



ARABIC LITERATURE IN THE EUROPEAN DIASPORA: 2011-2021

On Contemporary Arabic Literary Production:
a series of essays by Marcia Lynx Qualey
exploring trends and themes in contemporary
Arabic-language literary creation.

Arabic Literature in the European Diaspora: 2011-2021

A series of articles by Marcia Lynx-Qualey (ArabLit) commissioned in the framework of the LEILA Research Project



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About the author

Marcia Lynx Qualey is the founding editor of ArabLit, an online publication that has evolved over the years from a literary blog into a high-quality review, database, media platform and arts magazine featuring guest writers, rich media content, event calendars and comprehensive cross-referencing with other art forms and venues. She launched the ArabLit Quarterly as a print and e-magazine in 2018. In recognition of her 'strong personal dedication to creating cross-cultural understanding in the diverse world of Arabic literature', Qualey was awarded the Literary Translation Initiative Award at the 2017 London Book Fair. Based in Morocco, she holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Minnesota and is a freelance cultural journalist for a number of newspapers, journals and literary magazines. She co-hosts the Bulaq: The Arab World in Books podcast with Ursula Lindsey. Her published translations include *Ghady & Rawan* by Fatima Sharafeddine and Samar Mahfouz Barraaj (co-translated with Sawad Hussain), published in 2019, and *Wondrous Journeys in Amazing Lands* by Sonia Nimr, published in 2020.

Arabic Literature in the European Diaspora: 2011-2021

A century ago, the author writing in Arabic about Europe was largely a stranger who was writing about strangers. Yet starting with the waves of migrations in the 1960s and 1970s, Europe became home to major publishing projects, translation projects, and many key literary authors. This has given birth to fresh collaborations and new forms in Arabic as authors work between languages, and it can and should also feed European literatures, too.

In the nineteenth century, the great Lebanese writer Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq was an outlier in Arabic literary circles. Al-Shidyaq (1804-1887) contributed important works to Arabic literature even though he lived in Europe for significant part of his life. Indeed, the satirist and scholar often turned his wit on the peculiarities of life in England and France. Most Arabic-language writers who wrote about Europe before the twentieth century did so after relatively short visits, such as nineteenth century Moroccan writer Idriss al-Amraoui (author of *The Masterpiece of the Beloved King to the Kingdom of Paris*) or nineteenth-century Egyptian writer Rifa'a al-Tahtawi (author of *A Paris Profile*).

However, the gravitational centers of Arabic literature shifted in the twentieth century, during waves of migration, famine, and European colonial rule, as well as increased mobility. By the 1920s, far-off New York City was an important space for Arabic publishing, with a Pen League that included authors such as Khalil Gibran and Mikhail Naimy. Despite severe economic and political woes, Cairo and Beirut have remained the major centers of Arabic publishing. However, movements that began in the early twentieth century picked up tempo by the mid twentieth century, as many authors were either forced or chose to leave repressive regimes in Iraq, Syria, Morocco, and elsewhere. By mid-century, Europe was no longer a neighboring region about which writers might pen amusing or admiring or scathing observations. Instead, it came to represent sanctuary or economic stability to some, and to others access to readers, fellow writers, translation, and publishing success.

Several significant and influential literary Arabic publishing projects started in Europe, beginning in the 1970s and 80s. The Saqi Bookshop was founded in London in 1978, and they later launched Saqi Books in London and Dar al-Saqi in Beirut. Khaled al-Maaly founded the Kamel Verlag publishing house in Germany in 1983, and Mona Henning started the Arabic children's publishing house Dar al-Muna in Sweden the following year, in 1984. There are other, related cultural projects in Europe—an important force for arts funding, Mophradat, which was founded in Belgium in 2004.

Since 2011, Arabic literary projects in Europe have proliferated. The bilingual, experimental Arabic-French children's publishing house Port a Jauni was founded in 2012, and the prolific Dar al-Mutawassit was founded in Milan in 2015. In the last several years, Arabic bookshops, magazines, publishing houses, literary cafes, and literary festivals have appeared among Arabic-writing and -reading communities in Europe. This is particularly true of Berlin, home of a

number of important authors, as well as the Khan Aljanub Arabic bookshop and publishing house, and the Baynatna library, among other literary institutions.

Arabic literature is thriving in the European diaspora, and authors living in Europe have won major prizes, publishing work that lives not at the margins, but rather at the center of the Arabic literary discussion. For many Arab authors, a life in Europe was not their choice. Still, many have found ways to work on their literary craft, sometimes collaborating with European authors, like Ghayath al-Madhoun has done; and sometimes moving between Arabic and European languages, as Abdellatif Laabi and Rachid Boudjedra move between Arabic and French, and Amara Lakhous moves between Arabic and Italian. Many writers have found themselves translating European writers into Arabic, and Arabic-language authors into European languages. These cross-pollinations create new styles, new forms, and new ways of imagining the world.

Indeed, before Covid-19 put a stop to most live theater, there were many important collaborations in European- and Arabic-language theater. Poets also have collaborated on books with European authors and artists. The Syrian poet Ghayath Almadhoun co-authored *Till Damaskus* (Albert Bonniers Förlag, 2014) with the Swedish poet Marie Silkeberg, and this collection was also turned into a radio play for Swedish National Radio. Almadhoun has also worked with Dutch poet Anne Vegter, US artist Jenny Holzer, and German musician Blixa Bargeld.

But, when talking about their lives in Europe, Arabic-language writers also mentioned difficulties. Some felt shut out of the local literary scene; others pointed out issues of racism and tokenism; others talked about community fragmentation and loneliness. Even in Berlin, where there is a growing amount of structural support for authors who write in non-German languages, particularly Arabic, authors echoed the same frustrations.

Buying books and economic difficulties

Staying abreast of what's being written in Arabic is a major challenge for many Arab authors living in Europe. Book distribution is a challenge between different Arab countries, and even more so between Arabic-speaking countries and other regions. This was particularly true in 2020-2021, when travel and book fairs were curtailed because of the spread of Covid-19.

"It's frustrating, because I read about all these interesting works (online), and I haven't read many of them," Palestinian poet and writer Mazen Maarouf said in the spring of 2021. The multi-award-winning Maarouf is based in Reykjavik, and he says, "It's very expensive to ship here, and I'm waiting to go back to Beirut."

Maarouf's poetry and short stories have been celebrated in Arabic, as well as in translation into a number of European language, and a translation of his debut short-story collection was a finalist for the Man Booker International. He notes that living in a city like Reykjavik is very different from living in a city such as Berlin, that has more infrastructure for embracing its literary émigrés. By and large, Maarouf said, foreign writers "live on the margin of the literary scene here

in Iceland, and I am one of them. There is no interest in our works, almost, here. We don't know why, but this is how it is here.”

Not all Arab authors living in Europe are concerned with engagement. The great Syrian-Kurdish novelist and poet Salim Barakat, who lives in rural Sweden, channels his isolation into his literature, and continues to read and re-read the Arabic classics. When we asked Barakat, in 2017, what his “favorite reads of the year” had been in Arabic, he mentioned works by Ibn Arabi (1165-1240) and Ibn Kathir (d. 1373).

The need to focus more on non-creative work has also been a challenge for established writers who have been compelled to leave their homes for Europe. The great Sudanese writer Abdelaziz Baraka Sakin won the 2010 Tayeb Salih Prize at the Khartoum Book Fair. Also in 2010, his novel *The Jungo* was confiscated by the Bashir regime. Sakin adds that copies were torched in what he called the country's first-ever book burning. In 2012, during a widely reported incident at the Khartoum Book Fair, [all of Sakin's books were confiscated and banned](#). “I was also arrested for a short period,” he said over email.

Since that time, Sakin has lived in Austria, where he says life is indeed safer for him. But life in Austria is also complicated, he added, as a person either has to be wealthy, he said, or “work like a machine, sacrificing all the joys, sorrows, and great opportunities that life offers for self-development.” Sakin, perhaps working like a machine, has continued to produce new work, as well as editing and supporting the work of other writers.

Arabic literature and Berlin

Berlin has a great deal to offer the poet, playwright, or novelist who works in Arabic. At a recent panel discussion titled “Arabic Literature in Berlin,” authors Haytham El-Wardany and Liwaa Yazji were joined by Arabic-German translator Sandra Hetzl and Berlin-based Arabic-English translator Katharine Halls, to discuss Berlin's growing role as a hub of innovative Arabic-language writing.

Haytham El-Wardany is an influential Arabic prose stylist who has lived in Berlin for 20 years. El-Wardany, who was born in Giza, Egypt, won the prestigious Sawiris Award with his debut 2003 short-story collection, and went on to pioneer a style of quiet, genre-shifting tension that was markedly different from that of his contemporaries. His *Waking Dream* won the 2012 Cairo Book Fair Prize for best short-story collection, and in 2013 he published his first experimental prose work, *How to Disappear*, as part of the groundbreaking “Kayfa ta” series. He published his nonfiction *The Book of Sleep* in 2017 and his latest short-story collection, *That Which Cannot Be Fixed*, came out in 2020. Much as his writing weaves between genres, the collection weaves between “human” and “animal.”

Despite his long tenure in Germany, El-Wardany has remained a highlight of the Arabic literary scene, particularly for how his work subverts expectations of form, content, and style. He has also found support in Germany. Recently, he received a prestigious Berlin Senate stipend for non-German literature. At the “Arabic Literature in Berlin” panel July 9, El-Wardany spoke

about the major shifts he has seen in the Berlin literary scene in the last 20 years. While El-Wardany used to be part of a much smaller community of Arabic-language writers in Berlin, recently many gifted Arabic-language writers have come to Berlin, including the Palestinian nonfiction writer, poet, and podcaster Farah Barqawi; Syrians playwrights Liwaa Yazji, and Mohammed al-Attar; the Syrian-Palestinian poet Ghayath al-Madhoun; Syrian fiction writers Rasha Abbas, Ramy al-Asheq, and Nihad Sirees; and Egyptian novelists such as Mohammad Rabie, who is also the founder of Berlin's new Khan Aljanub Arabic bookshop.

El-Wardany said that, for Arabic-language writers, "Today we're in a better situation, because we have places like Khan Aljanub," as well as the Hopscotch Reading Room; the Archive Kabinett, which is a non-project project space; Baynatna, an Arabic library in Berlin; and Bulbul, a café and cultural center.

However, he added, "There is a feeling that the landscape is very rich, and yet there is less discourse. There are many individuals and islands," but still a lack of Arabic literary community. Syrian playwright Mohammad al-Attar, who is based in Berlin, has managed to hold together a small theater company with collaborators in three different cities. His long-time collaborator, the director Omar Abusaada, remains in Damascus, while their artistic director, Bissane Al Charif, is in Paris. "We used to sit for long hours just to chat," al-Attar said in an interview. "If the three of us lived in one city, in one country, by now we could have our physical structure, like a company, or even maybe a small space. Maybe not a space to perform, just to do rehearsals. This is very essential, usually, in developing the theme of a company."

Still, al-Attar added, "I like Berlin. There are many things in Berlin for me to like—it's a very open city, very liberal. Also, there is now a growing Syrian community here, and the city is getting more and more cosmopolitan."

Yet what most Arabic-language writer in Berlin criticized was not a lack of shared spaces or literary community. It was, instead, what El-Wardany calls the "representation trap."

'Emergency literature' and the 'Representation trap'

Nearly all Europe-based authors, both those interviewed for this paper and for ArabLit and Literature Across Frontiers, criticized what Haytham El-Wardany calls "the representation trap." El-Wardany said that, when authors and artists are invited to events in Berlin, "it is kind of expected that they would represent the pain, represent the failed revolution, represent the war, etcetera. One of the things that we have tried to work on was how to escape from this representation trap. How not to play this game, how not to do what is expected, but to do what needs to be done, what needs to be written."

Syrian-Palestinian poet and writer Ramy al-Asheq also lives in Berlin, where he has been relatively successful. He published his first Arabic-language collection, *Walking on Dreams*, in 2014, followed by *Ever Since I Did Not Die* (2016), and *No One Noticed When You Died* (2018). He has won a number of prizes and had a book of poems published in German translation in 2019. In 2016, he also co-founded [Abwab](#), a European newspaper in Arabic, which is mostly edited by

refugees, and, in 2017, he followed with the Arabic-German cultural magazine *Fann*. However, despite all these successful projects, he said [in a 2020 interview](#) that the window of things he is encouraged to talk about is very narrow: “They say, ‘show us how much you are suffering on the way to Europe, and how much Europe is good’- they want to know about [the Syrian conflict] because it is something happening now, so it’s not about the literature, it’s about events. I don’t find this really progressive.” Al-Asheq added that he is particularly concerned that this has a wider effect on literature: “Because... the problem is that a lot of authors... started writing what the Europeans expect and what they want to read.”

The conflation of an author’s lived experience as a migrant with their literary work affects the way an author is read—even if their text has nothing to do with their personal life. This was forcefully expressed by writer and thinker Yassin Al-Haj Saleh, [also in a 2020 interview](#): “I feel as if I am not read closely, or critically. I want the content of my work to be read, not the biography on the back cover.” Saleh added that people are interested in, “sexy stories of suffering.”

Writers’ frustrations differed based on where they were from and how they were perceived by European audiences. Sudanese author Ishraga Mustafa, who lives in Austria, and is both a writer and a translator. At a panel event in July 2021, Mustafa said that Europeans often don’t expect her, as a Black woman, to also be a Muslim woman who writes in Arabic. Even if authors don’t personally feel pressured to write about suffering, they are still affected by its large presence on the Arabic literary landscape as translated into European languages.

Reading Europe in Arabic

As Ahmed Faris al-Shidyaq did in the mid-nineteenth century, many contemporary Arabic-language books are set partly or entirely in Europe, providing an important outside lens on European communities. Many of these books are based on lived experience, including Syrian author Maha Hassan’s *In Anne Frank’s House*, which was sparked by her year-long writing residency in Anne Frank’s house in Amsterdam and reflects on the intertwined histories of European Jews, Syrian Arabs, and Syrian Kurds.

Berlin in particular has been a city that increasingly appears in Arabic literature, perhaps even supplanting Paris—although there are still many Arabic novels that explore the lives of Arab migrant communities in Paris. The acclaimed Syrian novelist and screenwriter Nihad Sirees, author of the award-winning novel *The Silence and the Roar*, published a novel in the summer of 2021 called *The Berlin Papers*, which takes place between Aleppo and Berlin. Sirees, who was born in Aleppo and emerged as a major force in fiction in the 1980s, was forced into exile in 2012. Initially, he moved to Egypt, but later was forced to move on, ending up in Berlin. This novel reflects the fractured nature of his personal imaginary, which is both in his remembered Aleppo and his daily life in Berlin. But among the recent novels centering Berlin, some are by authors who don’t live in Germany. Among those foregrounding Berlin are Ghassan Nabhan’s 2019 mystery novel *Ghosts of Berlin* (Ashbah Berlin), Yousef Waqas’s 2021 *The Road to Berlin* (al-Tareeq illa Berlin), and Hisham al-Khashn’s popular 2018 novel *It Happened in Berlin* (Hadath fi Berlin). Waqas lives in Italy and al-Khashan in Egypt.

Other European countries also appear in recent Arabic literature. In Syrian author Haitham Hussein's *No One May Remain: Agatha Christie, Come, I'll Tell You How I Live*, he reflects on the memoir Agatha Christie wrote about Syria while writing his own memoir about life in the UK. Habib Selmi's 2020 novel *Longing for the Woman Next Door* is about the relationships between French and Tunisians, much like his compelling 2008 relationship novel *The Scent of Marie-Claire*. In Libyan author Najwa Binshatwan's 2021 novel *Roma Termini*, we get a satiric look at the life of an Eastern European immigrant who works for three wealthy Italian women. However, translator Sawad Hussain noted that she has had more difficulty finding a translator for *Roma Termini* than for Binshatwan's other work, because it is about Europe and thus not "representative" of her origins in Libya.

Between Arabic, European languages, and Kurdish

Another sort of cross-pollination is happening not just between Arabic and European languages, but as a three-way fertilization, between Arabic, European languages, and Kurdish. Syrian poet Golan Haji was born in the Kurdish town of Amouda, went to university in Damascus, and recently relocated to France. He said, in an interview, that his daily life weaves between four languages. He writes his literary work largely in Arabic, but also uses French, English, and his mother tongue, Kurdish. Moreover, he said, "I have a passion of these minority languages. Not because I'm a Kurd, but (because) I know, with my body and my consciousness, how you can survive through oppression and how you can create in the shadow."

Moreover, there are a number of Kurdish writers in the European diaspora who move between Arabic and Kurdish, such as Jan Dost and Abdulkadir Musa, as well as those who write about Kurdish history and culture in Arabic, such as Haji, Salim Barakat, and Haitham Hussein. There has also been the US-based publishing initiative Dar Safi, which has attempted to increase ties between authors who work in Kurdish, who work in Arabic, and those who read in English.

There are now several different generations of Arabic-language writers living in Egypt, from those who migrated in the 1970s, to those who came in the 90s, to recent arrivals, particularly from Syria. Although there might not yet be the sort of literary community some writers have said they would desire, there are a great number of powerful literary voices living in European countries whose work and voices can enrich the European literary landscapes: in theatre, poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and in genres and sub-genres still being invented.

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