male and female artists’ opinions on the male dominance of rap in Palestine, but also how scholars have published their findings on the topic. DAM (Da Arabian MC’s) has controlled the rap scene in Palestine since their debut. This is not only the rap groups fault themselves, but also scholars who have studied the importance of rap in

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<sup>5</sup> Robathan, Hannah. 2016. *Shadia Mansour: The Voice Of Palestine From South London*. August 31. <https://theculturetrip.com/middle-east/palestinian-territories/articles/shadia-mansour-the-voice-of-palestine-from-south-london/>.

Palestine. These scholars typically fail to incorporate of female importance in the genre in their findings. One strong example of a scholar who has written in this fashion is David McDonald (2008, who investigates the dominant social and political issues that rappers face as they try to negotiate the conditions of Palestinians in Israel. The author was seeking to understand how the issues of national discourse, hegemony, and social protest are used in music and popular culture to resolve the formation of a collective identity in this location. In order to answer these questions, McDonald researched DAM. He focuses on their music and their most influential song *Hûn Anwalîdat* (Arabic: “Born Here”).

While scholars like McDonald gain large quantities of data on music in Palestine from performing fieldwork, they incorporate bias by examining only male artists. In many cases, the scholars are unaware of how many successful female rappers there are because of their dominant male counterparts that take all the attention. Therefore, they help the field of rap to be seen as male dominated by their readers. McDonald’s research guide while in Palestine was Tamer Nafar, one of the members of DAM. Nafar not only showed McDonald the Palestinian city of Lyd, but also gave him the ability to witness and live the life style of those believed to be undermined in Israel. His research shows how female rap artists are commonly missed when attempting to understand the lives of Palestinian artists in Israel. This is just one example of how there is both a lack of media exposure and difficulty to succeed in the male dominated genre for female rappers in this area of the world.

### **Domestic Expectations Restricting Creativity**

In the Middle East, specifically Palestine, women are seen to be the domestic figure in the household. They are expected to hold responsibilities which include taking care of the



children and the home, while men are the breadwinner. It is the “Islamic law that requires Muslim men to be the family breadwinner” (Marranci 2006, 122). Being the breadwinner has caused men to be the controlling figure in Palestinian homes, which means women are given minimal free time for more casual activities such as creating music. These domestic expectations limited Palestinian women’s ability to pursue their creative interests. Such limitations are the reasons behind so few successful female rap artists. It is hard for women to go against their expectations in society, which often makes pursuing music a sacrifice.

Men of Palestinian homes strive to preserve their families honor. Scholars often argue that this honor is “dependent upon men’s ability to ‘control and supervise the behavior of their females’” (Huntington et al 1989, 3). This control often leads men to restrict women in their family to perform only domestic tasks. The expectations of both men and women in Palestine are deep rooted into all generations, making it difficult to change people’s minds. A study was performed on Palestinian families living in the West Bank and Gaza Strip during 1994 and 1995. Families were given a variety of questions about the domestic expectations of women. Over 25% of the younger family members, between 14 and 20 years old, questioned deemed child care as a “wife only” responsibility (Huntington et al 1989). This high number of younger individuals with the mindset of women being the sole person responsible to perform domestic tasks shows the larger societal issue. While this study was performed about twenty years ago, recent studies do not show much of an improvement.

## **Conclusion**

After analyzing the different factors of the Palestinian rap community, it becomes clear how women are at a disadvantage. Palestinian female rappers have limited public exposure due

to the combination of lack of media exposure, participating in a genre dominated by males, and having limited time to pursue a music career due to domestic expectations. There has to be a shift for women to gain more power in this creative model of expression in order for there to be change. This is important because it allows women to gain recognition and popularized expression in ways that would not be possible through traditional methods in Palestine. More scholars and media outlets need to start focusing on the female rappers, rather than the male rappers that already have enough attention.

As my paper demonstrates, change has slowly begun. Male groups have begun to incorporate female guest artists in their songs. One of the more influential changes that has recently been made was in 2015, when DAM added a female member named Maysa Daw to their group. They released a feminist anthem quickly after Daw's arrival called "Who you are", which showed men and women swapping roles. Not only did this song gain attention from the media, but it also started a battle against sexism in Palestine. The music was also supported by the United Nations to change sexist attitudes in the Middle East. Bold changes like the one made by DAM is what is necessary for female rappers and women in general to gain recognition in Palestine. Palestinian female rappers gaining exposure is just the beginning of what needs to be done to give women voice in countries where they are typically not heard.

### **Appendix A: Shadia Mansour's Biography**

Shadia Mansour was born in London in 1985 into a Christian Palestinian Family. Like many others, Masour's parents were forced to exile Palestine before she was born due to the Israeli forces control over the Palestinian territory. Although her parents were part of Palestine Diaspora for many years they continued their heritages traditions while living in London, which

sprung Shadia's interest and awareness of her cultures complicated heritage. She began singing Arabic classical protest songs at a young age and continued to be influenced by political readings as she grew older. By the age of eighteen she made a name for herself in London's Palestinian-cultural scene by performing at Palestinian cultural events at every chance she had. After years of collaborating with a multitude of talented artists who understood her Arab Diaspora, she began working with Palestine's most well-known hip-hop group DAM (Da Arab MC's) in 2007<sup>6</sup>. By 2008 she began touring with DAM. One of her firsts tours led her back to West Bank Palestine where she reconsidered her role in the Palestinian struggle and the power her voice now had. Since her first tour, Shadia has continued to release music that have become staples in Palestinian communities.



Pictured: Shadia Mansour  
Retrieved from [theculturetrip.com](http://theculturetrip.com)

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<sup>6</sup> Carreño, Natalia Sampedro. 2018. *Shadia Mansour* Retrieved from She Thought It: <http://shethoughtit.ilcml.com/biography/shadia-mansour/>

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