

Singing the Nation

An examination of belonging, gender, and
modernity in Nasser's Egypt
through the work of Umm Kulthum



MA thesis
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Glossary:

Tarab: A state of musical ecstasy within Oriental music

Mulid: Saint Celebration day

Nashid watani: national anthem

Ughnia watania: national song

Qasida (sing.) Qasaid (plu.): Old form of poem/poetry

I sing songs to inebriate my listeners
To make the branches on the trees shake
And the narcissus and the jasmine
To attract sailors from village to village
I'll display the wonders of my art
Men will explain it to the djinn
Those who leave shall tell those who arrive
Song is the life of the soul
The darkness of the night becomes
The light in the eyes of the lovers
(From the song *Ghanili Swayya Swayya* "Sing me a little", 1945)

1. Introduction

The Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum was, and still is, famous across the Middle East and North Africa. During the mid 20th century, she became a national icon in Egypt and across the Arab world and her persona, as well as her songs, became part of the creation of the experience and feeling of national belonging among Egyptians. Until today, Kulthum and her music plays an important role in many Egyptians' lives. Her songs are still functioning as a soundtrack to Cairo and it is almost impossible to ride a taxi for more than five minutes without becoming familiar with the characteristic voice of Umm Kulthum.

This thesis examines the ways in which Umm Kulthum, as a singer, became powerful enough to affect and influence national narratives. Further, the thesis explores how these narratives came into being and what they consisted of. The thesis suggests that Umm Kulthum was a figure that encompassed complex contraries and that these contraries can tell us something about ideas of modernity and belonging in Nasser's Egypt.

Several scholars have pointed out the link between gender and nation; the fact that nation-building projects have been strikingly gendered, either because of the lack of women's participation or because of the gendered images and narratives surrounding nation-building projects which often depict women as symbols like mothers or daughters or objects of protection (De los Reyes 2011).

Also in Egypt, as depicted by scholars like Beth Baron and Margot Badran, the anti-imperialist struggle and nation-building projects have been gendered (in Egypt as women from 2005 and feminists, *Islam and Nation* from 1995). The rise of Egypt's feminist struggle was partly a response to women's lack of influence in political processes and thus women claiming their rights to participate in state building as well as political and public life. Like in many other processes of nation- and state-building and post-revolutionary societies, Egyptian feminist and women activists have been left out in important processes. They have been promised change but faced status quo or a worsening of their conditions in different historical events (Baron, 2005). Yet, there has been important female and feminist participation in Egypt's history and this history is ambiguous and complex. Women's bodies have been widely used and discussed as symbols in national narratives in relation to concepts like family and honour. These concepts have therefore also been part of creating the idea of Egypt as a nation.

Umm Kulthum became a symbol of nation-building and Arabic heritage. She is first and foremost known for her amazing voice and musical performances. But she also became a national icon and a powerful political voice, not despite the fact that she was a woman, but *because* she represented ideas of masculinity and femininity that fitted discourses of the nationalist movement. Her impact, or her persona's impact, on what "Egyptianness" and national belonging meant in Nasser's Egypt, is the central focus in the following.

My research question consists of two different questions, and I will seek to answer them concurrently throughout my analyses:

How did Umm Kulthum contribute to the creation of national belonging in Egypt in the period of her performances and political participation? And in which ways can her role as a unifying figure across gender, class, nationality and religion be understood?

Through analyses of the narratives that she created and took part in, I will examine Umm Kulthum's role in Nasser's nation-building project. My focus will in particular be on gender, class, and national belonging, which were important themes in Umm Kulthum's life as well as in her songs and speeches.

I will set out by depicting central theoretical concepts. Proceeding to the methods section, I describe how I understand and use narrative analysis and I present the empirical basis of my analyses. In the chapter "The Romantic Repertoire", I look at the ways in which Kulthum's romantic songs can be said to represent contradictory narratives. The following chapter, "Religion and Modernity", shows how religion was central in discourses of modernity alongside with national narratives of secularism. The final analytical chapter, "Singing Songs of the Nation", suggest that these songs played a crucial role in constructing emotions of belonging and productivity among the population, that led to a reinforced support for the regime. In the conclusion, I relate the analyses to present-day Egypt, where Umm Kulthum persists as an icon of national identity and where gender is continuously used in discourses that draws the boundaries of the national community.

The songs, which are cited throughout the thesis, are translated from Arabic to English by me.

2. Theoretical outline

In the following, I present the fundamental concepts used in this thesis: Nation, power, (post-)colonialism, gender, identity, and belonging. Giving an account of some of the scholars that have been particularly influential in our understanding of the concepts, I depict the ideas that have impacted and formed the ground of my analyses.

2.1 Nation

The word nation originates from *natio*, meaning birth. Nations are often described in this metaphoric language in relation to being born and to the notion of family; thus connected to emotions and relationships among people. There is a certain naturalness connected to the idea of nation, yet it has not always existed and will not necessarily continue to exist (McClintock, 2011).

Nations are and have been understood in different ways depending on time and location, as such the nation can have multiple meanings and functions (Yuval Davis, 2011). A nation is, unlike a state, not necessarily tied to physical boundaries but can also be an idea about a land. The state, according to Judith Butler “signifies the legal and institutional structures that delimit a certain territory (although not all of those institutional structures belong to the apparatus of the state)” (Butler, Spivak, 2010: 3). The state is supposed to service the matrix for the obligations and powers of citizenship. A nation does not necessarily encompass legal and institutional structures or citizenship, but is often understood in relation to the state (nation state). Since WW1 scholars have been investigating the idea and rise of the nation. Some scholars believed that nationalism occurred because of “the strength of the national bourgeoisie, the emergence of the bureaucracy, establishment of citizenship and the growth of universal education” (Suruchi Thapar-Bjorkert: 2014: 804). Modernist scholars have understood the rise of the nation and nationalisms as connected to modernity and developments in the modern world. Where Ernest Gellner argued that nations “are the products of modern conditions such as capitalism, bureaucracy, and industrialism” (ibid: 804), Benedict Anderson understands a nation as an “Imagined community” and stresses the role of print media in the development of a national consciousness (Yuval-Davis, 2011). According to Anderson, nationalism is not based on rationality but passion, which is why nationalism has replaced the role of religion (ibid: 2011).

Ernest Renan's scholarship has been influential in thinking about the concept of the nation. In 1882, he writes: "A nation is a spiritual principle, the outcome of the profound complications of history; it is a spiritual family not a group determined by the shape of the earth" (Renan in Bhabha, 1990: 19). According to Renan, people are tied together in the nation through memories of a heroic past and through the omission of what separated them in the past (Ibid: 19). Several scholars have argued that nationalist narratives work through identifying an external enemy, specific heroes, and crucial moments in the nation's history. To promote unity behind a particular leader or group, counter-narratives are silenced and marginalized in the nationalist narrative. These counter-narratives tend to be those written, or remembered, by oppositional groups, members of the lower classes, minorities, and women (Baron, 2005).

2.2 Power

Power is essential in the understanding of processes of nationalisms and nation building (McClintock, 2011). This includes power and resistance on different levels; international and national power as well as power within local societies (Zwingel, 2005). Antonio Gramsci has developed a notion of hegemony, which helps to understand and analyse the role of the state and other authorities (ruling class) in creating norms and practices, which lead to hegemony without the need for coercion through culture (Salih & Richter-Devroe, 2012). In a poststructuralist understanding of power, symbols and discourses are constructing the reality, which is continuously created, accepted, negotiated, and resisted by the subjects who live it.

Pierre Bourdieu understands power as symbolic. Symbolic powers are modes of cultural/social domination over conscious subjects, which are reproduced in everyday social habits, which he calls *habitus* or *socialised norms*. They maintain a social hierarchy through systems and institutions and sometimes individual relations. As other poststructuralists, he argues that language should be seen as a means of power and can lead to acceptance of social differences and hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1977).

In Foucault's understanding, power is complex, changing, and productive through knowledge. He presents the notion of *disciplinary power*, which disciplines through "impersonal mechanisms of bodily discipline" and *governmentality*, which can be understood through examination of discourse (Yuval-Davis, 2011: 2). Resistance is important in Foucault's understanding of power,

because power begins to operate when resistance occurs; or in the words of Foucault: “where there is power there is resistance” (Foucault in Abu-Lughod, 1990: 41). Critics have suggested that Foucault’s understanding of power makes it difficult to localize (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Relatedly, anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod argues that there has been a general tendency within Middle Eastern Studies to romanticize resistance, which is why she suggests that resistance should be seen as a *diagnostics of power* (Abu-Lughod, 1990). This means that analyses of various kinds of resistance can reveal “complex inner workings of historically changing structures of power” (Ibid: 53).

2.3 (Post-)Colonialism

“As such, nations are not just the phantasmagoria of the mind; as a system of cultural representation through which human beings can imagine a shared experience of identifying with larger communities, they constitute historical practices through which social differences are both constructed and performed” (McClintock, 2011: 73. Translated from Swedish by me).

Similarities in the rise and characteristics of nations can be traced all over the world. However, differences are often related to the history of colonialism - a system based on racist assumptions of differences between the ruler and the ruled, which is what Partha Chatterjee calls *the rule of colonial difference* (Bier, 2011: 13). Post-colonialism is the critique of power relations in colonialism and subsequently the reproduction of these after ending colonial rule (Loomba, Ania: 2005). According to several scholars of postcolonial nationalism, there is correlation between how nationalisms are being constructed and the emotions of inferiority and desires related to colonialism (Suruchi Thapar-Bjorkert: 2014). Nationalisms evolve on experiences and collective memory created by discourses and narratives about the self and groups/collectivities. Edward Said is one of the pioneers within postcolonial critique of representations of *the East* in Western cultural, historical, and political productions. He showed how images of *the Orient* shaped discourses of *Orientalism*, which signalled “European-Atlantic power of the Orient” and shaped the Orient as “Other than” the West (Said, 1979: 6).

“Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind’s eye” (Bhabha: 1990: 1). Homi K. Bhabha also explores the impact of

colonialism in modern discourse. He elaborates on Anderson's idea of the nation as imagined and analyses the nation as a "powerful historical idea" stressing the role of narrative and temporality in the creation of nations (Bhabha, 1990). Culture is not pre-given, and it is thus first in the very enunciation of culture that it exists. Relatedly, nationness can be understood as a cultural construction; "as a form of social and textual affiliation" (Ibid: 292). One of Bhabha's key concepts, *hybridity*, is inspired by Edward Said and can help to understand how colonialism continuously intervene in cultural productions and shape multiculturalisms (Ibid).

Bhabha further explores the relationship between nationalism and modernity. Several scholars have described the origins of nations as a symptom of modernity, however Bhabha sees an ambivalence connected to the idea of the nation, "the language of those who write of it and the lives of those who live it" because "the cultural temporality of the nation inscribes a much more transitional social reality" (Ibid: 1). The nation is constructed through culture and social lives rather than "the discipline of social polity" and it is therefore important to recognize the performativity of the language itself (Ibid).

Several scholars have made such epistemological critiques of modernity, however focusing on the state modernization projects' effect on people. Lila Abu-Lughod has coined the term *politics of modernity* as a way to understand the role of modernity without falling for the dichotomous understanding of modernity as either good or bad and as a measurement of progress (Abu-Lughod, 1993). The politics of modernity investigates how "new ideas and practices, identified as "modern" and progressive implanted in European colonies or simply taken up by emerging local elites, ushered in not only new forms of emancipation but also new forms of social control and coercive norms" (Bier, 2011: 6).

2.4 Nation and gender

Feminist studies have shown how nationalist discourses are constructed on gendered perceptions (De Los Reyes, 2011). Gender is a social construct and the world is made up of ideas about masculinities and femininities that change through time, place, and history. Gender is also understood as a system of social hierarchy or a structure that reveals unequal power relations between men and women (Ackerly and True, 2010). Gender analysis challenges some of the assumptions about how nations are created, and several scholars, such as Nira Yuval-Davis, argue

that gender is crucial in the production and reproduction of ethnic and national identities (Yuval-Davis, 2010).

The family has been used as an analogy for the nation, and Yuval-Davis here argues that the national hierarchy is created/constructed through the hierarchy of the family, thus naturalising hierarchies of the nation/nations (McClintock, 2011: 76). Women's roles in national narratives have often been as bearers of tradition and authenticity, whereas men have symbolised progression and modernity (Ibid: 78).

“nationalism has typically sprung from masculinised memory, masculinised humiliation and masculinised hope” (Enloe quoted in Oxford handbook of gender and nation, 2013: 809)

According to feminist scholar Anne McClintock, all nationalisms are “gendered, invented and dangerous” (McClintock, 2011: 73). They are dangerous because they are systems of cultural representations that legitimise people's unequal access to the resources of the nation state (Ibid). By deconstructing nationalist discourses, we are thus able to understand some of the workings of power behind these discourses. Discourses that may seek to create collectivity based on homogeneity and collectiveness at the same time, historically, have constructed women and men as well as different classes and races as unequal in the eyes of the nation (Yuval-Davis, 2011).

In Egypt, the nationalist movement used gendered narratives and images to create specific emotions and senses of belonging towards the nation (Badran, 1995 Baron, 2005, Bier, 2011). As many places around the world, Egyptian women have been represented as mothers or daughters of the nation, as those who should be protected from the desire or violence of the foreign male, as well as bearers of national honour. Consequently, men have been represented as for example protectors of women and children or as foreign perpetrators. Women have also symbolised the fertilized land, the next generation, and hereby they have become the embodiment of the future of the nation (Baron, 2005).

“However, we need to go beyond the nationalist rhetoric and analyze how women not only accepted their symbolic roles but also participated in the process of actively propagating them and encouraged other women to do the same” (Suruchi Thapar-Bjorkert, 2014: 814).

According to Suruchi Thapar-Bjorkert, much scholarship has been disregarding women's role in nationalism (Ibid.). Despite the masculine ideal of many nationalisms, women should still be considered as agents in the creation of nationalism and in nation building processes (Ibid.). In "Women-Nation-State", Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias investigate the ways in which women have affected and been affected by processes related to the formation of state and nation, and further how they have contributed to the construction, reproduction, and transformation of "ethnic-national categories" (Ibid: 808). Cynthia Enloe has worked with women's experience of and in war. In her book *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases* she investigates the *Militarization* that becomes part of everyday culture and experiences during times of war, and how it reinforces hierarchies of masculine superiority (Enloe, 2000). Enloe further investigates how feminist movements are affected by nationalism and colonial discourses of sexism and patriarchy.

2.5 Identity and the politics of belonging

Nations are connected to ideas about identity and belonging. According to Beth Baron, collective memory plays a crucial role in the construction of nationalisms and national narratives as these narratives create collective identities. When analysing collectives and collective identities it is important to consider who is included in the "we"? (Butler, Spivak: 2010). Identities can be understood as narratives people tell themselves and others about who they are and who they are not. Personal identities provide what Yuval-Davis calls *personal order* in the same way that collective identities create order and meaning on a larger scale (Yuval-Davis, 2010). This is not a static order, but one which makes it possible to navigate in change and contestations, as well as to create space for agency. According to Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias, "there is no inherent difference between ethnic, racial and national collectivities, they are all constructed around boundaries that divide the world between *us* and *them*, usually around myths of a common origin and/or common destiny" (Yuval-Davis, 2011: 84-85). The politics of belonging is therefore concerned with where the boundaries of the "Andersonian imagined communities" pass.

It is important to differentiate between belonging and the *politics of belonging* (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Belonging is a feeling of home or emotions of belonging to a certain collectivity or location, and it is a dynamic process (Ibid). Yuval-Davis argues that whether or not an individual belongs to a nation depends on the specific politics of belonging in a certain nation as well as their definition of

membership. The politics of belonging is therefore connected to the discussions of power and mobilization, which "focuses on the intersection of the sociology of power and the sociology of emotions" (Yuval-Davis, 2010: 2).

Sara Ahmed has written "The Cultural Politics of Emotion", in which she argues that "all emotions are politicized" (Yuval-Davis, 2011: 177). Ahmed explores the relationship between bodies, language, and emotion and argues that emotions give value to bodies and align them with powerful ideologies in or outside of them and thereby create the boundaries of the nation (Ahmed, 2004). Emotions are productive and create what Ahmed calls affect, because they affect the bodies of the objects that they describe. When used in politics and social movements, emotions can create social power. Yuval-Davis stresses that emotions play an important role in the politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Emotions are utilized to create a sensation of what belongs to *us* and *them* and to impose shame on certain objects or people (Ibid). Yuval-Davis argues that even when an individual is seen as belonging to a certain collectivity, people who feel an attachment to the same collectivity can experience it differently. This is why people cannot be seen as ultimately either belonging or not belonging. But the narrative that is told and the politics that are being made are based on these attachments of individuals to collectivities.

Yuval-Davis investigates what she considers "the major political projects of belonging in the contemporary world", which relates to citizenship, nation, religion, cosmopolitanism, as well as the ethics of care (Ibid: 6). The important question to ask about a certain category (nation, ethnic or racial group) is "how it is constructed and where its boundaries pass" (Ibid: 92). This approach can explain why the boundaries of belonging and social categories are often contested and why they seem to become stronger through resistance. In the analysis, it is important to consider social locations, people's emotional attachments to/identification with a certain or various collectivities, and how these are evaluated by ethical and political value systems.

Yuval-Davis suggests that intersectionality is crucial as a method of analysis of belonging, because it can deconstruct naturalised notions of collectivities as well as their boundaries. Intersectionality entails that different positions or "situated gaze, knowledge and imagination" creates different ways to see and experience the world, and as a method it urges a sensitivity to different locations and identifications in normative value systems (Yuval-Davis, 2010: 200).

3. Methodology

My initial curiosity about Umm Kulthum started when I lived in Cairo in 2016. Many people around me talked about her and I slowly discovered how narratives of the singer's legacy played an active role in their lives. The narratives often described Umm Kulthum as a national pride from another era of Egyptian greatness. The past was in this way juxtaposed to present-day Egypt, which was characterized by being less prominent than it used to be: The political situation and the economy were suffering and so were Egyptians. I realized that Umm Kulthum was not only an excellent singer, she was also a nostalgic national icon who for many captured and symbolised what it means to be an Egyptian and what it means to belong (Lohman, 2010). I became interested in these narratives, how they occurred, when they were constructed, and by whom.

The analyses in this thesis are focused on the early period of Egypt's modern history after the revolution in 1952 (Nasser became president in 1956). This was the period where Egyptian nationalism became institutionalised instead of being in opposition or resistance to colonial rule and monarchy. Benedict Anderson terms this *official nationalism* (Anderson, 2006). Prevailing discourses from the nationalist struggle impacted on Nasserist discourses that disseminated ideas about modernity, progress, and women's liberation. The period of Nasser was influenced by social engineering projects to modernize Egypt's educational system, implement state feminism, and a move from agricultural to industrialized economy. It meant a change in class structure; a new elite and new possibilities for the Egyptian middle class. However, the period was also characterized by several wars, attempts to eliminate political opposition, and corruption. Some claim that Umm Kulthum functioned as a pacifier to prevent public discontent. This thesis provides an analysis of her work and her role as political agent throughout this period. It suggests that her persona and work had multifaceted influences in Egypt, and that these influences were affected by her positions of power. In this way, I will argue that the impact of Umm Kulthum at once can be understood as agreeing with and challenging existing norms.

3.1 Methods

Narrative analysis

As described in the theoretical chapter; narratives, symbols, stories, pictures, bodies, and voices have been, and are being, used to create ideas about and feelings of nationhood and national belonging. This thesis claims that Umm Kulthum's impact on discourses of national belonging and nation building has partly manifested itself through narratives created about and by her. These narratives contain symbols and myths from a past, narrated about the nation in the present, and they became part of the public sphere through written press and national mass media and, as I will argue, through the songs and voice of Umm Kulthum (Bhabha, 1990).

Narrative analysis is originally understood as a method that focuses on the lives of individuals through personal narratives. Narratives can, however, also be traced through collective memory, discussions, visual representation, stories, and texts about individuals or groups. Groups, communities, and cultures reproduce narratives through myths, fairy tales, and stories, and knowledge about these narratives are required to participate in a certain collectivity (Bo et al., 2016: 16). What is important in narrative analysis, is the focus on the origin of the narrative; where it came from, which language it is mediated by, how it is presented/performed, and which metaphors and symbols it contains.

In this thesis, I will combine narrative analysis with discourse analysis and thus understand narratives in the context of official discourses. Narrative analysis is related to social constructivism and poststructuralism, which focus on discourses, construction of language as a source of power, and the effect that these narratives or discourses have (Bo et al., 2016: 19). A distinction can be made between *small narratives* and *grand narratives*. A grand narrative can be understood as a discursive narrative about societal issues. According to Molly Andrews there is a connection between how people tell stories about their lives and political events and realities. There will never be one single story about a political event. This creates competing narratives about a certain situation or period, which is why discursive power is central in any analyses of grand narratives (Bo et al., 2016: 22). Small narratives are also known as biographical narrative method and focus on the individual's life story. They, on the other hand, can give a more thorough understanding of people's experiences, subjectivities, and lived life, which is also a focus of anthropological methods. Small narratives focus

on individual stories, but can according to sociologist R. Connell document structures within societies and hereby help to deconstruct collectiveness through subjectivity.

My analysis is inspired by Ann phoenix' understanding of canonical narratives, where a grand narrative is understood as a complete story (e.g. life story or national narrative) while the small narrative is a defined section of a story. A defined section of a narrative can be seen as defining norms and reflect how life is expected to be lived in terms of for example gender, race or class. This method encourages an understanding of small and grand narratives as compatible and it allows us to see both macro and micro perspectives through narratives. In this thesis, I argue that an understanding of grand narratives can be found within small narratives. It is related to power and a hierarchy of discourses, which determines which stories are being told and which ones are left out. Narratives that opposes or challenges hegemonic narratives can be understood as counter narratives. (Bo et al., 2016).

Intersectional perspective

Through narrative analysis, I will explore narratives surrounding Umm Kulthum and her persona. In narratives, it matters *who* is behind a narrative as well as the voice that represents the narrative. Umm Kulthum's voice literally came to affect the lives of millions, but her voice cannot be seen in isolation from the society that she was a part of. This is why I use the intersectional method in order to secure a sensitive understanding of the ways in which the different discourses and narratives have been created and understood. As mentioned earlier, gender, religion, colonialism, and class have made a difference in the creation of national belonging and nation building in Egypt. As such, an intersectional approach that takes different social positions and individuals' different experiences into consideration will enable me to shed light on Umm Kulthum's role in shaping national belonging across, gender, class, and religion (Yuval-Davis, 2011).

3.2 Literature

I use the rich scholarship of Middle Eastern feminism as a foundation for this study to understand the complex relation of agency, gender, and power in Egypt. Middle Eastern feminist scholarship has for years tried to break down stereotypes of the oppressed Muslim woman, while finding the balance of not undermining the patriarchal systems of power internally in the society and in a global context. My aim is to go beyond stereotypes of Muslim or Middle Eastern women by

using the insights of former scholarship like anthropological works by Lila Abu-Lughod and Homa Hoodfar who have done ethnographic research among women from different social backgrounds in Egypt. Since secularism and Islam is an important part of the construction of Egyptian nationalism, I include scholars like Leila Ahmed, Fatema Mernissi and Deniz Kandiyoti whose scholarship have offered a more sensitive and dynamic vision of Islam and the role of religion.

Middle Eastern feminist scholarship is part of a wider scope of postcolonial studies, which will be used in this thesis. Post-colonialism introduces a way to understand complexity and ambiguity in the creation of national belonging; as remaining discourses and hierarchies from the colonial rule are resisted and implicated into nationalist discourses. In the Middle East, this has often been through what Edward Said called the *Dogmas of Orientalism* which relates to tradition and modernity, harem and freedom, veiling and unveiling (Said, 1979). Some Middle Eastern feminist scholars have argued that Edward Said's *Orientalism* have encouraged a binary thinking of East/West and thereby focused too much on the West instead of criticizing internal power relations (Kandiyoti, 1991). Scholars on Egyptian feminism and nationalism however claim that gender in nationalist discourses has been constructed in relation to colonial ideas about Eastern backwardness. This thesis urges to understand how these discourses were translated into local contexts and used as a means of power and resistance (Abu-Lughod, 1998).

Overall, I employ theories of power and resistance because of the complex workings of power in postcolonial national discourses, and because it clarifies the role of public culture in politics. The previously mentioned 'politics of belonging' by Nira Yuval-Davis provides tools to analyse the concrete political project of creating belonging through music, which is the main aim in this thesis.

3.3 Empirical material

My empirical material exists of different sources; songs, written texts including biographies and articles, visual images, and video material. Because of the popularity and productivity of Umm Kulthum, great amounts of video and audio material is available online (on platforms like YouTube). Unfortunately, scholarship on music in Egypt is not a very well-developed field of study, which has made the selection process more difficult, but two works about Umm Kulthum has been a great help to find important written material about her and understand the scope of her work.

“The voice of Egypt” by ethnomusicologist Virginia Danielson is a thorough biography about Umm Kulthum and her musical development based on ethnographic research counting more than five years of fieldwork in Cairo. This book collects information on the writings about and by Umm Kulthum and gives an overview of musical cooperation and style in the work of Umm Kulthum. Musicologist Laura Lohman has written “Umm Kulthum - Artistic agency and the shaping of an Arab legend” that focuses on Umm Kulthum’s role in shaping her legacy in the last years of her career. This book also provided helpful sources and interesting analytical ideas and knowledge about the music industry and gender roles in Egypt (Lohman, 2011).

Furthermore, I have found material at the Umm Kulthum museum in Cairo and in record stores. Here, I collected pamphlets/biographies created by the Egyptian government (Ministry of Culture). I translated these in cooperation with my Arabic teacher Zeinab Mohsen at the Arabiyya Language institute in Cairo. Mohsen was also helpful in the translation of song lyrics/poems, as some of these were written in Classical Arabic, which differs from Egyptian dialect; referred to as colloquial Arabic in this thesis.

4. The power of music and poetry: Umm Kulthum as performer and political agent

Umm Kulthum was first and foremost a musician and performer. Her popularity as a musician enabled her to gain power within music and in politics. Through music she managed to encapsulate and influence *Egyptian postcolonial subjectivity* because she performed and mediated emotions of nationalism, emancipation, and cultural authenticity (*asala*) (Halabi, 2016: 78). In this chapter I will show how Umm Kulthum gained power and positioned herself among the elite, and I will explore how it enabled her to influence the Nasserist political discourses of nationalism and Pan-Arabism (Bhabha, 1990).

Music plays an important role in most societies. In Egypt, and especially Cairo, music has become part of the noise that characterizes the city together with noises from cars, mosques, people, animals, vendors etc. There are sounds everywhere and music is an important part of the public sphere and has been played in outdoor cafes, markets, and small shops for more than a hundred years. Radio became important in Egypt in the 1930s and was one of the medias that was used to

listen to Umm Kulthum. In the 1960s, when the transit radio had become popular and mass media were available to most Egyptians, president Nasser established an Umm Kulthum radio station that until today broadcasts songs from her concerts every night (Hammond, 2007). The mass media played an important role in the creation of Egyptian nationalism (Abu-Lughod, 1993). Especially radio became a nationalist dominant culture that served to create national desires, and Umm Kulthum became part of the imagination of the nation as her voice penetrated public, as well as more intimate, spheres; for instance, private homes (Zaatari, 2014).

4.1 Poetry and power

“The songs depend before all else on the words”, Umm Kulthum stated (quoted in Danielson, 1997: 139). In Arabic music, there has traditionally been a strong connection between poetry and song. Poetry is and has for centuries been important in the Middle East and has its roots in the pre-Islamic era (Rice & Hamdy, 2016); in particular an oral form of poetry where the interaction between poet and listeners was essential and it was the role of the poet to express (emotions of) a group through himself (Ibid.). This oral transmission as well as its interactive tradition means that poetry is connected to collectivity and to collective memoryⁱ (Danielson, 1997). An Arabic word for song (Nashid) also means voice or raising the voice, and poetry is connected with the voice of the poet and the other way around (Rice & Hamdy, 2016). Poetry has been used as a tool of resistance and is until today a medium of power in the Arab world (Bassiouny, 2014):

“Egyptian poets often produced works in the wake of events that inspired them or that had national repercussions. Like the ballads of the countryside, classical poems were frequently memorized and recited in cafes and homes and were an important medium for communicating social and political dissent. When possible, they were also published in the press” (Baron, 2005: 44).

Poetry and singers have played an important role in both resisting colonial powers and supporting the nationalist movement, and it has been a tool of resistance on a micro level within local communities (Abu Lughod, 1990). In Egypt in the twentieth century the singer was the main attraction in films and concerts and was the one who was evaluated and talked about among people and discussed in magazines, newspapers etc. Umm Kulthum was one of several important singers at

her time. Her songs were written by different writers and composers who became part of her musical legacy and who played an important part in the shaping of her career. It was, however, Umm Kulthum herself who made decisions on the content of her repertoire. She chose the poets and composers she wanted to work with and she even changed the lyrics she sang. Managing to renew herself through these cooperations, she maintained her popularity by, for example, singing populist songs in colloquial Arabic; songs that expressed emotions of working class women in a period where Egyptian women were encouraged to work by the Egyptian government (Lohman, 2010). In some ways, her role can be seen as the role of earlier Egyptian poets, mentioned in the quote above, because her music often expressed the emotions of Egyptians and reflected political events. Her popularity was connected to her understanding of the Arabic language and she represented a tradition of orally transmitted poetry that had been seen as backwards by the colonialists.

4.2 The becoming of Umm Kulthum

When Umm Kulthum moved to Cairo from a small village, she slowly created a career for herself concurrent with becoming part of elite circles of politicians, the royal family, intellectuals, musicians, leftists etc. She managed to stay popular among people despite changing regimes and changing political environments. In the beginning of her career, she created spaces for herself that ensured her agency within her art as well as financial security through thoroughly considered agreements with radio, production companies, and she commenced producing her own concerts in the 1930s (Halabi, 2016). When Kulthum's radio performances, which often lasted three to six hours, started being broadcasted to millions of people in the Arab world in the 1950s, her fame grew noticeably. These performances are today part of many Arabs' collective memory rooted in the mid-twentieth century, where families and neighbours gathered to listen to her new tracks. Around this time, discussions and reviews of her performances took up a lot of space in the media, and even within the private sphere of the people. She became chairman of the board of the Listening Committee for radio broadcasting where she, according to Virginia Danielson, "guarded her own interests and lobbied for the positions she advocated and the people she liked" (Danielson, 1997: 117). She became president of the Musicians' Union, even though some claimed that a woman could not hold that position, to which Kulthum responded: "I am also able to serve as a leader. I also have ideas and solutions to problems" (Kulthum quoted in Danielson, 1997: 120). The music

industry was powerful during the time of Nasser, where record companies, radio, and television were nationalised. Consequently, power in music also meant political influence (Frishkopf, 2008). Umm Kulthum became part of the political scene in the later years of her career, where she developed a close friendship with president Nasser. Although to a limited extent, she began commenting on political events and her music also reflected political events that took place in the 1950s and 1960s (Ibid).

4.3 A powerful figure



In the photograph above, Umm Kulthum is seen among men in suits. The man with folded hands who smiles at Kulthum is president Nasser, and the mutual smiles bear witness of the close connection between the two, as well as the respected and powerful position she occupied in Egyptian society. Nasser and Kulthum often presented themselves publicly together in the way that Umm Kulthum would sing before or after Nasser's speech or public appearance. This type of visual and written representations of Umm Kulthum in the company of powerful Egyptian figures became

part of a narrative about Kulthum as a powerful figure, as part of the elite, and as a leader. Her deep, powerful voice was often mentioned in media as her main advantage because it was a symbol of strength, and so were the hour-long concerts that showed her endurance. Her strength was narrated as a sign of authenticity and as a result of her upbringing in the countryside (Halabi, 2005).

Being powerful, strong and a leader is often regarded as masculine values in the Egyptian system of paternalism, which differs from patriarchy by its fluidity. As Laura Bier argues; “paternalism signifies a system of negotiated relations and hierarchies in which elite men continually reconstruct their authority over women as well as subaltern men” (Bier, 2011: 30). The Egyptian paternalistic system was among other things constructed on discourses of familiar symbols such as presenting men as sons of Egypt and protectors of the national family (McClintock, 2007). Umm Kulthum’s performance of masculine values may, in this relation, have been accepted and welcomed because she symbolized the strength of the nation and resistance towards imperialism, and hence this has allowed her to negotiate hegemonic national narratives of paternal superiority.

In the Egyptian women’s movement and nationalist movement, there were several female front figures who paved the way for women’s political participation and connected women’s liberation to the nationalist struggle (Baron, 2005). However, as it has been the case in other nationalist struggles, few women stayed in power after the nationalist struggle was over. According to some scholars, this has to do with women being represented as symbolic figures and gendered imageries that reinforced existing power hierarchies (McClintock, 2011).

4.4 Planet of the East (*Kawkab al-Sharq*)

One of Nasser’s main political projects was Pan-Arabism, an ideology often understood vis á vis colonialism and Zionism, that pursues the idea of Arab national identity onto a regional scale. The project manifested in the union of Syria and Egypt between 1958-1961 (Bier, 2011). Umm Kulthum became an important icon of Arab heritage and powerful symbol of resistance towards colonialism and imperialism in the whole region. Nasser was seen as the postcolonial hope of the Arabs. He was a military general who fought for independence, and due to Egypt’s powerful role in the Middle East and their cultural hegemony, Nasser became a natural focal point (Hammond, 2007). Using the family as metaphor in Egyptian nationalist discourses and on a regional scale, Nasser was named *Father of Arabs*, whereas Umm Kulthum in her later years was portrayed as *Mother*

of *Arabs* and *Planet of the East*, which is still used to describe her in media and everyday use (Lohman, 2010: 129).

Umm Kulthum took part in constructing the narrative about Arab unity and she used her relationship and experience with her audience to explain the nature of this idea. When asked about how other Arabs differed from Egyptians as audiences, she replied: "I confirm that there is no difference" (Umm Kulthum in television interview 1969, retrieved 20/05/17). She even described their listening as an "evidence that affirms the unity of the Arab people and its cohesiveness from the most ancient times" (Ibid). The music, poetry, and the perfection of Arabic language that Umm Kulthum represented thus served as a symbol of a shared national identity and unity among Arabs of different locations (Yuval-Davis, 2011). This was further elaborated by Kulthum, who wore national clothes of the countries she visited, including Sudan and Morocco, to show her respect to the heritage of each culture and at the same time representing herself as part of it. "These concerts in the Arab homeland have the power to display the shared feelings that tie together the Arab people everywhere and confirm that all of the Arabs are of one heart and one pulse", she concluded (Umm Kulthum in television interview, 1969). Kulthum spoke about the countries as "the homeland", clearly stating the wish for and nature of a unity, which resembles the *imagined community* described by Benedict Anderson; "imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson 1983: 49). She received state honours from Tunisia, Lebanon, Pakistan, and Kuwait for her musical achievements, which were normally given for heads of state. Umm Kulthum therefore became an Arab icon, and this status was used to create a sense of belonging within Egypt which will be elaborated in the last chapter of the analysis.

5. Gendered narratives: Daughter of the village and Mother of the nation

While Umm Kulthum became a symbol of power and colonial resistance, she was subsequently written into normative discourses in terms of gender and class, which was part of shaping her career and her public persona. This chapter will explore gendered narratives about Umm Kulthum by looking at how these narratives were shaped as well as their role in shaping political discourses and the national narrative of a Nasserist family.

According to scholars of feminism and nation building, women's political culture has historically been excluded from national narratives, or remembered only when it served a symbolic purpose (Yuval-Davis, 2011). In post-independence Egypt, women increasingly gained more rights, such as the right to vote, and discourses of modernity connected to women's liberation were prevailing (Bier, 2011). However, women's actual emancipation and political influence did not live up to these discourses and policy changes, or to the promises from the nationalist struggle for independence.

5.1 The authentic rural

An idea about the backwards native woman had been planted in the Egyptian society during colonialism (Bier, 2011). In the 1890's, early nationalists started celebrating the countryside as a counter narrative to colonial narratives. People of the countryside were presented as "culturally authentic" opposite people in the city, who were seen as Westernized (Baron, 2005: 68). Women became a battle field of nationalist discourses of honor and pride and the peasant woman, in particular, became a symbol of fertility and cultural heritage.

"They (fallahin) are simple people... but they have hearts of gold. They were my first audience. Whatever success I have realized goes back to them. They are the real masters of this country because they are the source of goodness, generosity and love in it. The country is the foundation and source of the city. If you live in the city, you live in exile but in the village you live with your relatives and friends" (umm Kulthum in El-Mougi, 2011).

Umm Kulthum describes the *fallahin* as the foundation of the country because of their characteristics as humans and their way of living together as families. They live the way Egyptians used to live, and as such become symbols of authenticity (*asala*). This narrative evokes emotions of nostalgia for a different time, and can be related to Umm Kulthum's own story and movement from the countryside to the city and her personal nostalgia for her childhood. It was, however, also a common description of *fallahin* in national narratives that characterized them as typically Egyptian; where these narratives established values of modesty, and being "common" and "simple" as desirable. Throughout her life, Umm Kulthum referred to herself as *Bint al rif* (Girl/daughter of the countryside): "My childhood was not different from that of many children of my country" (El-

Mougi, 2011). “I rubbed with my little feet all over Egypt, village by village, before moving to Cairo” (ibid.). In this way, she referred to her childhood as average, like all other Egyptians. Like in her personal narratives, journalists and biographers often narrated Umm Kulthum’s story emphasizing her upbringing in the countryside and her connection to the peasant life, as important for her personality. In an article, her work ethics are described through the image of peasants: “She had the tiredness of a fallaha” (Danielson, 1997: 131). In this way Kulthum incarnated the nostalgic dream of authenticity at the same time as she lived a life, which was radically different from life in the rural.

5.2 An ‘exemplar of Islamic modesty’

Umm Kulthum grew up in a village in the Northern delta in Egypt. Her father was a religious singer and he sang at different events in his own and nearby villages for different events such as weddings and Mulids (saint birthdays). Umm Kulthum and her brothers started singing with their father, where she eventually was discovered by professional musicians and moved to Cairo. Performing in public in front of men, which was unusual for girls/women, she was dressed in Bedouin boys’ clothes when she started singing in the villages. Performing in Bedouin boys’ clothes later became a part of the narratives about Kulthum and also a story she told about herself (El-Mougi, 2011). In these narratives, her father was described as a pious man who protected his daughter from the glances of other men, whereas Umm Kulthum was described as a modest girl who needed the protection of her male relatives (Lohman, 2011). The focus on the father’s role as the protector represents an ideal of familial patriarchal relationships in a system where women belong to the private sphere and therefore need to be hidden from men, who are unable to control their sexual desires (Mernissi, 1975). At the same time, paradoxically, it encourages girls’ roles as performers in the public sphere.

“A beautiful country girl, an exemplar of Islamic modesty. She stood among her family in the clothes of a Bedouin man; she sang vintage Egyptian music, consisting of religious songs. She raised her angelic voice calling forth in the voices of the authentic religious people” (Fawzi, Husayn, 1975).

In this quote by journalist Husayn Fawzi in a biography about Umm Kulthum, she is described as an “exemplar of Islamic modesty”. The emphasis is on her beauty, her clothes, and her relation to the countryside family and tradition. By performing in boys’ clothes, Umm Kulthum was

no longer at risk of being looked at or of losing her honour, because she performed a different gender than she was expected to (Zaatari, 2014). The people (audiences) are described as authentic and religious, which can be seen as a symbolic and romanticized language, thus raising the question: Who should she be hidden from? In this way, normative societal structures are not questioned as Kulthum becomes an ‘exemplar of Islamic modesty’; however, the narrative can be seen as part of the creation of a discourse that normalises men as a group that women should be protected from and consequently women as objects of protection. In a documentary, another journalist described how she “passed through *haram* with purity” (Mahsab, 1969). *Haram* is a religious word that means forbidden in Arabic, and it refers to religious ideas about what is right and wrong. Umm Kulthum’s dress is seen as *pure* and becomes a symbol of piousness, which consequently is understood as “doing right” according to religion. Islam is not represented as a threat to progress and modernity but as a symbol of education and doing right. The narrative captures a paradox within political discourse of modernity that represented the people of the countryside (fallahin) as authentic, religious and typically Egyptian (thus anti-colonial) at the same time as it represented the countryside as opposing modern ideas such as women’s liberation and education (Bier, 2011).

5.3 Resistance and gender bending

The representation of Umm Kulthum as a symbol of Egyptian piousness and modesty is reinforced in biographies, films, and articles about Umm Kulthum (written by the cultural elite) in which she is described as an uneducated girl that learned manners from the upper class (how to eat properly and how to dress as a woman) when she moved to Cairo (Lohman, 2010). This narrative is interesting because it marks the boundaries of the national community when womanhood is idealised as educated, urban, pious, and feminine. It can also be seen as reinforcing elite and orientalist stereotypes of men in the countryside as backwards and dangerous due to their sexuality (Said, 1979). This story about Umm Kulthum, however, also reveals something about everyday conditions of women in the countryside, their symbolic roles as representatives of honour, and their lack of access to the public sphere. The act of Umm Kulthum (or her parents, who decided to dress her as a boy) can therefore be seen as resistance towards gender norms and segregated spaces (Mernissi, 1975). And it can be regarded as powerful, as it produced a narrative which became part of a discourse entailing a counter-narrative to the image of Kulthum as pious and modest. The act permitted the crossing of boundaries of normative perceptions of performing gender.

Poet Ahmed Rami described Umm Kulthum in an interview as a “hermaphrodite divinity” (Shusha, 1979). This description is interesting because while “hermaphrodite”, at the time, most often was used as a suppressant term, Ahmed Rami, who was a close friend and colleague of Umm Kulthum, used the word to describe the role of Umm Kulthum as outside normative gender categories (Butler, 1993). It acknowledges the ways in which Kulthum, throughout her career, used gender as a means to be able to perform and gain power, and how she represented and performed ideals of masculinity and femininity in order to be accepted as an artist. This counter narrative was usually silenced in the cultural productions of Umm Kulthum, but was however present and can be seen as a resistance or a force of disruption to the hegemonic narratives about her (Rice, 2007).

According to Lila Abu-Lughod, one of the pitfalls of feminist poststructuralist scholarship in the Middle East is to see everything as resistance or *romanticizing resistance* (Abu-Lughod, 1993). Abu-Lughod therefore suggests exploring the diagnostics of power and, as shown throughout this chapter, the narratives about Umm Kulthum can reveal hierarchies of discourses in Nasser’s Egypt. Ideals of informed citizenship, masculinity, and female purity were focal in the construction of Egyptian nationalism and belonging and thus depicts the boundaries of the national community as the opposite (Yuval-Davis, 2011). However, Umm Kulthum and the narratives around her, shows that there was a space where identities could be negotiated.

5.4 Motherhood as womanhood

Motherhood in Egypt is until this day represented as the most important achievement for women, and to some extent a woman is not considered “complete” without having children (Golley, Nawar el-Hassan, 2012). This normative understanding of womanhood can be found all over the world, and in Egypt it is connected to a long discursive history of the country being represented as a family as a means to foster national belonging (Baron, 2005). Colonial rulers used paternal rhetoric to undermine the intelligence and maturity of Egyptians, and nationalists, accordingly, found that maternal imagery and iconography could be a way to restore Egyptian honour (Ibid). According to Beth Baron, Egyptian nationalists used the concept of family honour as a mobilizing strategy against colonial occupation and foreign control. Honor came to define the “parameters of the collective” and thereby also to define who belonged and who were excluded from the nation (Baron, 2005: 7). In official discourse, the nation was found depicted as a family in official language, political material, posters etc., and because family in general was seen as honourable, personal honour could be

appropriated as national honour (Badran, 1995). Thus, the moral codes of the intimate sphere were juxtaposed to the public sphere, which worked to qualify the nation as a coherent community. Nasser was usually depicted as either a paternal figure or a son of Egypt and was, like other nationalists before him, written into the symbolic narration of the nation:

“The family is not merely the first cell of society where the connection of the man to the woman occurs to realize the operation of perpetuation of life... but it has become an institute where the child learns the traditions of his people and their customs and their inclinations... It is a factory in which generations of the future are manufactured and through it the operations of social fusion of the future begins” (Abu Zaid quoted in Bier, 2011: 130).

Imagining the family as a “cell of society” and a “factory” to foster belonging and productivity, Minister of Social Affairs, Hikmat Abu Zayd, in this quote from 1964 used the family as political discourse. Mothers were seen as bearers of the future of the nation, because it was their role to produce new citizens. These symbolic discourses were institutionalised in the period of Nasser’s regime through policies of state feminism and resulted in new legislations guaranteeing education, jobs, labour rights and other forms of welfare (Abu-Lughod, 1993). One of these new legislative actions was family planning which was carried out in the 1950s and 1960s. It was, according to historian Laura Bier, “a normalizing project aimed at creating modernized families, bodies, and gendered subjects as a means to social, economic, and political transformation” (Bier, 2011: 122). Family planning became a way to limit the population growth through introduction of cheap contraception. Despite state feminism’s limitation of independent women’s groups, the women’s movement was continuously active at this time and tried to utilize this debate in order to move towards a more general discussion about women’s body rights. The government, however, used symbolic rhetoric of the family to defend and explain the project, saying that without a national family planning program, the state would be unable to provide a decent standard of living for Egyptian family. Furthermore, birth control would improve the physical conditions of Egyptian mothers, who often carried a large number of children at the expense of their own health (Bier, 2011). In this depiction of Egyptian families, peasant, and lower-class women were represented as backwards, and incapable of reproductive agency.

5.5 El-sit (*the woman*)

One of Umm Kulthum's many nicknames, and probably the most common one, is el-Sit which means *the woman*. It explains her status in Egypt as an exemplary citizen and woman as well as a role model and female icon. In Hannah Arendt's view, "the society of the nation in the Modern world is that 'curiously hybrid realm where private interests assume public significance'" (Arendt cited in Bhabha, 1990: 2). Umm Kulthum was in her 50s when she got married and she did not have children. This has been the subject/topic of several cultural productions about her life such as films, series, newspaper articles, and biographies (Lohman, 2010). A common story describes how Umm Kulthum had suffered after a broken engagement, which she did not recover from, and therefore did not have children. Another story told that she sacrificed having children of her own because of her maternal role in the Egyptian society (Al-Tabi, 1965). None of the official biographiesⁱⁱ suggest that Umm Kulthum decided not to have children because of her career, even though having children would most likely have stopped her from performing, as it was the case of several of her female colleagues. Even though the state encouraged women to work, motherhood and work (especially in the field of performance, theater, music etc.) were not seen as compatible in public discourse (Badran, 1995).



In order to be a respectable woman, biographers and journalists described how she was good and caring towards children (Skeggs, 1997). Concurrently with moral discourses in the society, Umm Kulthum emphasized her family and close relationship with nephews and nieces (Lohman, 2010). Through visual images from various countries of her holding and kissing babies (as depicted in the photograph above), she manifested herself as caring and as a symbol of motherhood. These narratives of Kulthum as gentle and caring were showing her “performing motherhood” through affection towards children, people, as well as the nation (Yuval-Davis, 2011). It emphasizes ideals of motherhood in Egyptian society and because of Umm Kulthum’s powerful position, it can be seen as part of shaping motherhood as a gendered norm (Baron, 1995).

It further shows how discourses on family in Nasserist rhetoric as well as policies of modernity and feminism was envisioned as a middle class nuclear family based on normative ideas about men and women, instead of the emancipation of all genders. Women were used in discourse and legislation but were however excluded from political participation and representation (Bier, 2011). “When women are accorded the symbolic roles as mothers of the nation, the intersections of sexual purity and national honour politicize both the public and domestic-familial domains - the events in one domain reflect on the other” (Suruchi Thapar-Bjorkert, 2014: 812). This seems to be the case in Egypt, where private interests assumed public significance and the other way around, which is what Arendt refers to as the society of the modern nation.

Elite women, such as Umm Kulthum, were part of creating these gender norms, and their performance of maternity can be seen as more than simply a reproduction of norms. According to Beth Baron, these women’s symbolic status opened up a possibility for them to act more openly in public space and “(d)epicting women, particularly elite women, as Mothers of the Nation” gave them a maternal authority and respectability to engage more openly in society and politics (Baron, 1995: 66). The maternal imagery and narrative of caring gave Umm Kulthum moral authority and allowed her to cross normative boundaries of class and gender. These narratives thus took part in shaping hegemonic norms and formed a counter-narrative to societal expectations, because Umm Kulthum adopted the man’s role as a breadwinner, and because she did not become a mother.

This tells us something about the complex gendered discourses of postcolonial Egypt that used women as symbols of modernity and progress, at the same time as they reaffirmed prevailing heteronormative ideas about family and citizenship. While peasant and lower-class women were depicted as not living up to their citizen duty of producing and belonging to the Egyptian modern

nuclear family, narratives about Umm Kulthum supported hegemonic discourses at the same time as they provided a space, particularly for elite and middle-class women, to participate in public life. This means that the boundaries of belonging are also part of the narration of the ideal woman which creates norms about womanhood and motherhood.

6. The romantic repertoire

A major part of Umm Kulthum's repertoire were romantic songs about longing, unfulfilled love, and "staying up late" waiting for the loved one; a common metaphor in Egyptian poetry. The narratives unfolded around themes of separation usually related to a man leaving a woman. Romantic songs filled up most of her repertoire in the 1920s and 1930s as a form of "romantic escapism" from economic depression, everyday struggles, colonial rule, and longing for national independence (Halabi, 2016). The 1940s are known as the "golden age" of Umm Kulthum as she returned to the religious *Qasaid*, poems written in classical Arabic, which she also sang in the beginning of her career. In the same period, she worked with new composers and writers that dealt with "ordinary people's" problems through populist songs in colloquial Arabic. These songs were written in a language that people could relate to. Umm Kulthum produced romantic songs throughout her career and with songs such as *Enta 'Umri* ("You are my life"), *Amal Hayati* ("The hope of my life") and *Alf layla wa Layla* ("Thousand and one night"), she became famous in the entire Arab world as well as in countries in Africa and Asia.

6.1 Songs with multiple meanings

The romantic songs can be understood in relation to the grand narratives of nationalism relating to romantic ideas about the nation and the national family. Further, the changing themes and styles of her songs were shaped by the political context in which they were produced, and Umm Kulthum chose her repertoire with sensitivity to the political situation (Danielson, 1997). Many of the romantic songs were understood as having double meaning; the messages of lost hope could often be transferred to collective emotions of Egyptians, for instance after the 1967 defeat (Bier, 2011). Moreover, most Arabic words have several meanings, which gives room for multiple interpretations.

The song *al-Atlal*, “The Ruins” (1966), is written in classical Arabic and the narrative of the song relates to lost hope in love:

And you seduced me with a sweet calling and tender tongue
And a hand extending towards me like a hand stretched out through the waves to a drowning person
And a light searching for a wanderer
But where is that light in your eyes?
My darling, I visited your nest one day as a bird of desire singing my pain (Al-Atlal, 1966)

This verse describes a classical theme in Umm Kulthum’s songs of romance that develops into painful separation. It is narrated through strong metaphors such as “a drowning person” and “bloodied wrists”, which together with Umm Kulthum’s strong and emotional voice and performance evokes emotions of pain and loss.

Give me my freedom, release my hands
Indeed, I've given you yours and did not try to retain anything
Ah, your chains have bloodied my wrists (Al-Atlal, 1966)

Besides being a famous love song, *al-Atlal* became a symbol of other injustices. “Give me my freedom, release my hands” is a famous sentence from the song that became a metaphor of several injustices such as colonial rule and the occupation of Palestine. Some even understood the song as a message of the repressive methods of Nasser’s regime which was increasingly tightening its grip on the population as it became more corrupt and inefficient (Halabi, 2005). Romantic songs were in this way not only understood as romantic, but emotions were translated into political realities by the listeners. The symbols, metaphors, and emotions that a song like *al-Atlal* depicted, fitted well into the political context in Egypt characterized by hardship and struggle. In this way, Umm Kulthum became the voice of many Egyptian’s struggles.

Umm Kulthum’s romantic songs in the later part of her career were characterized by her cooperation with the Egyptian singer and composer Abdel Wahab. Writing patriotic songs and love lyrics in colloquial Arabic, he was known for his poetic use of expressions from everyday language and his modern musical style, which meant that he introduced dance rhythms to Umm Kulthum’s

musical repertoire (Fayed, 2016). A famous song from the cooperation is *Amal Hayati*, “Hope of my life” (1965), where Umm Kulthum sings: “Tell me, which of my wishes have not been fulfilled when I’m in your arms, I never felt tenderness like this, I never loved my life for anything but you”. In another romantic song by Wahab called *Fakarouni*, “They reminded me”, Kulthum sings “Whatever happened in the past, my soul is with you, what will the world be without you? Is the world anything without you?” (Fakarouni, 1966). In both songs, the female narrator expresses strong romantic emotions towards a lover and thus communicates emotions such as love, grief, and sorrow, as it is likewise the case in *al-Atlal*.

6.2 Politics of emotion

Romantic songs could also work to evoke emotions towards the nation in different contexts. Nasser encouraged the cooperation between Abdel Wahab and Umm Kulthum in the 1960s (until 1967), where optimism was still prevailing and Egypt had a leading role in the music and cinema industry in the Middle East (Hammond, 2007). It is worth remembering how Kulthum’s music was a focal point for families and communities who gathered every Thursday to listen to her concerts in radio and television. In that sense, the romantic songs became part of people’s everyday experiences and formed an ideal soundtrack to the Nasserist idea of a nationalist family romance.

With her concept of ‘the politics of emotion’, Sara Ahmed argues that emotions are cultural productions and that they are politicized (Ahmed, 2004). Emotions, she states, shape the surface and boundaries of individual and collective bodies. Umm Kulthum’s love songs shaped the collective bodies within the nation through an emotional language and through her performances, which evoked and encouraged emotional responses from her audience. When Umm Kulthum performed her songs, she aimed at creating *Tarab*ⁱⁱⁱ among her audiences, and she had special techniques to stress climax of the songs as well as voice techniques which encouraged the audience to respond. In recordings of her concerts, people’s responses are a crucial part of the soundscape. They can be heard yelling and cheering with words such as *Asima ala asima* (“Very great”) and *Allah* (“Oh my god”). Kulthum’s performances, in this way, became shared experiences of emotions of many Egyptians. Before and after great events, Umm Kulthum’s voice sounded in homes, cafés, and other public and private spaces and reminded people of love and pain as natural ingredients of Egyptianness. This does not mean that the romantic songs were produced to serve as propaganda

for Nasser's social engineering projects as such, but they reflected discourses of their time and worked as a politics of belonging that evoked feelings of belonging.

6.3 The female lover and female desire

In the 1960s it was not extraordinary to see women expressing themselves publicly. As early as in the 1870s, before organised Egyptian feminism developed, Egyptian women were publishing their writings such as prose, poetry, articles, essays, and biographies in mainstream press and were engaged in public speaking (Badran, 1995). These women were usually middle class or upper-class women who participated in women's and nationalist movements and therefore in public life. As indicated earlier, state feminism planted ideas and ideals of feminism and womanhood in Egyptian society, resulting in a less diverse women's movement, but at the same time, women's participation in public space and cultural productions can be seen as publicly creating counter narratives.

As mentioned, Umm Kulthum was constructed and evaluated as part of national narratives based on her gender and heritage. Being in her fifties and sixties when she sang songs such as *Amal Hayati* and *Enta Umri*, she was criticized for singing the romantic dreams and sorrows of a young girl (Danielson, 1997). This can be found in several songs where the female voice (of Umm Kulthum) is waiting patiently for a loved one; like in *Ya msaharni*, "The one who keeps me awake at night", where she sings "I did not occur in your mind one day. Ask about me". (Amal Hayati, 1965. Enta Umri, 1964 Ya Msaharni, 1972)

The critique reveals normative ideas about romance in societal discourse. Yet, the songs also express a woman's emotional desire for the beloved and some songs express female agency in romantic relationships. *Lil Sabr Hudud* ("Patience has its limits") for example, describes a female narrator refusing to let "shame and torment" be part of her life. Being represented as a strong character, she has to overcome her own desire to let go of her loved one because "patience has its limits". This narrative seen in the light of colonial resistance and other regional political events, as it describes a woman's respectability through her resistance towards a man who protects her honour, can be translated to national narratives and understood as the nation taking back its honour by expel colonial rulers.

Don't console me with promises, sweet words and vows,
I have for too long tolerated this fire, torment and shame,
It was a mistake and it won't happen again,
even as my longing and desires continue to exist,
for patience also has its limits, my beloved (Lil Sabr Hudud, 1964)

6.4 Songs for working class women

In the “golden age” of Umm Kulthum, in the 1940s she cooperated with a well-known political satirist and poet called Bayram al-Tunisi, who wrote lyrics in colloquial Arabic. The language was strong and direct, often including dialogue. Further, it spoke to the working class; especially the emotions and experiences of working class women; whereas Kulthum's earlier music had somehow been speaking to, and as, the aristocracy (Halabi, 2005). In this song, a strong desire is expressed by the narrator, and religious tradition is questioned.

“So many sins are forgiven, for God knows what's in the hearts
this is the best answer, this is what we were waiting for
tell me and don't be ashamed, is the kiss forbidden or not?
The kiss. The kiss.” (*Uli Wala tahabesh ya zen* “Tell me without denying, beautiful”, 1945).

With its direct language, and by placing the woman in a position from which she is enabled to speak about her desires, this song could be said to widen the space for women to be active and demand things. Lyrics broadened up ideas about citizenship to include working class, reflecting the socialist discourses of the Nasser time and political interest in and public discussions of how to make women join the workforce and thereby participate in nation building. Many new challenges arose when women started working, like how to behave in the public sphere among men (Bier, 2011). Even though many of the populist songs continuously had romantic themes, they had a different approach to the romance. Resembling popular songs played at weddings and celebrations, they became a way for Umm Kulthum to move away from her elitist image. They further helped to strengthen the idea of the working class as the foundation of the society and the working, liberal

woman as respectful and Egyptian. In this way, we can see how shifting and ambiguous understandings of femininity are related to shifting political discourses (Zaatari, 2014).

6.6 Re-appropriating sexuality as agency

The romantic songs of Umm Kulthum also contained somehow daring language and messages (Fayed, 2016). She released songs early in her career with a more direct “flirting” or even erotic content, singing lines such as “Debauchery and indulgence you are my creed” (1924), in which she asks the listener to let her pursue her sensual pleasures. The flirting messages can also be found in other songs such as *al-Atlal*, where she sings “I visited your nest and...”. Within a national context, these songs can be seen as resisting patriarchal norms. They are further interesting to explore from a postcolonial perspective. In the words of Edward Said: “The relation between the Middle East and the West is really defined as sexual” (Said, Edward, 1978, 312). In “Orientalism”, he explains the Western gaze on the Orient as constructing sexualised subjects through cultural presentations of the Arab/Muslim Male who is driven by sex, whereas the woman is portrayed as part of a harem and therefore hypersexualised and subject to men’s desire (Rice, 2007). Umm Kulthum’s songs can be understood as a re-appropriation of sexuality as a form of agency. Romantic songs sung by a strong powerful woman created a counter narrative towards colonial images of women; what Bhabha calls “subaltern agency” (Bhabha, 1990). Egypt was strongly influenced by global power structures, and discourses were generally anti-imperialist as in the rest of the Middle East. Umm Kulthum therefore became a symbol of resistance because she communicated emotions of love as an Egyptian and Arab woman.

Fundamentally, Umm Kulthum represented a complex paradox of contrasting discourses and meanings. Some of Umm Kulthum’s romantic performances can be seen as symbolising and performing normative national-liberal ideas of women’s roles in Nasser’s modern secular state. They had a symbolic power that portrayed a certain kind of fragile femininity and kind of brutal and unworthy masculinity. Umm Kulthum was often portrayed as the object of male desire. She belonged to the desire of Egyptian men and she expressed emotions of a patient and victimized woman who needed protection as a symbol of the nation (Lohman, 2010: 120). At the same time, Umm Kulthum's performances showed her as a matriarch expressing female desire with the words of working class women; the “masses”. This creates a counter narrative to the hegemonic narrative;

a narrative in which women's emotional life leads to agency and independence from the man. It, however, also entailed boundaries to the feelings and opportunities of belonging: the Egyptian woman was unveiled, modest, and "liberated" as part of this imagined modernity that came along with nationalist discourses (Bier, 2011).

The romantic repertoire of Umm Kulthum is wide-ranging in terms of content, and were written by different composers, in different decades. Umm Kulthum was used to symbolize women's freedom in the modern nation building project of Nasser, but the songs reveal a complex history of women's sexuality and agency as well as shifting hegemonic discourses and power structures regarding class and gender.

The songs can be seen as ways to create emotions of belonging and emotional unity, and they contributed to the grand narrative of national romance. Umm Kulthum can therefore be understood as part of naturalising discourses through creating cultural practises of emotion which intersected with power through mass media, her relationship with Nasser, and her own powerful position within music and radio in Egypt (Abu-Lughod, 1993). Her art is however not simply a reproduction of official discourses, but reflects currents in society, like women's struggle for family rights, the right to choose a spouse, and body rights (Bier, 2011).

7. Religion and modernity in Nasser's Egypt

Secularism is often connected to modernity to the extent that some scholars have argued that nationalisms have taken over the role of religion (Anderson, 1991). In Egypt, secularism became part of the discourses of modernity, while religion simultaneously persisted as a strong symbol of heritage and thereby resistance towards Western values. Secularism was transferred to the legal system to a certain extent during Nasser. Since the British rule in the late nineteenth century, laws regarding the family had been dealt with by a religious court system. During Nasser, this system was nationalised, however personal law dealing with marriage, divorce, child custody, financial support, and inheritance remained based on religious principles (Sonbol in Ilkkaracan, 2000). Criticised by the feminist movement in particular, these laws were widely debated in Egyptian society and public space. The opposing side of the debate was formed by religious institutions. Normative visions of gender roles and family relationships embodied in the Nasser

regime's modernizing project were compatible with religious laws that constituted the man as head of the family (Bier, 2011), and women's activists did not succeed in changing the family law status. Until today, parts of the family law continue to be based on Shari'a. In this way, religion was not seen in opposition to Egyptian modernity but was part of the construction of its specific nationalism. It is therefore imperative to avoid common traditional/modern and religious/secular dichotomies when analysing Egyptian nationalist discourses. This chapter will examine the role of religion in modernity through narratives surrounding Umm Kulthum and through her religious music.

7.1 A symbol of piousness and religious authority

Umm Kulthum sang religious songs from a young age. She went to Quran school where she learned how to recite the Quran, and her singing style continued to be characterized by her recitation skills. Further, religion became an important part of her public persona and was mentioned in narratives about her as well as in the narratives she created about herself in interviews and autobiographies. Similar to pictures distributed of her in company with children, she often posed praying and kissing religious objects such as the Quran (Lohman, 2010: 93). In conformity with gender norms of female modesty and piousness, this can be regarded as a way for Umm Kulthum to justify her lifestyle and gain popularity within a wider, primarily Muslim, population (Mernissi, 1975).

In autobiographies, Umm Kulthum referred to herself as *min al-mashayekh*; an expression defining respected religious people from the countryside. The word is the plural form of *sheik* and female *sheikha*. After doing her pilgrimage to Mekka, Kulthum was often described as either *sheika* or later *haqqa* (pilgrim). To be *min al-mashayekh* also meant coming from "the people". Umm Kulthum therefore emphasized her own heritage and authenticity as a villager as a way to position herself as a symbol of religion and as a religious leadership figure. The media reproduced this narrative. As an example, the popular magazine *Ruz al-Yusuf* described Kulthum as a "sufi leader"^{iv}.

"Umm Kulthum is a Sufi leader in a song. She struts through a melody like a purebred Arabian horse affected by the sound of mizmar. She has her own style in ending musical phrases which she took from the old *tajwid*, the seven readings (of the Qur'an) and religious song" (Mahmud, Mustafa, 1966).

Here, the narrative of Umm Kulthum as a religious leader combined her musical talent and understanding of *Tajwid* with her Arab origin (Frishkopf, 2008). Her religiosity was seen and used as a symbol of strength and power as well as national belonging. The role of religion in Egypt as heritage, which thus became a symbol of belonging, is in this way obvious (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Umm Kulthum also described her audience as “in a Sufi state”, affirming her own position as a religious leader through her description of the audience (Umm Kulthum quoted in Danielson, 1997: 121).

The narrative of Kulthum as religious authority followed Nasserist ideas of education and enlightenment. Umm Kulthum’s understanding and knowledge of Islam and the Quran was seen as exemplary and educated (Lohman, 2011). In representing resistance towards Western ideas while simultaneously representing Egyptian heritage and values, religion becomes a signifier of belonging. At the same time, it becomes visible how women claiming religious authority were accepted as part of the national narrative. Yet, as in the case of the legal system and Nasser’s attempt to secularize, conservative religious authorities stopped Umm Kulthum’s attempt to recite the Quran in recordings; a project that she attempted to pursue for years. Obviously, there was a limit to the religious agency of women as conservative religious powers were continuously dominant.

7.2 Religious songs

In the 1940s, Umm Kulthum returned to genres that she had been singing early in her career; songs called *Qasaid* that is an old form of Egyptian poetry. Some of the *Qasaid* were religious and they will be examined in this chapter. The colloquial songs from the 1940s and the religious and romantic *Qasaid* received a lot of airtime in Egyptian (national) radio in the 1950s and were part of her repertoire in concerts during the Nasser period. They reflected enlightenment of the population and Umm Kulthum therefore became known as the singer who “taught poetry to the masses” (Danielson, 1997).

Returning to religious singing, while she was peaking as an artist and in popularity, can be seen as an attempt to preserve Arabic heritage through maintaining and developing old forms of poetry. In Umm Kulthum’s words: “Qasa’id are the foundation of Arabic song whose history extends over 3000 years” (Umm Kulthum quoted in Danielson, 1997: 123). She thus related her music to a long tradition of Arabic song, while she often opposed the term “modern” in relation to

her music. At the same time as religion was a symbol of authenticity in popular music, it can also be understood as a way to secularize Islam or use it in a non-religious way.

The *Qasaid* is different in style and also the narrative differs. Some of the *Qasaid* has recitation-like moments such as very long phrases, but put in context of “modern music”. An example of a Religious *Qasida* is *Salu Qalbi* (“Ask My Heart”), which was written in 1914 as a celebration of the prophet Muhammed’s birthday, and the music resembles classic traditions of sung poetry and recitation of the Quran (*Salu Qalbi*, 1945). It was often played in Egyptian radio in the 1950s and 1960s.

Doing goodness is the best thing in this life
It remains after death, and gives the best reward
The prophet of goodness, showed us the right path
He has prepared a charter and guided humans

Achievements never come by wishes
But to get the victory, the world must bend
Nothing can stop a nation
It goes through ups and downs bravely (*Salu Qalbi*, 1945)

This song forms a narrative of the Egyptian or Arab people as guided by the prophet. Religion is a marker of the goodness of people and the nation and thereby naturalises or explains national boundaries as religious. Urging people to “do good” because it is rewarding, even after death, the song is educational or moral. The boundaries of the nation in this narrative can therefore be found in the moral state of the people because the “we” have been shown the right path and therefore belong to the victorious nation.

Salu Qalbi is aligned with nationalist discourses as it draws on the same symbols as nationalist narratives of victory and defeat, and further creates an idea of Arab or Egyptian homogeneity based on heritage, which in this example is Islam: “Nothing can stop a nation, it goes through ups and downs bravely”. As their narratives support the idea of the nation through religion, and encourages “good citizenship”, it is understandable that religious songs were played in national radio.

The religious songs represented a turn away from materialism and lack of moral, which the West came to stand for during the 1940s and onwards (Mernissi, 1975). Islam was seen as part of the fight against injustice and colonialism, resulting in a rise of an Islamic current in the Egyptian

society, manifesting in a reinforcement of the Muslim Brotherhood. Religion was in this way also used in nationalist songs. In a nationalist song from 1967, where Umm Kulthum approaches and celebrates Gamal Abdel Nasser, she sings:

And tomorrow we call the people to prayer in the beginning of dawn
And tomorrow bells will celebrate the day of victory
Stand up for we are ready
Stand up for we raised unity (Habib el-Sha'ab, 1967).

This song reflects a desire of unity across religion within Egypt. Symbols from Christianity and Islam are used to narrate the story of Egypt as the secular victorious nation in grand narratives of Nasser's regime. In that sense, religious songs were used as a means of creating belonging to the nation across religion.

The religious repertoire constructed emotions through Umm Kulthum's singing style that resembled Quranic recitation, which is part of many Egyptians' collective memory (Danielson, 1995). Furthermore, they functioned as part of the construction of an imagined shared Egyptian/Arab heritage and national belonging. This can be seen as a way for the dominant class to create hegemony in a Gramscian sense (Salih & Richter-Devroe, 2012). Religion, and Islam more specifically, was used to naturalise nationalist discourses, and by introducing Islam as part of popular culture, an attempt was made to secularize Islam and construct it as part of a national narrative of a moral, good, and authentic Arab people. The modern Egypt was therefore religious and secular, and Umm Kulthum was a symbol of this modernity that entailed complex ideas about religion, class, and gender.

8. Singing songs of the nation

According to Michael Billig, national songs are part of what he calls "banal nationalism": Everyday reminders like flags, national hymns etc. that remind people of their national identity (Bhabha, 1990). During Nasser's time, most singers recorded one or more national songs encouraged by the ministry of information and national guidance (Danielson, 1997). Umm Kulthum also recorded an amount of nationalist songs, and from 1952 to 1960, almost half of her

repertory was nationalist songs. Opposite her romantic and religious repertoire, the national songs did not have multiple meanings, and according to critics, the artistic value of these songs did not match the rest of her repertoire (Lohman, 2011). The narratives celebrated events like the construction of the high dam, the evacuation of the British, the union of Syria and Egypt as the United Arab Republic in 1920, as well as fatal events like the 1967 war, where Egypt was defeated by Israel, France, and Britain. In this chapter, I analyse the national repertoire of Umm Kulthum and elaborate on ideas of heritage, war, and victory as constituting for politics of belonging in the period.

8.1 Singing the Nation

Besides values such as family, honor, and religion, symbols from ancient Egypt played a crucial role in the narratives of the nation. The pyramids, the sphinx, and pharaonic symbols were frequently used in nationalist poetry and imagery, as a way to create a sense of belonging and shared history; as it was the case of religion and images of the countryside such as the Nile (Bhabha, 1990). Images of the countryside and ancient Egypt were also part of Kulthum's nationalist repertoire. One of these songs is Hafiz Ibrahim's classic poem *Misr tatahaddath an nafsi-ha* ("Egypt speaks about itself"), which has been used in several national struggles such as the 1952 revolution, the 1967 war, and the revolution in 2011. The song is sung in classical Arabic, which is not spoken/read by all Egyptians but was memorized by many (Bassiouney, 2014). It encapsulates the grand narrative of Egypt as the centre of the world:

All of creation stood watching, how I build the foundations for glory by myself.
The builders of the pyramids' early age saved me from having to speak when challenged.
On my head I wear the crown of the whole east, and its precious pearls hang around my neck.
My glory is ancient and rooted in the very beginnings. Who has glory and beginnings like mine? (Misr
Tatahaddath an nafsi-ha, 1952).

In this song, Egypt is telling its own story and is thus personified as a narrating "I". In the Arab world, Egypt is often referred to as *Umm el-Dunia* "Mother of the World", and the song constructs a narrative about a "Mother of the world" with "precious pearls around its neck" who is the foundation of the glory of the East, while "all of creation stood watching". It is a nostalgic

narrative of a great past, which in the period of Nasser served to shape an idea of national belonging in the present (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Ancient Egypt is connected to myths and history about the pharaohs and ancient gods. The pre-Islamic era is, however, combined with Islam or modern religion in the narrative: “God looked to me while I guided my sons, and they pulled upwards with all of their might”. God has guided the sons of Egypt to create the pyramids and to resist challengers, and in that sense, ancient history and modern history is combined through the mother nation. Ancient symbols were therefore part of narrating Egypt as a nation and thus creating a nationalist modernity built on nostalgic and ancient metaphors and symbols (Bhabha, 1990).

In *Misr tatahaddath an nafsi-ha* the pyramids are used as a symbol of how great challenges the Egyptian people can overcome. They embody the strength and resistance that “saved me from having to speak when challenged”. It means that their symbolic role points out Egypt’s strength as a nation to those who challenge it (probably, this refers to colonial rulers). “Do you believe that I, who have spent my life in a continuous struggle, have not come of age yet?”; this sentence stresses Egypt’s age and maturity and therefore challenges colonial perceptions and discourses of Egypt (as well as other colonies) as “backwards” and “immature” (Thapar-Bjorkert, 2014). This is further stressed by letting Egypt narrate the story of itself, reclaiming its own history, and telling this story in beautiful classical Arabic full of metaphors and symbols, which for Arabs reflects respect and intellect.

8.2 The victorious nation

Another continuous theme in the national songs sung by Umm Kulthum is victory of the nation, often relating to the nationalist struggle against colonialism. In a famous song from Umm Kulthum’s national repertory, *Ana al-Sha’ab* (“I am the people”), the independence from Britain is celebrated:

The people let out a voice of freedom
Strong, ancient, deep, and exalted
Saying: I am the people and the miracle
I am the people
I do not know the impossible
I am the people
I will accept no less than eternity

With my citizenship and my socialism
With the beat of Arabism in the nation (*Ana el-sha'ab*, 1960)

This song not only celebrates the voice of the people, the narrator is talking *with* the voice of the people or personifying it. The voice is “strong, ancient, deep”, referring to the proud history of Egyptians used to create a sense of collectivity and belonging in nationalist discourses (Yuval-Davis, 2011). The strong and deep voice says something about masculine ideals of strong and determined citizens (Enloe, 2000).

Letting the people tell the story goes in line with revolutionary narratives that described common people as the foundation of modern Egypt, opposite colonial rule, characterized by disregarding the people and causing oppression, illiteracy, and disease. Nasser stood for an “Egypt for Egyptians”, which was the slogan of the nationalist movement (Badran, 1995). In this narrative, boundaries of the national collectivities are drawn because the people/citizens/”those-who-belong”, are narrated as socialist, Arab, religious, masculinised and militarised subjects. Sentences such as “I do not accept immortality as an alternative” and “I love peace and I enter fights” describe how belonging is conditioned by a wish to fight and die for the nation (Enloe, 2000).

No invader ever left my land intact for the care of God is my soldier. Many a country transgressed against me, and attacked me, but then ceased to exist, and this is its punishment for transgression. For I am free and I've broken my bonds, against the will of the enemy, I've cut my chains. (*Masr Tatahadath an nafsiha*, 1952).

Several songs describe how Egypt has fought to become free of bonds and chains, which is why fighting and war are connected to freedom and peace in this narrative. From 1960 to 1978, Egypt's national Anthem was *Walla Zaman Ya Silahi* (“I haven't seen you for a while my weapon”) sung by Umm Kulthum, which, as the title suggests, brings a message of violence. Even though the 1952 revolution, where King Farouk was overthrown, did not become extremely violent, the rhetoric and discourses of nationalism and nation building were militarised (Enloe, 2000).

In the national songs, an enemy or an *other* is present but is often not mentioned by name. “Collect the friend and get rid of the stranger/outsider” is a sentence from the song *Ana el-Sha'ab* “I am the people”, where the other is described in Arabic as *Dakhil*; a negative laded word for stranger, outsider, or intruder. The enemy could therefore be interpreted in different ways. Obviously, it was

often referring to Western interference and the monarchy that ruled alongside the Brits, but the “stranger” could also be transferred to anyone not belonging or contributing to the nation-building and national struggles.

The militarised cultural productions can be seen as part of creating a militarised society and militarised subjectivities through ‘habitus’ and ‘banal nationalism’ (ibid). The songs are meant as a celebration of the nationalist struggle, but the discourse also becomes part of the construction of the ‘new’ Egyptian nation, its values, and peoples’ belonging as militarized subjectivities. It is also here that the boundaries of belonging are created. Those who belong are willing to sacrifice themselves for the cause/the nation. The fight for the nation is described as a common desire of the people, which also means that those who do not agree, do not belong. Further, it is interesting how the language of nationalism is bloodier than around the revolution of 1952.

8.3 A new enemy

The creation of Israel in 1948 became an important event in the modern history of the Middle East and in the creation of Middle Eastern nationalisms (Hammond, 2007). During the 1950s, Nasser increased Egypt’s support of the Palestinian guerrilla movement and nationalised the Suez Canal, which led to the tripartite aggression, where parts of Egypt were invaded by Israel, Britain, and France (Cobban, 1984). In this period, the song *Walah zaman ya silahi* (“I haven’t seen you for a while my weapon”) was played frequently in Egyptian radio (Lohman, 2011). Israel was perceived as a continuation of colonialism and in public discourse, Israel was constructed as the new enemy of Arab nationalism and independence.

Increasing tensions along the borders of Israel and Israeli attacks on Palestinian villages led to the Six Day War in 1967, where Jordanian and Egyptian military were defeated by the Israeli air force a few days after attacking Israel. This came as a shock for Egypt, and the entire Arab world, who saw Egypt and Nasser as the strong leader/father of Arabs. In the period up to the war, Egyptian national radio broadcasted seven speeches that Umm Kulthum presented and was the co-writer of, where she encouraged the Egyptian population to participate in Egypt’s war efforts (Lohman, 2011). The speech below evoked emotions of fear and anger by personifying Palestine as a girl who is the victim of Israeli terror. The Palestinian girl becomes a metaphor for the national

honour of the Arabs, because “she could be my daughter”. Palestine is represented as a part of the Nasserist family, strengthening Nasser’s idea of an Arab nation.

“Our fearless soldiers, when you were on the way to the borders, the past fortified me. I saw her - a young girl trembling with fear and terror under the bullets of the enemy. I saw him say “tomorrow, that could be my daughter.” You know the girl. The girl is Palestine. And you know the man - our man, Jamal Abd el-Nasir. Where is this girl today, to hear his voice calling you to her? God will help you as long as you help her” (*Sab’a Nida’at* “Seven Speeches”, 1967)

The defeat, however, led to Nasser’s resignation. Encouraged by Umm Kulthum’s multifaceted support, thousands went to the streets to demonstrate. Kulthum was one out of several artists who wrote a letter of support to Nasser, honouring him as a great leader. She donated money to the Egyptian army and she presented a new song honouring Nasser, *Habib el- sha’ab* (“Love of the people”), which was broadcasted almost every day for a month in the Egyptian national radio (Lohman, 2011). It begins: “Stand up and listen from deep down for I am the people, Stay for you are defender of the dam to the wishes of the people, Stay for you are what is left of the future of the people” (*Habib el-Sha’ab*, 1967). The message is that Egypt “survived” colonialism and several wounds, and that the only saviour now is Nasser.

Stand up for we have dried our tears and we smiled
Stand up, we strengthened our hearing and we learned
Stand up, we united and moved forward
Stand up for the people and remove its despair

And remember the future and forget the past
Stand up and push us forward after the naksa (set back).
And raise the head of this people
Stay for up are the love of the people (Habib el-Shaa’b, 1967)

In this song, Umm Kulthum speaks on behalf of the Egyptian people and asks Nasser to stay as president. The song draws on the same symbols as other nationalist songs such as the idea of unity and the greatness of nation. However, the narrative focuses on the future to a larger extent than other national songs, and urges the listener to “forget the past” (Bhabha, 1990). The support resulted in Nasser’s accept of returning to the presidency.

8.4 Belonging through grieve and productivity

“Where national memories are concerned, griefs are of more value than triumphs, for they impose duties, and require a common effort” (Renan in Bhabha: 1990: p. 19).

As described in the chapter above, Umm Kulthum’s role in society changed after the defeat, and her involvement in politics became more direct. Besides donating money herself, she encouraged the public to donate money to the war efforts. National discourses after the war, including Umm Kulthum’s public performances encouraged people to participate by ensuring that everyone had an important role, and that the farmer was as important as the soldier (Lohman, 2011). The grieve that the creation of Israel and the defeat in 1967 brought to many Egyptians were thus turned into messages of productivity and the unity of Egyptians and Arabs. By mobilizing large parts of the population, the government managed to create a sense of belonging through productivity, serving to normalise the idea of public military support. This stresses the power of mass media in Egypt and its role in creating hegemony (Abu-Lughod, 1990).

Umm Kulthum contacted women’s organisations in order to organize a money collection campaign, where poor people were encouraged to donate clothes. In radio programmes, she addressed working women and housewives to donate jewellery (El-Mougi, 2011). Women in this way became active participants in an (ended) war, encouraged by the example of Umm Kulthum who personalized the ideal woman. Mobilizing women was beneficial for the government because it doubled the number of citizens who could participate in rebuilding the army. It can also be seen as having a symbolic role; as a way to hide the severe consequences of the defeat and instead create familial symbolic images of women (mothers and daughters) of Egypt, doing their national duty. As I will continue to show in the next chapter, Umm Kulthum hence played an important role in the reinforcement of Egyptian military and maintaining public support of the regime.

Additionally, she played concerts, that were supposed to help create popular enthusiasm for the government and the war effort, in several governorates and provinces (El-Mougi, 2011). Especially photographs from the concerts served to show support for the government from different

classes and regions, and pictures of both rural and urban communities were circulated through the press.

“Mr. President, as a citizen of this region, I feel happy to welcome you. Like everyone here...You bring honor to all countries that you visit. It is not only Arab countries who share this love for you. In Egypt, we followed your journeys to countries like India and Pakistan and we felt proud. Especially when you were welcomed by an Indian artist, who showed you respect and welcomed you with *bukhur* (protection from envy). For this is the highest degree of love. But who is better than Egypt to protect his son? Egypt protects you by the book of god (Quran)” (Umm Kulthum at public concert 1967. Umm Kulthum at public performance: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YzbfP1T0wgQ>, Retrieved 20/05/17. my translation).

In this speech, held at one of the concerts, Umm Kulthum referred to Nasser as the son of Egypt, who needed the protection of his people. She highlighted the greatness of the nation by creating a sense of community and emotional bond to the great leader. The speech constructs emotions by explaining how other countries shared “love” for Nasser and how “we felt proud” (Ahmed, 2005).

Umm Kulthum also travelled to France and several Arabic countries like Sudan, Morocco, and Tunisia to sing at concerts. The trip to France was celebrated in the Egyptian media as a sign of Arab unity, and her audience were described as Arab fans from all over the world (Lohman, 2011). Umm Kulthum participated to create this image of her trip and Egypt’s role in the world:

“Members of the Arab emigrant communities visited me... And told me about Egypt, the love that they harbour for Egypt, and the trial that it undergoes. How many sons of Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria, even sons of black Africa, and many non-Arab Muslims came to visit me, and most of their discussion was about their love for Egypt and the great place that it occupies in their hearts” (El-Mougi, 2011).

She presented it as her citizen duty to go to Paris to export Egyptian culture and to shed light on the Palestinian cause the same way as she encouraged Egyptians to work, donate, and stay productive. Again, the discourses focused on Egypt’s grand history and heritage as a sign of power and resistance (Abu-Lughod, 1993). Belonging, thus, became constituted through an emotion of love towards Egypt, which could also be explained as a familial bond to the Nasserist nation like “the sons of black Africa” that Kulthum mentions in the interview above (Yuval-Davis, 2011).

On this tour, she sang *al-Attal* in all Arab countries and the sentence “Give me my freedom, set free my hands” was once again relevant, but this time relating to Palestine. She represented Egypt’s support of the Palestinian Resistance Movement as a way to maintain Egypt’s regional powerful role. Inside Egypt, the government feared, and tried to contain, a desire within the Egyptian population for a popular resistance against Israel after 12.000 Egyptian youths had signed up to volunteer in the Fatah movement after the 1967 defeat, where Egypt lost parts of Sinai (Cobban, 1984). This shows how national, regional and international power intersected and affected national discourses in Egypt. Pan Arabism as a political project was declining after the end of the union of Egypt and Syria, but was still used as a strategy to create belonging and support for the regime in Egypt.

However, Umm Kulthum’s dedication to the Palestinian cause was strong and lasted throughout her life and she donated more money to the Palestinian national movement than internal war efforts. In an interview where she was asked about her relationship to the Palestinian resistance movement she said: “Does this mean that I have become one of you? One of the combatants? There is nothing greater than the day I become one of you” (Umm Kulthum quoted in Lohman, 2011: 83). This was also part of keeping her own popularity in the Arab world intact, even when the power of Egypt was declining as regional power.

8.5 A Female Voice of War

“Caring, in its different gendered forms, therefore, has been at the heart of the performativity, as well as narratives of resistance, of national belonging” (Yuval Davis, 2011: 9).

There are several reasons why Umm Kulthum’s involvement in the war was not necessarily seen as inappropriate or provocative despite prevailing normative discourses on women (Bier, 2011). First of all, as mentioned, women participating in resistance movements were not unusual in the late 1960s, and furthermore it was a desire in the government to mobilize women to the war effort. Focusing on women groups and “humanitarian efforts” like collecting money and clothes was a way to naturalise and shape her own and other women’s participation in the war as *caring* instead of

military support (Yuval-Davis, 2011). She somehow functioned as a “pious” example of female resistance and her involvement might have helped to create public acceptance of female participation in the war effort.

However, Umm Kulthum’s voice sang militarised songs and she revealed a wish to become one of the “combatants” in the Palestinian resistance movement. She narrated masculine desires of the nation, which were related to violence and conquests. Umm Kulthum was more than a caring maternal figure, she contributed to performing a militarised masculinity that was foundational for people’s sense and possibility of belonging to the nation (Enloe, 2000).

9. Concluding remarks

In this thesis, I have examined different aspects of Umm Kulthum’s work as well as her role as a public figure in relation to belonging and nation-building processes in Egypt. The analyses of narratives reveal how cultural productions such as music reflected public discourses in Nasser’s Egypt and how they at the same time were part of shaping national hegemonic narratives. In some ways, music functioned as a direct political tool to mobilize citizens in war and crises, to create productivity in the population, and to maintain support for the regime; especially through a nationalistic repertoire that celebrated the victories and the heritage of Egypt. Umm Kulthum’s romantic and religious songs reflected popular emotions of Egyptians in different periods of Egypt’s modern history. The romantic songs also resembled nationalist narratives of longing, nostalgia, romance and religion. These songs evoked emotions of national belonging in a different way than the nationalist songs because they reflected the state that people were in, through recognizable themes of love and faith rather than through militarized language and bloody metaphors.

Some of these romantic songs served as counter-narratives to hegemonic ones because they can be seen as giving a voice to different groups of the population, whose voices had previously not been represented in mass media, such as peasant and working-class women. Umm Kulthum herself was part of a ruling class that disregarded exactly these women in decision-making processes and constructed politics of belonging in gendered terms that excluded certain groups of the society from what was considered to be “good citizenship”. Contraries can therefore be found within official or hegemonic narratives. Kulthum’s persona and life were part of the creation of counter-narratives

because of her personal transformations and transgression of boundaries of gender and class that did not match societal norms and expectations created through colonial and national governmentalities. The narratives related to Umm Kulthum therefore reveal a hybridity of past and present discourses.

Modernity was central to Egyptian nationalism during Nasser and Umm Kulthum became a symbol of this modernity. She reflected ideas about women's liberation at the same time as she symbolized heritage and religiosity, which were also part of the complex construction of modernity in Egypt. Umm Kulthum's songs narrated a complex and hybrid modernity that entailed ideas of unity in terms of religion, pan-Arabism, and class. The unity, however, was constructed in relation to the other, meaning that it was based on oriental ideas from colonialism. The modernity thereby reproduced the binary understanding of "us" and "them" constructed by colonial hegemonic discourses, which resulted in the reinforcement of ideas of purity in relation to national boundaries and identity (Pratt, 2007).

I therefore argue that Umm Kulthum participated in the construction of politics of belonging in Egypt through her multifaceted political support for Nasser, her art, and her public persona and symbolic role. Umm Kulthum managed to gain support from a wide spectre of the population, from different classes, genders, and religions.

9.1 A nuanced understanding of gender in the Middle East

The narratives about Kulthum shed light on ideas about gender in particular, because women were an important part of the construction of national identity as honourable and different from Western values and Orientalist stereotypes which affected the way the "Egyptian woman". The thesis shows, though, how Umm Kulthum participated in constructing a narrative about the modest and caring Egyptian woman, while she was able to negotiate her identity and use different perceptions of gender in various areas and periods in Egypt to her own benefit. The complexity of gender relations that this thesis depicts is relevant in relation to contemporary stereotype understandings of Middle Eastern gender relations.

In a Western context, Middle Eastern women (Muslim women in particular) have been central in debates about culture, identity, nationalism etc. in national contexts, but also in relation to global politics. In Western media, there is a tendency to portray Muslim women and men in stereotype ways that does not take different social locations such as class, nationality, education and age into consideration. This thesis nuances the picture through historical insights. It is not a

question of showing that “Muslim women can also be powerful or influential”. Rather, the relevance lies in the historical acceptance of the complexity of nationalisms and modernities, that have constituted both progressive and regressive currents within societies. In Egypt, discourses of women’s liberation created spaces for some women’s emancipation and repressive surroundings for others. Secular nationalist discourses constructed gendered narratives that maintained women in certain roles in the paternalistic and authoritarian system. As shown, religious institutions also played a role in creating unequal positions for men and women, yet the difference in Nasser’s Egypt was that hegemony was within nationalist discourses, which is important to remember when discussing gender in Middle Eastern societies.

In Egypt, gender is continuously used as a marker of belonging and in the construction of boundaries of the “national family”. Lately, more than fifty young Egyptians have been imprisoned after an episode at a concert with a Jordanian band in October 2017, where an Egyptian fan raised a rainbow flag in support of the LGBTQ community in Egypt (Mohie, 2017). This caused immediate reaction from the Egyptian government, that began a crackdown on homosexual men, who were detained and exposed to so called “anal tests”, where the authorities claim to be able to check whether or not a man is homosexual. The crackdown is first of all a strategy to remove focus from the political and economic chaos that prevails in Egypt, but it further reflects ideas about maintaining “national honour” through heterosexual relationships and keeping the national family “pure” from Western influence. This is one out of several cases like crackdown on women’s rights activists, gender based police violence, and sexual harassment, that explains how national discourse are still affected by colonialism and a militarized and hyper masculine nationalism (Amar, 2011).

9.2 Kulthum’s legacy in contemporary Egypt

In Egypt, Umm Kulthum is still a present and relevant figure more than forty years after her death. She has a museum in her honour, a statue in the centre of Cairo, and, perhaps more importantly, her music lives on in Egyptian streets, cafes, taxis, Nile boats, bars and homes, and so does the narratives about her. Everyone has a story about Umm Kulthum, often relating to their personal life. Her songs were also part of the revolution in 2011 and her status as a national icon persists.

Even though Umm Kulthum persists as a symbol of nostalgia, the audiences have changed and the songs of Umm Kulthum are given new meaning by new audiences. An Egyptian artist

called Huda Lutfi uses Umm Kulthum in her collages as a feminist icon to remember her as part of heritage that entailed matriarchs and female front figures. My Arabic teacher, a 25-year-old Egyptian woman from a middle-class home in Cairo, listens to Umm Kulthum's love songs that resembles her own longings for freedom and love, but to her, the songs also describes the sorrows of a citizen in Egypt, that does not see better things coming in the future. Thus, she continues to play a role in the creation of national belonging, even though the kind of belonging, which for instance my Arabic teacher experiences, is loaded with nostalgia and melancholy of a great nation that slowly crumbles.

Summary

In this thesis, I examine the role of the singer, Umm Kulthum, in the nation-building process in Nasser's Egypt. I show how the narratives, which are created through her professional appearance and her songs, can be read in various, sometimes contradictory, ways, and I suggest that exactly the multivocality of the narratives has worked to mobilise a variety of groups in the Egyptian society as *citizens* who felt national belonging, while, at the same time, certain narratives have worked to create a rather narrow understanding of *good citizenship*.

Singing the Nation-state is based on theoretical work originating in post-colonial and feminist studies. After the introduction, the theoretical chapters present the concepts, which are fundamental to the analyses; namely nationalism, power, gender, identity and belonging. Further, I depict the empirical basis of the thesis. Apart from empirical material from other scholarly work, I use material from the Umm Kulthum museum in Cairo and material available at online platforms like youtube. I then present the analytical method, narrative analysis, which I deploy in the analyses.

The analytical part counts five chapters. First, I look at the ways in which power intersects with music and culture and how Umm Kulthum positioned herself among the political elite through music. Second, the analysis of gendered narratives of Umm Kulthum suggests that these took part in constructing gender norms through concepts like honour, caring and motherhood, however counter-narratives of gender bending were also existing through her performativity of genders. In the third analytical chapter, I focus on how the romantic repertoire of Umm Kulthum fitted national discourses of a national family romance and I argue that they at the same time created new understandings of women's agency. The fourth chapter examines a complex understanding of modernity in Egypt and shows how religious songs were part of anti-colonial notions of modernity. Finally, the fifth chapter analyses national songs and how Umm Kulthum participated in the construction of hegemonic national narratives through her "singing" of the nation.

Continuously an important and popular persona in contemporary Egypt, Umm Kulthum has shown to be an extremely powerful and influential figure. In this thesis, I show that Kulthum participated in the construction of politics of belonging in Egypt through her multifaceted political support for Nasser, through her art and public persona/symbolic role. The analyses of narratives reveal how cultural productions such as music reflected public discourses in Nasser's Egypt and how they at the same time were part of shaping national hegemonic narratives.

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ⁱ Oral poetry was seen by Western experts as backwards and equal to lack of social change.

ⁱⁱ Biographies that were released at the time where Umm Kulthum was alive, were usually published with her consent and interference. The ministry of culture also released short biographies at her birthday and anniversaries

ⁱⁱⁱ Tarab is an expression in Arabic music for a state of ecstasy that can be obtained through listening to music.

^{iv} Sufi Islam is a certain branch of Islam focusing on spirituality and using music to achieve a sort of trance.