

# The “New Woman” of the Interwar Period:

## Performance, Identity, and Performative Act of Everyday Life in Egypt and Iran\*

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### Introduction

This article is about visual culture, identity, and women in interwar Egypt and Iran. I use a transnational feminist approach to connect the histories of Egypt and Iran, in their differences and commonalities, during the interwar period. By emphasizing women’s education as the source of advancement of the society, the late nineteenth century Egyptian thinkers, Qasim Amin and Mohammad Abduh, and Iranian intellectuals Jamal al-Din Asadabadi (al-Afghani), Abdolhossein Khan Kermani, and Yusef Ashtiyani, invoked a male representation of a “feminist” discourse. During the 1906-1911 Iranian Constitutional Revolution and the 1919 Egyptian anti-British Revolution, the discourse of education was translated into women’s first quest for legal and political rights. National modernization policies, as diverse as they were in each country, translated the “woman question,” both as a discursive and a practice, into the question of women’s appearance in public.

In interwar Egypt and Iran, articulation of the “new modes of women’s identity formation” was tied to many emerging aspects of the public sphere and many shifting boundaries of public and private realms of the culture of the body performance, including writing, music, theater, cinema, and dress. As a result, the public sphere shifted from a “site of debates and dialogue” to a “field of appearance, visibilities, and performances.” Print culture and press, with its many photographs and illustrated articles, contributed to the discursive foundation. The “New Woman” of the interwar Egypt and Iran addressed the emergence of this new culture of visual public sphere.<sup>1</sup>

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1. See Amin, 2000; Badran, 1994; Cinar, 2005; Habermas, 1989; & Najmabadi, 1998.

The concept of the “New Woman” was an early twentieth century cultural import to the Middle East. It dealt with the notion of “modernity” and the emergence of a new concept, that of the visual public sphere, with its socio-political challenges to the hegemony of society. The British journalist, Sarah Grand, first used the term in 1894 in the *North American Review*. The European press and Anglo-American novel writers immediately popularized it. Henric Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* (1879), staged for the first time in London, in 1889, ignited the proliferation of a series of public images on “the woman question” (Roberts, 2002, p. 22). The concept of the “New Woman” incorporated the “culture of personality, self-development, and self-fulfillment, rejecting the traditional notion of domesticity and its moral association with sacrifice and self-denial” (Roberts, p. 21).

Although in Europe and North America the concept was defined as “a rebellion against the stale Victorian truisms of bourgeois liberal culture” voicing “to attain moral and economic freedom” (Roberts, p. 21), the symbol became painted with a slight political tint in the Middle East.

Drawing on a closer reading of images, texts, and audio collections, I historicize the visual as an experience of women’s everyday life, underlining in so doing the significance of the performing arts as a performative act. I talk about the liminal position of music and stage performance as sites of transgression. Many of the shifting boundaries of the public and private realms of the culture of body performance, including one’s feminist consciousness, feminine persona, nationalist self, and social responsibility, have defined the interlocking means of the artistic performance and creativity of the “New Woman” in interwar Egypt and Iran. To explore these major points, I have focused on different strata of society, but at the same time, on the private persona of the interwar Iranian musical stage celebrity, Qamar al-Molouk Vaziri, and the Egyptian musical theater artist, Munira al-Mahdiyya.

### Women, Performing Arts, and Performance during Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries Egypt and Iran

The origin of the art of performance in Egypt and Iran, as the manifestation of diverse forms of artistic expression in private and public settings, is as old as the histories of these countries themselves. Despite the widespread notion in grand narratives of the males’ enactment of women’s roles in pre-nineteenth century Iran and Egypt, sporadic documents tracing back women’s historical presence in the performing arts as singers, performers, and dancers tell us that such a history has yet to be written. In the nineteenth century, both in Egypt and Iran, women singers and performers entered the profession through informal family or local training, but it was not until the 1920s and 1930s that these activities were acknowledged as careers for women. Although the establishment of separate training institutions and European-style theater and concert halls has shattered the unity of what could be termed the performing arts of the period – singing, acting, and dancing – women of the interwar period were still combining all those different artistic expressions in their performances on stage. As Karin van Nieuwkerk (1995) has argued with reference to Egypt, “The status of entertainers became increasingly determined by the form and context of their performances” (p. 62) when in the 1930s different state-funded professional art schools began to flourish.

According to Ali Racy (1997), musical culture in Egypt during the 1920s was still centered on artists “reinterpreting musical and poetic models known in the culture” (p. 140). As a means of creating personal and national identities and as a form of resistance to Western cultural domination, a search for *sunna* (i.e. tradition) in *al-musiqā al-arabiyya* (i.e. Arab music) in Egypt (Castelo-Branco, 1980) and *aseel* (i.e. original/traditional) in *melli* (i.e. national) music in Iran (During, 1991) became popular during the early decades of the twentieth century. Women performers were an integral part of this momentum with their presence on public stages in coffeehouses, theater halls, and nightclubs. As pioneers for the future generation of female artists, these women with their public presence transformed their own personal lives as well as their society’s cultural attitudes, norms, and aesthetics. Like women’s activities and accomplishments in politics, education, and law led by Egyptian feminists, such as Huda Sh’arawi, S’aiza

Nabrawi, and Nabawiyya Musa, and Iranian activists Sediqeh Dawlatabadi and Nur al-Huda Manganeh, the public participation of women in the performing arts has played a significant role in transforming the cultural life of the society.

Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1789 led to the country's encounter with Europe, producing works of art in the form of either European adaptations or Arabic plays and songs. With the presence of the Europeans in the country, construction of large theater and concert halls funded by the Khedives laid the ground for women's public performances. For example, many women professional singers and performers of the 1920s in Egypt began their careers by performing during intermissions at the Opera House built in 1869 on the occasion of the opening of the Suez Canal (Racy, 1977). In general, though, women's performance on stage as well as their presence in the audience was a spatially segregated phenomenon which explains why, in the 1920s, Badi'a Masabni still held matinee shows on Tuesdays in her *sala* (i.e. music hall) for women.

During the nineteenth century, female professional singers and performers, known as *'awalim* in Cairo, had their own trade guilds and made contracts with individual patrons for particular private ceremonies attended by women. Some elite and royal families housed the talented *'awalim* within their palaces. Seated inside a room with wooden lattice-work windows, these women could be heard, but not seen, by the male guests sitting in the court. It is important to note that there were two classes of women performers, *'awalim* and *ghawazi*, and they had distinctive levels of social respect and status. *'Awalim* were learned women who wrote poetry, composed music, and sang songs, but did not perform in public. *'Awalim* performed a repertoire called *taqtuqa* which refers to light, short songs written in colloquial Arabic. A minor form of art in a male dominated profession, *taqtuqa* could resemble the Western "pop music," as opposed to *dawr* and *muwashaha* performed by men, and comparable with Western "classical compositions." Unlike the *'awalim*, *ghawazi* were groups of female dancers and entertainers who "performed unveiled in the streets and in front of coffeehouses" on the occasion of saint's day or *mawlid* (i.e. prophet's birthday) festivities.<sup>2</sup> Although there were some Christian and Jewish *'awalim*, most of them were born in Egypt from working-class Muslim families. One such *'alma* Almaz (1860-1896), a professional singer as talented as her male counterparts under the patronage of Khedive Isma'il, was born into a Lebanese family in Alexandria (Nieuwkerk, 1995). Moreover, Al-Hajja Huda, the daughter of a miller in the Muski neighborhood of Cairo, whose daughters later became *'awalim*, was the leader of the guild in the early twentieth century. Besides, Fathiyya, Mufida, and Ratiba Ahmed, the three sisters who became famous professional singers owning their own *sala* during the 1920s, were nieces of Bamba Kashshar, a famous *'alma* (Danielson, 1991).

The post World War I culture of the spectacle in the city, streets, and public entertainment districts, including art schools, and music, theater, and movie halls, as well as clubs provided numerous sites for women to watch and be seen. The increase in the number of musical recordings, journal ads, and other commercial entertainment venues has popularized performing arts as a career for women. The emergence of artistic districts, such as Raud al-Faraj and Emad al-Din streets, known as the "Broadway of Cairo," with theaters and music halls, helped produce stars, such as Munira al-Mahdiyya, Fatima Rushdi, Fathiyya Ahmed, Na'ima al-Masriyya, Fatima Sirri, Ratiba Ahmed, Badi'a

2. For more information see Van Nieuwkerk, 1995, p.26; Racy, 1977, pp. 52-54.

Masabni, and Umm Kulthum (Danielson, 1991; Mitchell, 2006). The increase in the genre of “musical theater,” on the one hand, brought traditional music such as classical poetic text with rhyme (i.e. *qasida*) accompanied by an orchestra (*takht*)<sup>3</sup> to the heart of the theatrical plays, while on the other hand it popularized nationalistic songs of poets and musicians such as Ahmed Shawqi, Salama Hijazi, and Sayyid Darwish. Musical theater in Egypt also created fields of specialization for artists and brought forth a group consisting of *mutrib* (i.e. the singer), *mu'allif* (i.e. the writer/poet), *mulahhin* (i.e. the composer), and *takht* (i.e. orchestra) (Racy, 1977).

In Iran, Nasir al-Din Shah Qajar's (1848-1896) several trips abroad, financed with European loans, opened the country's door to the West and to the construction of theaters and concert halls funded by the Shahs. The constitutional revolution of 1906-1911 and the debates generated by the newly emerging middle class nationalists and intelligentsia over the impact of the art of performance on social and cultural awakening and the advancement of masses have paved the way for the opening of several performing arts companies such as *Farhang* (i.e. the culture) Company, *Komedi Iran* (i.e. Iran comedy) and *Komedi Akhavan* (i.e. Akhavan comedy). Armenian, Turkish, and Jewish women, such as Sara Yahoodi and Molouk Hosseini, were the first performers playing women's parts on a public stage (Emami, 1987; Sami'i, 1999). In 1910, a woman for the first time appeared on a public stage in front of male audiences. The play was an adaptation of *Tabeeb Ijbari* (i.e. the doctor in spite of himself), a seventeenth century comedy by French playwright, Moliere. It was performed by an Armenian theatrical group whose members had full command of Farsi and was brought to the stage inside the Armenian School of Tehran (Rasoulzadeh, 1910). *Iran Javan* (i.e. the young Iran) Theater was the first theater hall in 1922 where Muslim women and men were able to sit together and watch plays (Beyzai, 2004; Sami'i, 1999). *Honarestan Musiqi* (i.e. the school of music), established in 1926 by the master *tar* (i.e. a corded musical instrument) player, 'Alinaqi Vaziri in Iran, allotted matinee shows to women. These women later founded *Jam'iat Bidari Neswan* (i.e. women's awakening association) and organized a few plays at the auditorium of the Zoroastrian school (Khosrowpanah, 2003).

In post World War I Iran, few women directed plays (e.g. Marzieh Khanom); some performed in the works directed by their husbands (e.g. Lala Vartoonian), and others, like Mme Pari Aqababayof, performed in plays, operettas, and folklore music, forming the first female dancing group (Sami'i, 1999). Pioneering screen actresses during the 1930s, such as Fakhrolzaman Jabbar Vaziri, Iran Daftari, and Ruhangiz Sami Nejad, sang songs in films. While Ruhangiz and Qamar al-Molouk Vaziri confined their artistic careers to singing, phonographic recordings, and later radio, Molouk Zarrabi explored her talent in musical theater. The nationalistic songs of 'Aref Qazvini, Mirzadeh 'Eshqi, Shyeda, and Malek al-Sho'ara Bahar, sung by women celebrities in Iran, just as in Egypt, were produced in collaboration with the *muallif*.

### Women's Press and Performing Arts

During the 1920s and 1930s, the press in Egypt and Iran played a vital role in both reflecting and constructing an identity for a modern nation. The number of journals published by women increased, and both their content (editorials, letters to editors, art pages) and style (the addition of illustrations) underwent change. These women of the

3. *Takht*, a Persian word literally translated as the “platform”, was a small music ensemble consisting of two to five instrumentalists and a solo vocalist. During the first quarter of the twentieth century, through musical theater, new instruments including some Western ones were introduced, and the name *takht* was replaced with *firqā* (i.e. band). See Castelo-Branco, 1980, p. 559.

press wrote about each other in detail and displayed visual images of their identities. In Egypt 15 journals were in circulation and in Iran 13.

In Iran, from the mid 1920s, ads about women's public performances in theaters and musical concerts appeared in *'Alam Neswan* (the world of women). Some journals, such as *Ayandeh Iran* (the Future of Iran), added illustrations, mostly sketches, and photographs of teachers and students (Babran, 2002). In Egypt, by contrast, women's journals, such as *Ruz al-Yusuf*, *al-Hisan*, and *al-Fatat*, were filled with visual and literary stories about the personal and professional lives of women artists in the fields of music, theater, and cinema. Illustrated news about women who were finally able to open their own *salas* made headlines in both Iran and Egypt, and articles about the positive and negative aspects of different forms of performing arts abounded.

### **A Voice, a Time, and a Place: Private Qamar and Public Munira**

Several studies on the historical narrative of performance in Egypt and Iran separately explore themes, such as storytelling, improvisation, and musical lyrics, as elements of continuity and change (Castelo-Branco, 1980; During, 1991). In writing a history of women's artistic activities in performance in Iran and Egypt, these themes obtain trans-historical meanings as they address the question of continuity and change between the early twentieth century and the past. They are central to the understanding of everyday life of female performers in interwar Egypt and Iran. Moreover, the motifs studied in relation to the artistic activities of Qamar and Munira provide a transnational terrain for the exploration of historical connections between the two countries. In other words, they represent shared operative tropes through which different or similar artistic performative acts of the Egyptian musical theater artist, Munira al-Mahdiyya, and the Iranian stage celebrity, Qamar al-Molouk Vaziri, are explored as each of these women goes through complex processes in the formation of her identity as the "New Woman." According to Farfan (2004), public discourse on gender regards performance as pertaining not only to the performing arts but also to the performative act or to everyday life practices. The relationship between performing arts and gender is dependent on the political, economic, and social contexts of each society. At the same time, the performing arts play a significant role in defining national and cultural identities: "One cannot underestimate the power of performance, the substantial risks undertaken by performers, and the dynamic relationship between theater, identity, politics, and society" (Lengel & Warren, 2005, p. 2). As Roberts (2002) has argued about women artists and performers of the turn of the century in France, "[t]o act" for a woman "was a form of prostitution aimed at seducing the entire audience. Actresses threatened the naturalized female virtue vital to sexual differentiation, but actresses were idols to new women as well as outcasts" (pp. 54-57). Moreover, "[b]y entering the world of the stage, actresses lost respectability but escaped the strictures of domestic life" (Roberts, 2002, p. 57).

Cultural flourishing surrounding the discourse of the "New Woman" of the interwar period in Iran and Egypt is best illustrated by the extraordinary vocal stands of two women performers namely, the Iranian Qamar al-Molouk Vaziri and the Egyptian Munira al-Mahdiyya, who played significant roles in giving a humanist, visible, and nationalistic identity to women, music, and culture in their societies. Both were born

in environments where singing and performing were sources of economic necessity, and they drew their earlier inspirations from that.

### **Qamar al-Molouk Vaziri: in Iran**

Following the death of her mother, Qamar al-Molouk Vaziri lived with her grandmother, Mulla Khair al-Nessa', who was a court *rozehkhan* (i.e. religious reciter) and *mawliidi* (i.e. chanter). On occasion, she would sing with her grandmother, revealing her talent and interest in singing. It has been said that, from this early exposure, Qamar had gained the self-confidence and internal strength vital to a young woman performing in public. Her first exposure to the intellectual world of Iranian traditional music was when her grandmother took a trip leaving Qamar in her cousin's house, the wife of Majd al-Sanay'e, a wealthy man whose house was often frequented by many celebrities of the time. By listening to the songs and lyrics performed during these friendly gatherings, Qamar was informally introduced to the different styles of Iranian traditional music and developed a special interest in them. At the tender age of seventeen, while attending a wedding party with her grandmother, Qamar dared to sing a song, which consisted of rich lyrics from Persian classical poetry, displaying her talent and self-confidence for the first time in public. She became the shining star of the wedding ceremony. It was on this occasion that Ustad Morteza Naydawood encouraged Qamar to pursue advanced musical education. A few days later, Qamar appeared at the doorsteps of Ustad's house ready to take those special lessons in vocal music (Khaleqi, 2000).

Following her emergence as a female artist, Qamar struggled against prejudice and discrimination. She had to deal with her husband while working in a professional field historically dominated by men and while resisting being controlled by the powers that be. She left her husband early on in pursuit of musical training. She appeared unveiled in her first public concert in the Grand Hotel in Tehran in 1924, despite receiving several threats, and refused to perform in Kermanshah for the governor's private party as a precondition for the public concert she was invited to hold in that city. To assert her independence, she walked out to the balcony of the hotel and started singing for people on the street (Khaleqi, 2000). Her class-consciousness has definitely contributed to her persistence in educating the public on drawing a distinction between professional singers and prostitutes. Her newly attained middle class status contributed to her establishing strong connections with many Iranian nationalist leaders and artists, such as Colonel 'Ali Naqi Vaziri, Ustad Naydawood, Abolhassan Saba, and Seyyed Zia al-Din Tabatabai. Her house had become a gathering place for many intellectuals, politicians, and artists. She performed songs, which were written by nationalist and revolutionary poets and lyricists, such as Mirzadeh 'Eshqi and Abolqasim 'Aref. *Marsh Jomhuri* (i.e. the republic march) and *Morq Sahar* (i.e. the twilight bird) became Qamar's popular records of the time, although Reza Shah Pahlavi banned the circulation of the former in 1928. *Marsh Jomhuri* was written on the occasion of an uprising led by a member of Reza Shah's cabinet, Seyyed Zia al-Din Tabatabai who was in favor of forming a republic government of Iran; *Morq Sahar* was considered to promote revolutionary actions among peasants against the repressive system of landownership in Iran.<sup>4</sup> It has been claimed that Qamar never used a microphone in her public performances. Her ability to remain calm despite the challenges entailed in elevating her voice in terms of diversity, tone, and extension, was unique among female singers of the time. Qamar is associated with the origin of a

4. I would like to acknowledge Mr. Mohammad Hossein Khosrowpanah for addressing the point about the historical context of the two songs *Marsh Jomhuri* and *Morq Sahar* and providing me with audio/visual primary source materials on Qamar.

new vocal tone known as *bam* (Shoja'i, 2006). The emergence of commercial recording companies in the region has brought about change in the stylistic development of the performing arts, defining artists' success and securing their financial independence (Racy, 1977). Qamar was a female pioneer in recording songs with pre World War I recording companies in Iran. However, it was during the 1920s and after the fall of the Qajar dynasty, the rise of Reza Shah Pahlavi, the popularity of the press, play writing, and the spread of nationalistic songs and anthems, that her increasing fame and charming voice attracted European recording companies, which poured into Iran in large numbers to record her songs after a decade of production stalemate in the region (Khaleqi, 2000).

Qamar integrated the important aspects of her public presence with her private feminine persona as she created a subversive self for herself. She often used the charm of her physical and moral personality to display her other self in public. People still associate her pioneering contribution to the Iranian music of the 1920s and the 1930s with the attractive features of her public presence on stage, her beautiful blond hair, her fashionable clothes, and her affectionate expressions (Shoja'i, 2004). Although Qamar was invited by Umm Kulthum to give a public concert in Cairo, she never traveled outside Iran. Even though at the height of her career her financial gain was enormous, Qamar was remembered by her peers for her activist work on behalf of the poor, children, and women, either by contributing to numerous charity organizations or through personal assistance. She died in extreme poverty living in a small rented room (Khaleqi, 2000).

### **Munira al-Mahdiyya in Egypt**

Born in 1885 in the village of Mahdiyya in Syria, Zakiyya Hassan Mansour, later known as Munira al-Mahdiyya, grew up in a poor, crowded household. She was raised by her older sister, after losing her parents at a very young age. In her memoirs, compiled on May 30, 1927, Munira recalled the memories of her first subversive act while growing up in Alexandria:

Every morning, I wore my uniform to attend the school, but before going out of the door, I changed that uniform for a nice dress, which I had previously hidden under the steps. I would spend the entire day out in town hanging out but return on time when students were on their way home from school. I would then change my dress, go to the store, and purchase the ink to smear my fingers, face, and uniform to give the impression that I was at school. When I arrived home, my sister would welcome me with blessing and admiration. Later, when she found out about my habit, she changed my school and supervised me very closely. (Al-Hafni, 1968, p. 85, author's translation)

In 1905, Muhammad Faraj, an influential Cairene, who was on a visit to the school of Zaqa'ziq, discovered the beauty and power of Munira's voice and offered her the opportunity to move to Cairo and sing in his café. Munira developed a particular passion for and interest in listening to the voice of the singer Al-Lawandiyya whose influence on her was enormous. She started taking lessons in singing, embellishing her voice with a magical tone, which brought her fame and won everyone's heart in an unprecedented way (Al-Hafni, 1968).

Stories have it that Kamil al-Khalai'i, the great artist, heard Munira's voice and offered her to work in his café located in Birhamas neighborhood, close to Bab al-shaariyya in Cairo. This was the smallest café in a crowded neighborhood in which great female and male musicians worked. Moreover, as a popular café in the capital city, frequented by various musicians, it had become a place where works by artists, such as Ibrahim al-Qabbani, Suleyman Qardahi, and Sallama Hijazi, were introduced or cited before musical performances. Munira, at that time, was a beautiful young woman with intellectual and artistic talents, whose presence in the café attracted huge audiences. It was then that Munira realized the timeliness of her success and moved to the Eldorado nightclub which increased her fame. She then married Mahmud Jabr, who assumed the position of manager of her artistic activities (al-Hafni, 1968). Munira used her middle-class status to challenge those who questioned her professional persona while performing in coffeehouses and nightclubs. Like Qamar, though different in her approach, she used her improvisation skills and was able to break the traditional association which existed between female performers and the concept of fallen women which for centuries had created obstacles for women who wanted to appear on the public stage of theaters, nightclubs, and coffeehouses. Moreover, Munira's role-playing skits as a man where she was replacing the popular male musical artist Salama Hijazi in his absence brought her initial success. They also increased her popularity among women who supported her transgressive act of being among the first Muslim women to take off the veil in front of a mixed audience. Although she was criticized, sometimes for this unconventional performance, she demonstrated her mastery in that role.

After achieving success, Munira rented a café in al-Uzbakiyya neighborhood, decorated it and named it Nuzhat al-Nufus. It became a place where artists, intellectuals, and politicians, such as Sa'd Zaghlul and Husain Rushdi, gathered. Elites, aristocrats, and top businessmen would gather in Nuzhat al-Nufus daily. No café in Egypt enjoyed more fame and prestige at the time, to the point that even British officials attested to the distinctive status of Munira al-Mahdiyya's *sala*. *Sultanat al-tarab* (i.e. the queen of entertainment) had become the people's artist, enjoying equal status to the most popular musical artist, Sallama Hijazi. In response, Munira took people's love to heart while singing nationalistic songs, which stirred patriotic sentiments (al-Hafni, 1968). She was so active in this area that she became the subject of a popular slogan, *hawa' al-hurriyya fi masrah Munira al-Mahdiyya* (i.e. the love of freedom in the theater of Munira al-Mahdiyya) (Danielson, 1991). Munira was a pioneer in the twentieth-century Egyptian vocal genre, known as *taqtuqa*. She generated a regional popularity for herself through signing contracts with a "pan-Middle Eastern-North African enterprise", the Baidaphone Recording Company, which produced many records of hers in *taqtuqa* style (Racy, 1977, p. 112).

A beauty model, an attractive woman, and a fashionable celebrity on and off stage, Munira participated once in a pretty leg contest and won first prize.<sup>5</sup> In another contest, the public chose Munira, among three contestants, in second place ahead of Umm Kulthum, when they were asked about the most beautiful voice, the best performer, and the most appealing entertainment concert to attend (Ruz al-Yusuf, 1926). Munira has been described as a keen businesswoman. She managed closely the financial affairs of her *sala* and troupe. She traveled to a number of countries, including Iran, and gave many public concerts overseas (Al-Hafni, 1968).

5. I would like to acknowledge Ms. Kristina Nelson at the Egyptian Center for Culture and Art (ECCA) for assisting me in contacting Mr. Mohamed Hassan Ashour, an independent collector of rare Egyptian early recordings, prints, books, original ads, and photos. He informed me about this contest and provided me with additional audio/visual primary source materials on Munira al-Mahdiyya, which I used during my presentation at several conferences.

## Conclusion

The artistic, nationalist, and feminist performative acts of Qamar on stage and of Munira in musical theaters have contributed to the discursive and social emergence of the concept of the “New Woman” in Iran and Egypt. This concept prevailed throughout interwar societies, undergoing dramatic political and cultural changes, resulting from the introduction of photography, sound recording, advertisement, and the street culture with its theater halls, *salas*, and nightclubs. Qamar and Munira drew on these interactions to create identities for themselves as “New Women.” They both grew up in cultures where oral art, improvisation, and musical lyrics played significant roles in defining both music and performance. Both improvised in their nationalistic songs, and included their names in the lyrics. By doing so, they appealed to their own personas to bring music to the service of the people, to make it available to the public, and render it a source of inspiration for cultural, political, and social advancements.<sup>6</sup> In displaying a visual presence of herself, Qamar operated within the paradigm of a private sphere, while giving it a public turn. She was an extremely private individual who sought the medium of music and the public domain of the stage as a vocal venue for expressing her creative and humanist self. Munira, on the other hand, longed for a public life and became the singing and performing star of commercial recording and musical theater in the region. Perhaps no narrative better reflects the different public appearances, and at the same time, the private persona of these two interwar celebrities, than the historical memory of the two nations, whereby Qamar awakened stage music with her humanist voice as *bulbul* Iran (i.e. the nightingale of Iran) while Munira enriched musical theater in Egypt with her spectacular performance as *sultanat al-tarab* (the queen of entertainment).

6. Despite the presence of gender biases in the field of music of the time, the popularity of both *bam* and *taqtuqa* and their association with low-brow genre of art reflect the significant role that Qamar and Munira had played in moving music from the private spaces of royal courts into the street and public stages accessible to common men and women.

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