

# Shaaban Abdel Rahim and the Changing Stardom Culture in Egypt

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## Abstract

The subject of the study is Shaaban Abdel Rahim, an illiterate former *makwagi* (man who irons clothes) who gained pan-Arab fame in 2001 for the song 'I hate Israel' and, despite fierce criticism from the national media, has become one of the most recognisable stars of *sha'bi* music in Egypt. The study aims to answer the question of the main criterion of Abdel Rahim's popularity. The initial hypothesis was that the political content of his songs was the most decisive factor in the matter. However, a more detailed study, based on fieldwork conducted in Egypt in 2012, reveals that his political commitment is not the key issue. Referring to the theory of social relevance in popular culture, the author claims that Abdel Rahim's success is not derived from the meanings that people read into his songs, but rather from his low origins. The phenomenon should be considered within the context of a highly class-based society where Abdel Rahim has become a mouthpiece of the most neglected part of the Egyptian population deprived of representation in the mainstream media.

**Key Words:** Shaaban Abdel Rahim, sha'bi, music, popular culture, stardom, Egypt

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## 1. Egyptian Musical Landscape and Classical Stars

Music in Egypt is divided into four types: 1) folk music (*al-musiqa al-sha'biya*), 2) religious music (*al-musiqa al-diniya*), 3) art music (*al-musiqa al-'arabiya*, literary 'Arabic music'), and 4) contemporary popular music that splits into *sha'bi* and *shababi*.<sup>1</sup> These four types overlap in terms of popularity,<sup>2</sup> but differ significantly in their cultural capital and their appreciation by the media interested in promoting high culture and the pan-Arab heritage, in which music has always held an important place.

Since the 'Arabs are mad about music'<sup>3</sup>, with the emergence of radio and television in Egypt in the 1920s and 1960 respectively, music became a prominent component of broadcast media programming to attract an audience. Until the advent of cassette technology in the early 1970s, the state media, being 'the only venues for broadcasting music and song'<sup>4</sup>, secured their exclusive right to shape the musical tastes of the Arab public. The peak of the state media fell on the post-independence Nasserist era (1952-1970) when 'nationalist state-run mass media [...] became the mouthpiece for expressing national aspirations framed in the rhetoric of progress, development, and enlightenment.'<sup>5</sup> The media, endorsing high culture, actively promoted art music dominated by a few stars of its 'Golden Age'. Although the most recognised artists of the genre such as Umm Kulthum, Farid al-Atrash and Abdel Halim Hafez passed away in the 1970s, they are still a point of reference for Arab

critics and audiences, setting the standard by which all subsequent music is measured:

To get a sense of the cultural capital of such singers in Egypt, imagine that when Frank Sinatra passed away millions of weeping fans showed up at his funeral, that he is a central figure in U.S. nationalist mythology, that his music is constantly played on the radio, that his concerts and movies are endlessly aired on television, that video clips of Sinatra singing in concerts or movies are interspersed as fillers between TV programs on a daily basis, and, finally, that all popular music is measured in relation to Sinatra's standard of excellence.<sup>6</sup>

As Fishkopf notes, this was possible mainly due to the Egyptian broadcast media system, i.e. the low number and high power of pan-Arab stations controlled by the state and censors without which the so-called 'giants' would not have achieved such stunning success.<sup>7</sup> However, the advent of cassette technology and the diffusion of music production challenged this control in the early 1970s. Since Western music became more available, the youth became eager for modern music modelled on Western patterns with shorter and faster songs.<sup>8</sup> As a result, two new music genres appeared: *sha'bi* and *shababi*.

## 2. Sha'bi

*Sh'abi* emerged at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s in working-class neighbourhoods of Cairo. Although the first album of Ahmad Adawiya – considered the founder of the genre – sold a million copies when released in 1972,<sup>9</sup> for Egyptian intellectuals *sha'bi* has been a synonym of decadence, bad taste, and the antithesis of real (art) music. While all mediated music is seen as 'bad' compared to classical music, there is a clear difference in the perception of *sha'bi* and *shababi*.

*Shababi* ('of the youth') – referred also to as *al-jil*<sup>10</sup> ('generation') – is Arab pop. It carries a higher degree of legitimacy and is generally accepted in the media. Its representatives are 'physically attractive, vocally talented, and operate within the proper confines of secular and moderate religious propriety.'<sup>11</sup> Although *shababi* is criticised for being too westernised, it is closer to the classical music tradition in terms of its singers' music education, talent and appearance as well as the issues raised in their songs (with love at the top of the list). For that reason, after all, *shababi* singers can be considered as the successors of the Golden Age stars and certainly the lesser of two evils.

On the other hand, *sha'bi* ('of the people/masses') is primarily gauged with reference to the low origins of its musicians and their followers; the term itself derives from the fact that the music was first popular among microbus drivers and

the lower class.<sup>12</sup> *Sha'bi* singers do not have formal musical education and most of them begin their careers in Muhammad Ali street – ‘identified with the “slums” of Cairo and its inhabitants’<sup>13</sup> – singing at weddings, during street celebrations and circumcisions in popular neighbourhoods. From the very beginning, the music was seen as *habit* (vulgar) and banned from the broadcast media.<sup>14</sup> However, during the 1970s the state-run media were replaced by cassette as a distribution channel for music production and, as Nassar complains, ‘absurd lyrics began to appear’ that, alongside western electric instruments, ‘often spoiled the traditional Egyptian music style.’<sup>15</sup>

The new technology disseminated the music and over the years *sha'bi* has strengthened its market position. However, neither the attitude of the national media towards *sha'bi* has changed nor has that of the defenders of high culture. The media still avoid broadcasting *sha'bi* and intellectuals even call into question the use of the term *sha'bi* since it may be misunderstood as appreciated folk music. Thus, they prefer the term *fann 'ashwa'i* (‘art of slums’) as more appropriate (and far more stigmatised) since its audiences are ‘*ashawa'iyyat* inhabitants, tuk-tuk and microbus drivers’.<sup>16</sup>

### 3. The study

#### A. Shaaban Abdel Rahim

The subject of the study is Shaaban Abdel Rahim – one of the most recognisable as well as controversial stars of *sha'bi*. This physically unattractive, illiterate former *makwagi* embodies all the stereotypical features of a *sha'bi* musician. However, despite fierce criticism from advocates of high culture, he has become one of the biggest stars in Egypt and a well-known figure throughout the Arab world.

Like most *sha'bi* musicians, Shaaban Abdel Rahim began his career performing at weddings. He was quite well-known in Egypt by the late 1990s when began to appear on TV talk shows.<sup>17</sup> However, he gained international fame in 2001 from the song ‘I hate Israel’ and soon established himself as ‘the Arab world’s best-known “political singer”’.<sup>18</sup> The song released during the Second Intifada (Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation) – covered in all pan-Arab as well as state media and accompanied by widespread support for the Palestinians and grassroots initiatives, such as the boycott of American and Israeli products in Egypt<sup>19</sup> – was destined for success. ‘I hate Israel’, expressing in a simple and blunt manner the feelings of all Arabs, won the hearts of the public and became a symbol of resistance against Israel. Since then, Abdel Rahim has been considered the most famous musical commentator on current political and social issues in the Arab world. Although media ‘dismiss him as a bad joke’ and disparage his physical appearance,<sup>20</sup> he cannot be ignored or totally banned for commercial reasons. Thus, private

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Egyptian satellite channels – mainly *Melody* and *Mazzika*<sup>21</sup> – broadcast his video clips; he has also starred in few movies.

## B. Aims and methodology

The study aims to answer the question of the most important criterion of Shaaban Abdel Rahim's popularity. The initial hypothesis was that the most important determinant in raising Abdel Rahim to stardom was contents of his songs that made him, as called by Abd al-Hadi, a columnist in the journal "Ruz al-Yusuf", the 'interpreter of the pulse of the Egyptian and Arab street'.<sup>22</sup> Whatever he sings about, be it the U.S. policy in the Middle East, George W. Bush, Ariel Sharon, the Jyllands-Posten Muhammad cartoons, drugs, avian influenza or swine flu, he manages to express the emotions shared by the whole society. Thus, referring to Fiske's theory of popular culture, his songs meet the central criterion for popular discrimination, i.e. relevance, which means that a cultural resource offers 'points of pertinence through which the experience of everyday life can be made to resonate with it'.<sup>23</sup>

To test the hypothesis, the author used qualitative research to examine the attitudes of Abdel Rahim's followers, i.e. mainly members of the lower class. The research, in the form of in-depth interviews, was conducted in August 2012 in Safaga, a small port town and tourist area located 53 km (33 mi) south of Hurghada on the coast of the Red Sea, and one of the most common destinations for labour migrants from all over Egypt. To recruit interviewees, convenience and snowball sampling techniques were employed. The interviews were carried out in Egyptian Arabic. The sample consists of 27 people, all of whom are men aged 22 to 39. They come from different parts of Egypt, usually Greater Cairo and Luxor province and came to Safaga in search for employment. At the time of the research, the majority were manual labourers at the port or else working in tourism. Thus, the interviewees can be portrayed as representatives of the lower and lower-middle class. However, they differ in terms of education ranging from semi-illiterates to college graduates.

## C. Findings

When I explained what the topic of my research was, in the beginning the majority of respondents did not take it seriously. The first reaction was consternation and embarrassment; they could not understand how a person like Shaaban Abdel Rahim could be the subject of academic research. Some suggested more proper and respectable issues to tackle, e.g. Islam, Arabic language or classical music. Interestingly, such reactions were typical of virtually all respondents regardless of their attitude towards the singer. However, interviewees with higher aspirations in terms of social class membership – usually those with college diplomas (higher or at least secondary education and a 'clean' job, i.e. not manual, are essential factors for middle class identification<sup>24</sup>) – tended to be more resistant and sometimes even suspicious. The statement that occurred repeatedly was that Abdel Rahim was

uneducated, and only taxi drivers and the illiterate – or as one respondent said, ‘people who tend to think that the great pyramids are located in Luxor’ – listened to him. One person being asked to participate in the research categorically refused since Abdel Rahman’s fans were *nas ghalaba* (literary ‘the poor’) and residents of ‘*ashawa’iyyat*. These two terms are vital to understanding the respondents’ reaction.

‘*Ashwaa’i* (literary ‘haphazard’) is used with reference to informal housing areas (i.e. built without official permission). Although such areas constitute, depending on sources, 60 to 70 percent of the total urban area of Greater Cairo, ‘*ashawa’iyyat* has become a synonym for slums. Mainstream media tend to describe informal areas as nests of criminals, terrorism, prostitutes and thugs; while their residents are referred to as ‘deviants’, ‘animals’, ‘cancers’, ‘backward’ and a threat to modernity and civilisation.<sup>25</sup> The fear of being associated with *nas ghalaba*, particularly by a Western scholar, seems to be the main reason for the initial confusion usually followed by the question, ‘And what do you think about him?’ Although the stigmatisation of *sha’bi* encouraged people to pretend to submit to the dominant culture, as time went on, the respondents made more and more straightforward statements.

Many interviewees admitted that Abdel Rahim sang about important issues, but, surprisingly, hardly anybody mentioned these issues. Only one informant said that it was the most crucial reason for his admiration for the singer. However, this opinion should be considered in relation to the interviewee’s life experiences and his political commitment. Omar from Cairo, aged 24, is a political activist and, as a fierce opponent of the Mubarak regime, was actively involved in Egypt’s January 25 Revolution in 2011. He likes Abdel Rahim very much because, despite his humble origins, he dares to deal with issues nobody else does, especially those relating to the U.S. and Israel. When asked about Abdel Rahim’s support for Mubarak during the presidential campaign in 2005 and his appearance in a McDonald’s television commercial in 2001 – two things contradicting Omar’s strong aversion to Israel – he said:

McDonald’s advertisement was a mistake, but McDonald’s is everywhere. Right, Coca Cola, Pepsi, Fanta and McDonald’s are Zionist companies, but we all drink it and go to McDonalds. When it comes to Mubarak, he had to support him. Before the revolution, everyone loved Mubarak. My mom cried when he was overthrown; people couldn’t understand anything. After ‘I hate Israel’, he was arrested, he had to do so to make them let him live in peace. In reality, he hated Mubarak and, after all, he sings his heart out, he is witty.

As a matter of fact, Abdel Rahim praised Mubarak long before the presidential campaign in 2005 in his famous ‘I hate Israel’ (‘I love Hosni Mubarak because he

has a big heart'). Nevertheless, whether Abdel Rahim hated Mubarak is beyond the scope of this paper. The point is that, bearing in mind the time of the research (after the Revolution), it might have been a factor to his disadvantage. However, the respondents did not evoke 'sensitive' issues and when asked none of them blamed him. Abdel Rahim's support for Mubarak or his participation in a McDonald's commercial during the Intifada and the boycott of American products – of which McDonald's is the undisputed symbol in Egypt – were regarded as pure pragmatism; 'Perhaps this is not a reason to be proud of, but he did it for the money, and there is nothing wrong with that. Everybody would have done if only he or she had the chance.' (Adballah, 21)

While respondents admitted that Abdel Rahim sang about important issues, they generally downplayed the artistic value of his music emphasising his lack of talent and that all his songs were similar with the same characteristic rhythm, which, some claimed, was not listenable. Ahmad Adaweya was someone who could be labelled as a real *sha'bi* artist; however, Abdel Rahim is the unquestionable star. But why? Here, respondents frequently referred to the singer's personality; 'Maybe he doesn't read too much, but he has charisma, which others lack.' (Radwan, 36). Many emphasised that he was honest, both as a musician and a man, and he did not pretend to be someone else.

Nevertheless, to answer the question 'why', one should look not only to what respondents said about Abdel Rahim, but how they said it as well. Contrasting the singer's past life with his present status occurred frequently. Talking about his (lack of) education and origin, respondents used the past tense; 'He was a *makwagi* and used to put on strange clothes, but now he is famous.' (Muhammad, 37); 'He was an uneducated, simple man, and now he appears in television programs and stars in movies, big stars want to star with him.' (Nemo, 30). In fact, he is still a simple man, still oddly dressed and still uneducated, but the difference lies in the fact that now he is famous. Therefore, the above statements can be understood in two ways; either that he managed to achieve great success despite his illiteracy and low origin, or that his illiteracy and low origin are no longer valid as his distinctive features since he achieved success. No matter which interpretation is correct (perhaps both are), he is a simple man whom the dominant culture had to recognise since even its most influential representatives (i.e. big stars) want to appear by his side.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The interviewees' responses suggest that, contrary to the initial assumption, it is not the contents of Abdel Rahim songs that are the most important determinant in his popularity. That is not to say that his political commitment did not raise him to stardom. However, his lasting success is rather to be considered in the context of the dominant culture and strong class divisions in the Egyptian society, where an expanding lower class is denied representation in the official culture. As Al-Bargouti notes, the 'culture produced by television is that of the young Arab elite, a

depoliticized, disengaged elite that seems to be coming from outer space'<sup>26</sup>; and suddenly this culture, in which 'the handsome singer represents a socio-political system that oppresses and deprives his amazed spectator',<sup>27</sup> was challenged by the illiterate and unattractive Shaaban Abdel Rahim.

Abdel Rahim, embodying the lowest end of the social hierarchy in Egypt, is not the average Egyptian, nor is he the average lower class member. He certainly causes some disgust and embarrassment; however, what seems to be his disadvantage turns out to be his biggest advantage at the same time. In terms of art, for the Egyptian audience, irrespective of class, the 'giants' of classical music and their successors will always be paragons of musical excellence. However, Abdel Rahim, as a representative of the non-dominant popular culture, is a figure with whom subordinate social groups can identify. Both the official and the dominant popular culture (i.e. the *shababi* recognized in public discourse) lack relevance – points of reference reflecting the experiences of the lower class. Meanwhile, Abdel Rahim, as a cultural product, displays basic features of a 'producerly' text, i.e. a popular text in Fiske's concept – excess and the obvious.<sup>28</sup> The pleasures of an excessive, sensational text that exposes the inadequacy of norms,

are the pleasures of seeing the dominant, controlling explanations of the world at the point of the breakdown, pleasures that are particularly pertinent to those who feel barred from participating in controlling discourses of any sort, scientific or not. The sensational is the excessive failure of the normal, and as such pushes the norms to the limits of their adequacy and then exceeds them, pushes them over the edge.<sup>29</sup>

Abdel Rahim certainly exposes the inadequacy of norms that the elite, detached from the reality of the Egyptian street, has imposed. The pleasures, which Fiske writes about, result from the fact that Abdel Rahim combines all the features most stigmatised (by the dominant culture). As the lowest of the low he gives subordinate groups, which otherwise might consider their lives a failure, a sense of normality. Importantly, the media symbolically confirm the failure of 'the normal' utilising Abdel Rahim's potential to reach the lowest strata of society in the information campaign during the swine flu outbreak in 2009, when Egyptian television broadcast his song 'Swine Flu'.

Despite the popularity of *sha'bi* musicians, until recently it was difficult to imagine that someone like Abdel Rahim could become such a big star. Abdel Rahim is a grotesque figure and the majority treat him so. On the other hand, he has become a mouthpiece for the most neglected segments of the Egyptian population. His success demonstrates the gradual democratisation of culture as well as the increasing impotence of the old media to ignore the masses and impose the only 'proper' culture.

**Notes**



- 1 James R. Grippo, "Analysis What's Not on Egyptian Television and Radio! Locating the 'Popular' in Egyptian Sha'bi," in *Music and Media in the Arab World*, ed. Michael Frishkopf (Cairo, New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2010), 139.
- 2 Virginia Danielson, "New Nightingales of the Nile: Popular Music in Egypt Since the 1970s," *Popular Music* 15, no. 3 (1996): 301.
- 3 Andrew Hammond, *Popular Culture in the Arab World: Arts, Politics, and the Media* (Cairo, New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2007), 170.
- 4 Mounir Al Wassimi, "Arab Music and Changes in the Arab Media," in *Music and Media in the Arab World*, ed. Michael Frishkopf (Cairo, New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2010), 91.
- 5 Patricia Kubala, "The Controversy over Satellite Music Television in Contemporary Egypt," in *Music and Media in the Arab World*, ed. Michael Frishkopf (Cairo, New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2010), 178.
- 6 Ted Swedenburg, "Sa'ida Sultan/Danna International: Transgender Pop and the Polysemiotics of Sex, Nation, and Ethnicity on the Israeli-Egyptian Border," in *Mass Mediations: New Approaches to Popular Culture in the Middle East and Beyond*, ed. Walter Armbrust (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2000), 90.
- 7 Michael Frishkopf, "Introduction: Music and Media in the Arab World and Music and Media in the Arab World as Music and Media in the Arab World: A Metadiscourse," in *Music and Media in the Arab World*, ed. Michael Frishkopf (Cairo, New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2010), 13.
- 8 Michael Frishkopf, "Some Meanings of the Spanish Tinge in Contemporary Egyptian Music," in *Mediterranean Mosaic: Popular Music and Global Sounds*, ed. Goffredo Plastino (New York, London: Routledge, 2002), 158.
- 9 Hammond, *Popular Culture in the Arab World*, 170.
- 10 Ibid.; David Lodge and Bill Badley, "Egypt - Popular/Street Music: Cairo Hit Factory," in *World Music Volume 1: Africa, Europe and the Middle East: The Rough Guide*, ed. Simon Broughton, Mark Ellingham and Richard Trillo (London: The Rough Guides, 1999).
- 11 Joel Gordon, "Singing the Pulse of the Egyptian-Arab Street: Shaaban Abd al-Rahim and the Geo-Pop-Politics of Fast Food," *Popular Music* 22, no. 1 (2003): 77.
- 12 Yasser Abdel-Latif, "Music of the Streets: The Story of a Television Program," in *Music and Media in the Arab World*, ed. Michael Frishkopf (Cairo, New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2010), 130.
- 13 Nicolas Puig, "Egypt's Pop-Music Clashes and the 'Word-Crossing' Destinies of Muhammad 'Ali Street Musicians," in *Cairo Cosmopolitan: Politics, Culture, and Urban Space in the New Globalized Middle East*, ed. Diane Singerman and Amar Paul (Cairo, New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2006), 521.
- 14 Walter Armbrust, *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 180.
- 15 Zein Nassar, "A History of Music and Singing on Egyptian Radio and Television," in *Music and Media in the Arab World*, ed. Michael Frishkopf (Cairo, New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2010), 67–76, 73.
- 16 Ġamāl 'Abd al-Qādir, "'lissa han anni'... wa-fann al-'ašwa'iyāt," Aljarida, accessed May 4, 2014, <http://www.aljarida.com/news/index/2012603927/%C2%AB%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%87-%D9%87%D9%86%D8%BA%D9%86%D9%8A%C2%BB...-%D9%88%D9%81%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA/tag:70>.
- 17 James R. Grippo, "The Fool Sings a Hero's Song: Shaaban Abdel Rahim, Egyptian Shaabi, and the Video Clip Phenomenon," *Transnational Broadcasting Studies* 16 (2006), accessed April 6, 2014, <http://tbsjournal.arabmediasociety.com/Grippo.html>.
- 18 Eli Lake, "Cairo Dispatch: Sheik Yo Booty," *The New Republic*, May 8, 2006, 8.
- 19 Taline Djerdjarian, "Political Consumerism and the Boycott of American Goods in Egypt," in *Cairo Contested: Governance, Urban Space, and Global Modernity*, ed. Diane Singerman (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2009).

20 Grippo, "The Fool Sings a Hero's Song,"

21 Ibid.

22 Joel Gordon, "Singing the Pulse of the Egyptian-Arab Street: Shaaban Abd al-Rahim and the Geo-Pop-Politics of Fast Food," *Popular Music* 22, no. 1 (2003): 83.

23 John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (London, New York: Routledge, 1989), 130.

24 Anouk de Koning, *Global Dreams: Class, Gender, and Public Space in Cosmopolitan Cairo* (Cairo, New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2009), 47–9.

25 Diane Singerman, "The Siege of Imbaba, Egypt's Internal 'Other', and the Criminalization of Politics," in *Cairo Contested: Governance, Urban Space, and Global Modernity*, ed. Diane Singerman (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2009).

26 Tamim Al-Barghouti, "Caliphs and Clips," in *Music and Media in the Arab World*, ed. Michael Frishkopf (Cairo, New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2010), 227.

27 Ibid., 228.

28 Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, 114.

29 Ibid., 116.

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