

## **“Kolleena Ensan”: Samira Said’s Music as an Interpretation of Moroccan Women’s Cultural Identity**

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### **Abstract**

Samira Said is a modern “diva” in Middle Eastern music who is also known in Western world music circles. In her travels between Morocco, Egypt, and the U.S., Samira Said transitions, physically and musically, between and across cultural boundaries. As she explores and renegotiates her postcolonial identity she uses a complex interplay of gendered and cultural symbol systems, representing Arab femininity to Western audiences while exploring Moroccan and Egyptian themes for her Arab audiences. This essay investigates Said’s music and the way it is produced, performed, and received, as a means to understand the forces that have shaped present-day Moroccan women’s cultural identity. Post-colonial theory, ethnomusicology, and gender studies focused on the Middle East are used to place Said in this rich, multicultural context. A visual and auditory analysis of Said’s music videos is also incorporated as primary source material. Among the themes explored are pan-Arabism, the Westernization of North Africa, the competing pressures of sexuality and gender roles, multilingualism, and transnationalism and the Arabic diaspora. In addition to the cultural and gendered contexts which surround her work, Said’s music yields insights into shared musical ideas between cultures, nationalism in communal musical expression, and the relationship between performer and audience. Through her music and public persona, Said negotiates contradictory cultural forces while escaping them. By singing in Moroccan Arabic and using familiar elements of Moroccan music, as well as shaping her performances for Western audiences, Said is irreducible to one identity and evades definition, enacting the cultural hybridity required of contemporary Muslim women.

**Keywords: Samira Said, Morocco, Music**

### **1. Introduction**

The cliché “music is the universal language” assumes that all people’s music is intelligible and meaningful to all other people and that music, can be used for communication across language barriers. Although there is some truth to this idea, music is a product of a vast network of interlacing factors, including, but not limited to, the political, socioeconomic, sexual, religious, and otherwise personal backgrounds and attributes of the musician; the conditions, economic, political, and cultural, under which the music industry operates; and the myriad ways in which listeners consume and react to the music<sup>1</sup>. All of the above- mentioned factors influence, but do not dictate the audible and aesthetic qualities of the music itself. This essay uses the structure and fundamental elements of a piece of music, notably one of blended Middle Eastern (also referred to as Arabic) and Western (generally European and/ or American) origin, to explore the way a Westerner might be able to glimpse, through music and its surrounding contexts, the cultural forces that have shaped present-day Moroccan women’s views of themselves and their cultural identity. Because of the variety of Moroccan popular music and the various interpretations each musical style provides for, this essay will focus on the career and music of Samira Said (also written in Latin characters as Saeed or Saïd) and the situation of women in present-day Morocco and Egypt. In her moves between Morocco, Egypt, and

the U.S. as well as the various musical styles she employs, Samira Said embraces her femininity and uses her cultural heritage to supply her international celebrity, while her transitions between and across cultural boundaries give her legitimacy as a spokeswoman for not only Moroccan women's feelings about their identity within their country, but also Morocco's position in the Arab world and the international sphere.

Morocco's relation to other countries, as interpreted by Western scholars, has varied with the changes in models used to describe world cultures. According to the modernist theory, which was used to classify world cultures, all peoples were either oppressed by tradition or autonomous agents operating in the modern world. This theory has been debunked and replaced by the postmodernist theory, in which tradition is recognized to be an invention used to artificially separate would-be modern cultures from those still mired in the past. In exploring Moroccan women's identity from a Western perspective, one must be careful to avoid the detrimental and false perceptions of Islamic societies as "traditional," in other words "authoritarian, elitist, sultanic, obfuscatory, and despotic," while Western societies are "modern" and have moved past their own tradition, which harbored nothing more menacing than non-mechanized farming and barter economies<sup>2</sup>. The binary view of the world presented in the modernist theory is irreconcilable with the change and progress that all cultures undergo over time.

Western analyses of contemporary Moroccan culture have focused on the changes affected by French and Spanish colonization and later, Moroccan independence. The inner complexity and outer beauty of the polyrhythms common in Arabic music can be seen as a metaphor for the reconstructed cultural identities in Morocco and throughout the Arab world through the periods of precolonialism, colonialism, postcolonialism, and the modern era. The effects of French and, to an extent, Spanish, colonialism in Morocco are far-reaching and complex, but the simplest explanation of colonialism's long-lasting effects is reflected in Moroccan and Arab nationalist trends. French colonizers told the Moroccans they conquered that they were French and must shed their previous Middle Eastern identity, causing the Islamic culture in Morocco to react to colonialist pressures<sup>3</sup>. Because "the French colonizers sought to marginalize the Arab-Muslim culture through the assimilation and alienation of the Maghrebi peoples," "Pan-Arab and Pan-African cultural nationalism were a response to colonialism and its cultural domination"<sup>4</sup>. Out of the cultural subjugation imposed by the colonizers came a desire for independence which revealed itself in the surge in Moroccan nationalism. By celebrating their culture, Moroccans tried to undo the damage done to their self-image by the cultural degradation imposed during the colonial period. Although Morocco succeeded in winning its independence in 1956, Moroccan culture was forever changed by the French Protectorate period. This historical background underlies Said's work and her choices of lyrics, language, musical styles, and artistic presentation.

Born in Rabat, Morocco, Samira Said first sang on national television at a young age, when she was a guest on the show *Mawaheb* (Talents), showcasing talented child performers<sup>5</sup>. She began singing at the age of fourteen and while living in Morocco met Abdel Halim Hafez, one of the most popular Middle Eastern artists, and moved to Egypt so her career could flourish<sup>6</sup>. Said's star was set in the sky of Moroccan popular music with her hit song "Alemnah Al Hob" (Teach Us Love). According to the Jordanian newspaper *Al-Bawaba*, her "style initially was characterized as being lyrical and Westernized- a mesh of jazz, flamenco, and pop," but later exhibited more traits of "Moroccan gypsy music," especially in her song "Al Bal"<sup>7</sup>. Her album "Qaween Beek" (Make me Strong), released in 2005, reached the #1 spot in the market. Sales were highest in Arab countries, but Samira Said also plays to an international audience, as evinced by sales and concerts abroad<sup>8</sup>. Her talent has been recognized at several music festivals and awards, such as the Monaco Music Award for Best Arab Singer, which she received in 2003<sup>9</sup>. Because of her popularity in Morocco and other countries, as well as her unique position as a female entertainer who divides her time between three countries (Morocco, Egypt, and the U.S.), Samira Said's music is an ideal window into the cultural forces that have shaped and continue to influence Moroccan women's views of their own identity.

## 2. Samira Said's Music

One reason Said's music is so popular is because of the tonal beauty of her voice against the background instrumentation. The centrality of her voice represents her personal influence in her work. Fans of Said's music on youtube.com have the following observations to offer on her voice: "her voice is so niceeeeeee [sic]" and "that voice wow im [sic] in love," by GracefulLuxury and goshayug, respectively<sup>10</sup>. In relation to her audience, "the value of [the singer's] identity is as important as the value of the entertainment, diversion, or articulation of social problems, all of which might be shared across socio-political boundaries"<sup>11</sup>. Because the singer is the focus of the audience's attention, her personal life is under scrutiny, and her identity is essential in appreciating the music. Said's identity as a Moroccan woman inspires pride in her Moroccan fans who see her as a positive symbol of their cultural identity. As said by TheStrokesBaby on youtube.com, in reference to a video of Said's song "Kolleenan Ensan," "That is awesome, because I am also Moroccan...I am so proud that she is from Morocco!"<sup>12</sup>. Because Said is Moroccan,

Moroccan women see her as an emblem of themselves fulfilling dreams of international travel, fame, and economic independence.

No matter one's level of formal musical education, anyone can easily discuss and understand the most salient aspect of vocal music: the lyrics. Having said that song lyrics are intelligible to everyone, that statement must be qualified by the addition that the lyrics are only a point of interest for those who know the language. Although Said and other Arab artists have audiences who do not understand Arabic, the focus here is on the meaning of Said's lyrics to an Arabic-speaking audience. Once again, the impact of colonialism and subsequent political developments in the Arab world must be examined. While Arabic is commonly referred to as though it were a single language, there is a limited population that speaks Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), and this group- comprised mainly of academics- uses the language in artificial settings such as analysis and teaching. In their everyday lives, people in the Arab world speak Arabic dialects specific to their country, often in addition to French, Spanish, or English.

Language is an integral part of cultural identity. Egypt still monopolizes the entertainment production in the Arab world, and many Arabs are familiar with Egyptian Arabic, as well as their own dialect, "because of the country's leading role in movie and music production"<sup>13</sup>. Samira Said, in order to further her musical career, moved to Egypt soon after becoming famous by singing on a television show. For this reason, Samira Said's transition from performing and giving interviews in Moroccan Arabic to Egyptian Arabic was taken as a personal insult by many of her Moroccan fans, who derided her "for adopting another state's 'language'"<sup>14</sup>. Former supporters' reactions to Said's use of Egyptian dialect reflect their sense of loss and betrayal as she reestablished her cultural identity, through her language choice, as not Moroccan but Egyptian. Comments on her song "Kolleena Ensan" on youtube.com include everything from jqewel's mislabeling, "she is From Egypt" to SpikyMooDy's bitter "she is moroccan but now she is egyptian and she sing this song in egyptian 2 [sic]"<sup>15</sup>. Attitudes towards Said's use of Egyptian Arabic can best be explained within the context of language use and attitudes in Morocco.

Morocco is composed of many different ethnicities, like the hybridized styles in modern Arab popular music. Moha Ennaji, in his study of ethnolinguistics in Morocco, notes that "multilingualism is a major characteristic of Morocco, and for many Moroccans language loyalty constitutes a core value of their ethnocultural identity"<sup>16</sup>. Although many people in Morocco speak more than one language, they use language as a key element of their cultural self- identification. In particular, people's first language is important because "mother tongues have social functions that are basically related to identity, everyday life, family, and friends because they express people's feelings, values, aspirations, and beliefs"<sup>17</sup>. Native languages are people's first and deepest ways of connecting with the world and their experiences as a whole. The loss of one language and adoption of another signify more than a change in the pattern of speaking; rather the switch represents a denial of one identity and acceptance of a new sphere of social identity<sup>18</sup>. Because Moroccan Arabic is the primary language of many Moroccans (Berber is also widely spoken as a first language), Said's rejection of Moroccan Arabic in her music was seen as a negation of her identity as a Moroccan woman.

Although Said's use of Egyptian Arabic cost her some Moroccan fans, she still has a large following throughout the Middle East. As a female singer in a part of the world known in the West for its social separation of genders, and in many cases, subjugation of women, Said stands in a unique position to delineate new gender roles and identities in her society. Much of her music draws on traditional styles, but in a fashion appealing to modern audiences looking for something new. As well as her songs themselves, Said is well known for her music videos. The music video has allowed female singers to achieve fame for their dynamic presentations involving dances and storylines, as well as the music itself. A study of female performing artists in North Africa commented on the "doubly transgressing nature of the female body in performance" in an area where women are frequently hidden or veiled, saying that "the professional female performing body evokes fitna, or social disorder, because her performance does not necessarily abide by social contracts that would seek to control what her body does"<sup>19</sup>. The very idea of female artists producing music videos is enough to send shock waves through the popular culture because of the social boundaries that might be transgressed or reinvented in this new medium.

Because of the international music available to Arab listeners and the subsequent desire to innovate and increase market share, some female artists have made their music videos more sexually explicit, especially by wearing provocative clothing and performing suggestive dances<sup>20</sup>. There is also trend towards younger, sexier singers, while the memory of Umm Kulthum, despite her age and motherly appearance, is "still an obsession" in the hearts of all Egyptians<sup>21</sup>. The popularity of female singers with more overtly sexual appearances suggests changing attitudes towards sexuality in the Middle East. Although Samira Said is in her fifties, she is still perceived as attractive, as evinced by the following comments on a video of Said's song "Youm Wara Youm" on youtube.com:

joyouslife4all: wow! she is the hottest 51 I've ever seen!! she rocks!!  
kaka4thewin: 51!!! are u serious?!?!?!?!  
joyouslife4all: yeah, so I've heard!  
bisah7: she is soo hot  
goshayug: When I found out she is 51 omg she looks 30 years younger<sup>22</sup>

Some music fans suggest that if Samira Said were starting her career now, she would be at a disadvantage because of her age, but she is now so ensconced in the Arab music industry that she can hold her own with younger singers. The popularity of artists like Samira Said and the lingering national affection in Egypt for Umm Kulthum underscores the way in which tradition and modernity interact in the creation of popular culture. Many fans are calling Said the “Diva of Arab Music,” an interesting connection to the genre in which Umm Kulthum still reigns as “Queen.”

Said's songs and public appearances, supporting Egypt's position as a powerhouse of mass-produced Arabic culture, have solidified the idea of pan-Arabic nationalism, a group culture and identity across national boundaries. One of her most popular songs is the critically acclaimed “Youm Wara Youm” (Day after Day), a duet with Algerian singer Cheb Mami. Fans from the native countries of both singers enjoy the song, which Samira sings in Moroccan Arabic. Amid the many comments on the song on youtube.com, like this one by MissKadyya “Lalla Samira, vous êtes une grande artiste et une très belle femme!” (Madame Samira, you are a great artist and a very beautiful woman!), there are discussions about Westerners' perspectives on Arabic culture as well as the ethnic composition of Morocco<sup>23</sup>. As stated by prowned, “who eve [sic] said that moroccans are not arabs should stop right there. arabic is morocco's first language, it's a 100% arabic country. deal with it,” and Cherwaki, “Arabs and Berbers are brothers and sisters. We are Moroccans. Our ancestors are Arabs, Berbers, and mixed. That's what makes Morocco unique and an interesting country. I am an Arab and I love Berbers. They are my people too. Morocco wouldn't be Morocco without Arabs and Berbers”<sup>24</sup>. The rise in nationalism and the Arabisation process has caused Berbers to feel neglected, but many Moroccans, as evinced by the afore-cited comments, appreciate the importance of the Berber people and culture in the mosaic that is Morocco. The strongest voice for the integral necessity of Berber in Moroccan culture is that of King Mohammed VI, who said, “I am Moroccan before I can say that I am Berber or Arab. There are Moroccans who are Berber; others are from an Arab, African, or Andalusian origin. My father was of Arab descendance while my mother is Berber. This reality reflects the Moroccan genius”<sup>25</sup>. As validated by ordinary Moroccans as well as the reigning monarch, Morocco's ethnic diversity is one of the country's best features. In evaluating Said's music as an interpreter of Moroccan women's interaction with the rest of the world, it must be remembered that these women themselves come from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, giving rise to unique interpretations of her music.

The modern exchange of ideas about transnational identity is carried out via television and the internet, technology and modes of communication that span geopolitical borders. In the Arab world, vocal music has been used both as a political protest and to give an air of legitimacy and popular support to the ruling party. A notable example is the Shaaban Abdel Rahim, an Egyptian Shaabi singer famous for his song, “I Hate Israel”. What sounds like a simple political protest song is anything but simple. It should be noted that “when the song was first released... the lyrics said, ‘I Hate Israel and Love Amr Mussa’ (the leader of the Arab League). Although the governments of many Arab nations have attempted, with various degrees of success, to impart a national consciousness and identity on their constituents, the idea of nationalism has been realized most clearly, if inadvertently, in the popularity across nations of Arab singers. The question has been proposed, “If states have failed, been unable or unwilling to force a hegemonic identity discourse of nation state citizenry onto their populaces, is popular music... a utilized avenue of participation with the larger Arab community whose attempts at political and economic integration have been continuously frustrated?”<sup>26</sup>. The popularity of Superstar, an Arabic television show based on American Idol, as well as the cross-national celebrity of Samira Said, among other Arab artists, would suggest that there is indeed a pan-Arabic music and popular culture.

Samira Said herself is an emblem of transnationality in her moves between Morocco and Egypt as well the different awards and shows she has received and participated in as a representative of the Arabic music community. Samira Said won the BBC International Music Award in 2003 for her collaboration with Cheb Mami for “Youm Wara Youm”<sup>27</sup>. She was also chosen by the Egyptian Ministry of Culture to represent Egypt at the World Music Festival in 2004, in addition to singing to packed houses in Morocco and Jordan<sup>28</sup>. In a stunning expression of Arabic unity, Samira Said performs the song “Kolleen Ensan” (We Are All Human), the music video of which features a multiracial chorus singing:

We are all human  
Despite differences of languages  
And that man is many different shades  
Different intentions, forms and religion  
But the Lord is one  
The Lord of man  
We are gathered as one in love  
And all of us are human

The song, which is sung in Arabic, French, and English, turns its focus from world unity to the promise of African civilization, as Samira sings:

The eyes turned toward Africa,  
Friend of the whole world,  
Dreaming of peace and friendship for life<sup>29</sup>

One could hardly ask for a clearer picture of her worldview, or at least the image promoted at the African Cup of Nations soccer tournament in Cairo, for which the song was written<sup>30</sup>.

The separation of performer and audience, when seen within the larger context of the commercialization of Moroccan music and the world music industry in general can speak to Moroccans' disassociation from the art forms that Westerners look to as typical of their country. In fact, Western engagement with world music and other forms of internationally marketed art often reflects a Western desire to enter into the inner life of the other society, although the very processes that make this involvement possible deny it full efficacy by removing the art from its original medium, the life of the community. Similarly, some Moroccan listeners hold that Said's music, in trying to market itself in a global scene, has become too "Westernized" and detached from its Moroccan inspiration. Although some fans, like lafolieci, who commented on a video of Said's on youtube.com that, "you make us proud of morocco," and MoRockin15, who agrees that Said "be reppin us Moroccans!" see Said's music as a representation of Moroccan culture, there are others, such as NarutoUzumakis who contends that "Youm Wara Youm" is a "good sog [sic] but she looks like ordinary western singer and that's not really good," for whom Said's cultural integrity, as presented in her music videos, is debatable<sup>31</sup>. The availability of international music to Middle Eastern listeners has increased the supply of available music styles. In order to stay popular with their homeland audiences, Arab artists such as Samira Said have had to make their music unique and cutting- edge. This desire for new styles has led to hybridization, or the adoption of musical constructs from styles based in other cultures. Some critics complain that these new blended styles are inauthentic, but others contend that these styles are indeed Arab, because they are sung in Arabic by Arab artists<sup>32</sup>. Comments on Said's videos on youtube.com corroborate this view of hybridized music as essentially Arab because, as stated by Babyeagle, "This song is ours , it's ARABIC, written by ARAB poets, composed by ARAB musicians, performed by ARAB singers and directed by an ARAB director, and above that it's sang to us, us ARABS :)"<sup>33</sup>. This debate over cultural integrity in music production mirrors similar questions about Arab cultural identity in a world rife with global exchange.

### 3. Conclusion

From the controversy over her use of Egyptian dialect to the present popularity Samira Said enjoys in Morocco, the Arab world, and the international scene due to her return to using Moroccan melodies and poetry, Samira Said has reached a state of consonance. In 2009 the "#1 Moroccan artist" dazzled over 60,000 fans at the Mowazeen Music Festival in Morocco. In planning for her upcoming album, Samira planned to "include more Moroccan folk songs on her upcoming albums, adding that the Moroccan rhymes needed some polishing to mesh them with the modern music styles"<sup>34</sup>. A return to and embrace of her Moroccan roots is apparent in Samira Said's statement that "Moroccan songs need more support and to establish their own market"<sup>35</sup>. In her own way, Said has modulated her music from an Egyptian focus to a Moroccan one, mainly through singing in Moroccan Arabic and using familiar elements of Moroccan music. Moroccan identity, separate from Arabic transnationalism and the popular culture manufactured in Egypt, is a distinct cultural phenomenon.

Through her music and performance styles, Samira Said gives voice to and creates the cultural forces that have shaped her identity as a Moroccan woman. Her popularity across the Arab world is a demonstration of the pan- Arab unity found in popular culture. Among the cultural forces Said explores are colonialism and Arab nationalism, the

importance of dialect, and the relationship between Egyptian popular culture and other Arab countries. As a Moroccan woman Samira Said negotiates these cultural forces and interprets them for her listeners.

#### 4. Acknowledgements

The author wishes to express her appreciation to her advisor, Dr. Linn Tonstad, for her enthusiasm and guidance throughout this research project; Nathan A. Parlee, for his assistance in editing this essay; and Dr. Edward Upton for his help in revising this essay for publication.

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