

New Novel Chronicles Life, Love of Poet Ahmad Rami and Um Kulthum

I Loved You for Your Voice

By Selim Nassib
Trans. Alison Anderson
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By Sami Asmar



The story of Arab arts and culture cannot be told without a sizable chapter on Um Kulthum (1904 -1975), the legendary Egyptian singer venerated by generations of Arabs throughout the world. Many historical accounts have been written about Um Kulthum's life and works, but never a fictional one, with the exception of a television series in which the script's details were artistically filled in.

The novel "I Loved You for Your Voice" by Selim Nassib is a beautiful chronicle of Um Kulthum's life as imagined by the author, who transformed himself to her environment in order to mesmerize the reader with the particulars along every major step of the five-decade span of the novel. He took liberties appropriate for a novel but constrained himself within the historical framework of documented events. The creatively brilliant conversations feel so authentic that one has to remind oneself that this is fiction and not a documentary.

The novel is narrated by the poet Ahmad Rami (d. 1981) who wrote the lyrics of most of Um Kulthum's songs (137 of her 283 songs) and, as such, it explores the relationship between Rami and Um Kulthum as seen through the poet's eyes. There is no question that Rami loved Um Kulthum, but an unanswered question remains as to whether they had a romantic relationship. Um Kulthum was raised in a religious environment in a small village. When she made the transition to secular singing, she found she needed to socialize with Cairo's high society, though she always remained a conservative country girl on the inside. Unlike other celebrities who enjoyed publicity and being seen in the latest fashions with eligible bachelors, Um Kulthum maintained a solitary lifestyle. She carefully selected the people who could visit her: her family and professionals in her field. The public's interest in linking Um Kulthum to love affairs was never substantiated. For curious fans, Rami always made the top of the list of rumor material.

Nassib's novel (translated from French to English by Alison Anderson) is divided into four parts covering specific time periods: 1924-1928, 1932-1938, 1950-1956, and 1965-1975. The novel establishes the role of Um Kulthum's mentor Sheikh Abu al-Ela, a religious and secular vocalist, who arranged Rami's first meeting with Um Kulthum in 1924. Ahmad Rami, who was also a close friend of singer/composer Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab, had studied Persian at the Sorbonne and had translated the *Ruba'iyat* (Quatrains) of Omar al-Khayyam before returning to Egypt. On the occasion of their first meeting, Um Kulthum sang one of Rami's poems. During their conversation, she asked that he write more

poems for her. Much to Rami's surprise, Um Kulthum quickly made another request: not to use classical Arabic, so that more people could understand and enjoy her songs.

When Ahmad Rami later came to the realization that he was not only a fan but also in love with Um Kulthum, he decided to write her a definitive poem describing his feelings, an open love letter. Within two hours, he was at her door, offering to read her his work and watching for a reaction, if not reciprocation. It read, "If I forgive and ignore your coldness, how can I be free of the memory of you. Your gaze is dear. The heart has no price. Tell me to forget, have pity on me, or tell me to come. Come drink this glass with me." He felt that she understood the message for a moment, then closed up again. Composer and 'oud player Muhammad al-Qasabji put these verses to music, and Um Kulthum performed the song in 1928 under the title "*Law Kunti Asameh*." Nassib adds that the fervor of her singing caused a riot in the streets.

Selim Nassib depicted through Rami how Um Kulthum interacted with other important men in her life. Here is one descriptive example about al-Qasabji, who composed many of her songs and for whom the lute was everything: "He was five years old when he received his first lute; his arms were too short to reach around it. He had been playing for so long that his body had married the instrument; he'd become hunchbacked. But the moment he would sit and hold his lute [to play for Um Kulthum], he lost his hunch and his body found its place." Al-Qasabji was considered, at the time, a modernizer of classical Eastern music.

On the raging debate of the time between modernists and traditionalists in music, Nassib attributes this quote to Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab: "The West has only two modes, major and minor, and look at the wonderful results they have achieved. And we possess an infinity of modal formulas. Just imagine if we could establish an oriental harmony! There would no longer be anything stopping Arab music from shedding its local character to become universal. All that's needed is to adopt a single scale... and use the piano in our orchestras." It is clear from listening to his compositions that Abd al-Wahhab led the modernist camp, but this quote unfairly made him sound like a sell-out because it is just as obvious from listening to his compositions that he was a master of making the most use of the Arab musical scales and the infinity of modal formulas. Interestingly, Rami "did not follow" the technicality of the debate and Um Kulthum simply "did not care."

The novel builds up to a long-awaited milestone: the collaboration between Um Kulthum and Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab, who had become her professional rival. This rivalry started when Um Kulthum consulted with Rami about accepting a poem from the "Prince of Poets," Ahmad Shawqi, the long time mentor of Abd al-Wahhab. Rami thought it would be an honor but Um Kulthum had reservations about it, due to the long and practically exclusive arrangement between Shawqi and Abd al-Wahhab. "The deep relationship between those two is like the one between you and me," she told Rami, implying that she should not come between Shawqi and Abd al-Wahhab. Rami understood her comment differently; he assumed she did not want him to write a poem for his friend Abd al-Wahhab, but to maintain the pairwise exclusive relationships: Um Kulthum/Rami and Abd al-Wahhab/Shawqi. Rami was split between his feelings for her and his friendship with her rival. Um Kulthum appeared to respect Rami's loyalty to his friend, but she did not relieve him of his painful dilemma.

Um Kulthum chose not to collaborate with Abd al-Wahhab for a long time. It was not until President Gamal Abd al-Nasser used his influence on the two of them that they agreed to work together. The results were magnificent. In fact, of all the men in Um Kulthum's life, the one who ended up having the most influence was President Nasser. She had witnessed his revolution, supported the new republic and spent her energy and resources in the service of her nation, in her own way. She clearly had the attention and respect of the president, who treated her like the national treasure that she was. The story of Um Kulthum paralleled the modern history of Egypt from the early years to the center of the world's stage. "I Loved You for Your Voice" captures both accounts in a surreal mix of reality and fiction.

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