



ARABIC HISTORICAL NOVELS: QUESTIONING OFFICIAL HISTORIES

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

Arabic Historical Novels: Questioning Official Histories

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 Historical Novels: Questioning Official Histories

The historical novel has long been a favorite of serious novelists writing in Arabic, allowing authors to write back to power in a way that didn't seem—at first blush—to touch current regimes. Although different countries' historical novels have had different foci and obsessions, we note a few strands that cross national boundaries, such as re-telling history from women characters perspectives, telling the histories of minoritized populations, and blending historical novels with genre fiction.

At a 2019 panel at the Shubbak literary festival in London called “Telling The Past” Contemporary Arab Historical Novels,” three contemporary Arabic-language novelists talked about how they write against the grain of official state histories. Palestinian novelist Rabai al-Madhoun talked about confronting predominant Israeli narratives; Iraqi novelist Inaam Kachachi spoke about going beyond the daily-news headlines to pass on stories about Iraqi art and culture; and Sudanese novelist Hammour Ziada discussed writing about colonialism and race in Sudan from a Sudanese perspective.

At the panel, Ziada said, “I want to write about the white man in our country with *my* point of view. They wrote about us... but how do we see *them*? I have the right to write about this white man, or white woman.”

Throughout the last century, historical novels have been a popular genre in Arabic, as authors visit and re-visit key historical moments. Saudi novelist Ashraf Fagih, who has written both science fiction and historical fiction, suggested that good historical fiction should have an impact similar to that of science fiction. “It should at least encourage you to question the version [of history] you've always taken for granted.”

“Historical” epic poetry has been an important part of Arabic literature for more than millennium, since poetry was often a genre into which histories were memorialized. Yet what we now think of as the Arabic historical novel has its roots in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when authors like the Lebanese journalist and teacher Jurji Zaydan (1861-1914) used serialized historical novels to bring historical knowledge to a wider, Arabic-reading public and to affirm a secular historical identity that could belong to Arab Christians, Muslims, and others across the region. Zaydan, who wrote more than twenty popular historical novels about medieval figures such as Shajarat al-Durr (d. 1257), was an avid amateur historian, meticulous about the accuracy of his books, and sometimes critical of fellow writers who took too many liberties for the sake of plot.

Although Zaydan's use of the historical novel as a pedagogical tool has largely fallen out of style, historical novels have flourished as a genre, with many sub-genres: historical allegory, historical fantasy, magical realist histories, alternate histories, feminist histories, the histories of “great men re-examined,” and more.

Many twentieth-century Arabic-language novelists started out by writing historical novels. In the 1930s, Nobel laureate-to-be Naguib Mahfouz cut his teeth on novels that were set during the distant pharaonic period, as did his friend and writing buddy Adel Kamel. Later twentieth-century Egyptian authors such as Khairy Shalaby, Radwa Ashour, and Gamal al-Ghitani all wrote historical fictions, or historical allegories, many of which served as commentaries on power and on corrupt political leadership. For a number of twentieth-century authors, historical fictions offered a way to criticize power indirectly.

The genre continues to attract writers into the twenty-first century, with many novels longlisted for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction each year, for instance, described by their publishers as historical. Many authors continue to revisit the lives of medieval figures, as Zaydan did, such as Ibn Arabi (as in Saudi novelist Mohamed Hassan Alwan's award-winning *A Small Death*), Ibn Khaldun (in Bensalem Himmich's acclaimed *The Polymath*), and Ibn al-Haytham (as in Youssef Ziedan's *Hakim: The Madness of Ibn al-Haytham*). But they also endlessly revisit more recent events, such as the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), the start of the French occupation of Algeria (1830), and events leading up to the Palestinian Nakba (1948).

Some twenty-first century historical novels still do have educational and allegorical elements. But this genre has also been re-combined with others to look at our shared human condition in fresh ways. Trends include: re-writing history from the point of view of lesser-known women characters; re-examining the histories of Black, Jewish, and other minoritized communities; and combining history with popular genres, as in historical fantasy, mystery, folklore, and horror. Although it would be impossible to trace all the threads of historical novels across more than twenty countries—particularly as they often revisit specific national events such as civil wars and wars of independence—this paper will touch on a few themes that cross borders.

Re-framing history through the eyes of women

One intervention into the historical novel that cuts across national boundaries is writing history “with the women put back in,” to borrow a phrase from historians Kerstin Lucker and Ute Daenschel. Several contemporary novelists have re-visited major events, re-framing them around the lives of women. This is certainly true of acclaimed Palestinian novelist Sahar Khalifeh, and a number of her novels are set around ordinary and extraordinary women's experiences of well-known events, such as the 1987 intifada and the 1948 Nakba.

Khalifeh's *Asl w Fasl* (Origin and Branch, 2009) takes place in the years before the Nakba, as does Khalifeh's follow-up novel *Hobi al-Awil* (My First Love, 2010). Both stories shift the frame away from competing meta-narratives about 1948, which often focus on men's experiences. Instead, Khalifeh's novels narrate history primarily through the stories of women's lives and struggles. Both of these novels bring us back in time to the period shortly before the Nakba. The complex power of these women's stories presents not an idea of historical fixity, but of possibility. Indeed, Khalifeh's interest in history is her interest in the present. As she said in a 2021 interview, “I tried to capture our past which leads to our present. I am a committed writer or maybe I am an obsessed writer. I am obsessed by occupation because I live it. I witness the atrocities of occupation. I witness and live through those atrocities and still am living them.”

Elias Khoury's tender and accomplished historical novel *Ka'anaba Na'ema*, (*As Though She Were Sleeping*, 2007) also works by feminizing the period just before 1948, relaying events though not through the eyes of fighters, but via an "ordinary" woman named Milia. Unlike Khoury's other historical novels, *Ka'anaba Na'ema* brings us deep into the domestic sphere of everyday life in 1930s and 1940s Palestine and Lebanon, engaging deeply not only with changes in political powers, but also changes in foods, medical treatment, social practices, and fashion. While it is not Khoury's most popular novel, it is perhaps his richest.

Other historical novels have taken a new look at history by inserting invented female characters inserted into the lives of well-known men. In Amira Ghenim's *The Calamity of the Nobility* (2020), Ghenim gives us a look at the life of Tunisian author and social reformer El-Taher El-Haddad (1899-1935). Yet she looks at events at a slant, by inventing a lover named Lella Zubaida; in so doing, she centers a woman's experience, re-examining a period in history that has been told almost exclusively by and about men.

One of the most ambitious historical novels in recent years is *Arwab Eddo* (*Souls of Eddo*, 2018) by South Sudanese author Stella Gaitano. This novel tells the story of the changes in twentieth-century Sudan and South Sudan through the lens of family, and particularly motherhood. Gaitano, known for her shockingly vivid sensory descriptions, gives us a history that moves seamlessly between the folkloric and the "realist," centering the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations of motherhood. This polyphonic novel brings together the contradictory spaces of village, town, and city, as well as many different ideas of what motherhood and family can and might yet be.

Writing a history of enslaved Africans and their descendants

In the written histories of Arab-majority countries, the stories of enslaved Black Africans and their descendants is one that has often been erased. In recent years, some novelists have been working to resurface these histories. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, where Black Saudis make up an estimated 10 percent of the population, their histories have been largely unwritten.

Black Saudi novelist Mahmoud Trawry said that he wanted to write people from his community into history. His debut historical novel, *Maymouna* (2001), centers stories that don't often appear in contemporary Gulf literature. The scholar and poet Mona Kareem called the book "the most important contemporary piece of fiction on enslaved Africans of the Arabian Gulf." In a recent interview for *al-Fanar*, Trawry said that when he first became interested in writing about Black Saudis, he found few books focused on Black Saudis' stories and histories. "And so I researched, and I reviewed most of what was written in the history of the region, and I drew on oral information from the elderly, and the questions grew in my mind."

In the years since *Maymouna* was published, it has become something of a cult classic. It was first printed in Sharjah, then in Cairo and Beirut. The characters in *Maymouna*, like many Black Saudis, have roots in West Africa. These characters fled British colonialization in the nineteenth century and headed for Mecca, where they hoped to find a safe haven to live and practice their religion.

Unfortunately, one of the central characters, Omar al-Musk, doesn't find a safe haven, but is instead kidnapped and enslaved.

On the other side of the Red Sea, Sudanese author Hammour Ziada also depicts histories of enslavement. Ziada's work has focused on the ways in which slavery affected, and continues to affect, Sudan. His acclaimed 2014 novel *The Longing of the Dervish* is set in nineteenth century Sudan, and it follows a man who was formerly a slave, who was released from prison at the tail end of the Mahdist independence movement. Ziada's most recent historical novel, *Drowning*, is set in the 1960s, yet it is also animated by the legacy of slavery, which was officially abolished in Sudan in 1924. This novel centers on a 13-year-old girl's suicide, the reason for which lies in local social structures that are still informed by slavery. "It's not legal slavery," Ziada said in March 2021 during a panel called "Against Disappearance". "But there's a power relationship between the past owner and past slaves. Even today, history is living in the present."

Ziada added: "We are still prisoners in the nineteenth century, or the eighteenth century. So when I start writing about anything, I can't just forget about history. Even in my recent stories, I find myself going back to history to find why we are here now."

The legacies of slavery have been a particular focus among novelists in Oman, where slavery wasn't abolished until 1970. The most well-known among these novels is perhaps Jokha Alharthi's *Celestial Bodies* (Sayyidat al-Qamr), which won the 2019 Man Booker International prize in Marilyn Booth's translation. Some of these novels grapple clumsily with the legacy of slavery and show a sympathy with slavers. However, the work of poet and novelist Fatma al-Shidi explores the stories of women who were enslaved. In her novel *Death Party* (Haflat al-Moot, 2008), she brings together myth, folktale, and the difficult lives of enslaved women.

Novelists in other countries have also been grappling with their relationship to the ongoing effects of slavery and anti-Black racism. Tunisian novelist Kamel Riahi's *Gorilla* attempts to grapple with legacies of anti-Black racism, and Iraqi writer Mortada Gzar's 2009 novel *Broom of Paradise*, set between 1936-2007, following the lives of Black family in Basra. This city is where most Black Iraqis—either descendants of enslaved people or of African immigrants to Iraq—live today.

Diverse religious communities

In the years since the ouster of Saddam Hussein, Iraqi novels have also grappled with telling the stories of the country's diverse religious communities. For instance, Hawra al-Nadawi's 2017 novel *Qismat* follows the journey of a family of Feyli Kurds, a Shi'a community deported from Iraq in the 1970s and made stateless. Daa Jubaili's 2016 novel *The Lion of Basra*, meanwhile, is set amongst the fragmentation of Iraq's different religious communities. The novel opens in the 1950s, when Jewish Iraqis are being stripped of their citizenship, and follows a single character who takes on three different names and religions: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim.

The Lion of Basra is also part of a wave of recent Arabic novels that have re-explored Jewish history. The scholar Najat Abdulhaq, who has written about the rise in representations of "the

Arab Jew” in Arabic historical fiction, as in her chapter “Dissenting Narratives: The Figure of the ‘Arab Jew’ in Contemporary Arabic Literature and Film,” in *Dissemination Jewish Literatures* (2020). In a 2014 workshop on “The Possibilities of Arab-Jewish Thought,” she said she believes the wave started in 2006 or 2007. In the early 20th century, an estimated one quarter of Baghdad’s population was Jewish, with Jews occupying many important positions in the city. Yet there are novels not only about Baghdad’s once-thriving Jewish community, but also Jews of Algeria, Tunisia, Yemen, Libya, Egypt, and Syria.

According to Abdulhaq, there are a number of common points in the novels, most of which, she said, “are based seemingly true biographies.” The novels, she said, don’t boil down to conflict, but rather “go beyond it, and they start questioning.” From Egypt, there are a number of novels foregrounding Jewish characters, including the 2008 trilogy by Kamal Ruhayyim which begins with *Diary of a Jewish Muslim*. This first novel in the series tells the story of an Egyptian boy with a Jewish mother and a Muslim father, who was raised by his mother’s family. Other Egyptian novels reconstructing the country’s Jewish community include Mutaz Fatiha’s *The Last Jews of Alexandria* (2008) and Rasha Adli’s *Tattoo* (2014).

From Syria, Salim Barakat’s *What About Rachel, the Jewish Lady?* (2019) offers a rich panorama of Syria in the days following the defeat of the 1967 six-day war, giving insight into life in the Jewish quarter of Qamishli through a story of teen romance. Another notable Syrian novel exploring the country’s Jewish community is Ibrahim al-Jubain’s 2007 novel *Diary of a Damascus Jew*.

From Eritrea, Haji Jaber’s tightly paced and compelling *Black Foam* (2018) tells the story of a man who sometimes styles himself as Dawit, sometimes David, and sometimes Dawoud, embedding himself within the community of Falasha Jews and emigrating to Israel. Other notable historical novels about Jewish communities include, from Algeria, Amin Zaoui’s *The Last Jew of Tamentit* (2012) and Habib Sayeh’s *Me and Haim* (2018), from Yemen, as Ali al-Muqri’s *The Handsome Jew* (2000), and from Tunisia, Mohammed Eissa Al-Mu’adab’s *Hammam Dhabab* and Khawla Hamdi’s *Jewess in My Heart* (2012).

Queer and queered histories

Queer communities have also been left out of official histories, and a few recent novels have foregrounded queer history or queered well-known historical events. Mohamed Abdelnabi’s International Prize for Arabic Fiction-shortlisted *In the Spider’s Room* centers on the infamous “Queen Boat” incident in Egypt, when more than 50 men were swept up in a very public raid that targeted Cairo’s gay community. In Syria, Nihad Sirees’s *States of Passion* attempts to take the reader further back in queer history, to 1930s Aleppo, to the all-women *banat al-ishreb*, a community that lived, loved, and performed music together.

In Alexandra Chrietch’s *Ali and His Russian Mother*, meanwhile, the author queers a moment in Lebanese history, the July War of 2006, when Israel was bombing Beirut, and many fled the city. Instead of telling the story from the point of view of fighters or “important” figures taking part in events, Chrietch follows a woman narrator and her gay male frenemy fleeing the city.

Historical novels meet genre literature: from fantasy to horror

Another shift in historical novels is a movement is the incorporation of elements from popular genre writing. Indeed, of the six novels shortlisted for the 2021 International Prize for Arabic Fiction, three are historical novels from Maghrebi North Africa, and two of these are historical crime thrillers: Moroccan novelist Abdelmajid Sebbata's *File 42* and Algerian writer Abdulatif Ould Abdullah's *The Eye of Hammurabi*.

The historical puzzle novel *File 42* looks back at a moment in 1959 when tens of thousands of people in central Morocco were struck with a mysterious illness that left hundreds disabled. After a long investigation, the culprit was turned up: cooking oil poisoned with tri-ortho-cresyl phosphate, which came from a US army base. The army had sold off this oil used for jets to dealers who mixed it with cooking oil. A second, intertwined storyline follows a rich man's rape of a teen servant *The Eye of Hammurabi*, meanwhile, tells the story of two men accused of raiding a saint's tomb for artefacts. And while *The Eye of Hammurabi* is framed around a crime, Ould Abdulallah said, in an interview with IPAF organizers, that he saw the novel as a history of the forgotten. "Real history is not what is written by traditional historians," he said. "Ultimately, history is not made by the élite but rather, it is a mix of everything."

Crime is not the only genre being blended with historical fiction; horror, for instance, is a hugely popular genre among contemporary Arabic-language readers. One of the most notable horror-history crossovers is Saudi novelist Ashraf Fagih's *The Impaler*, which brings the reader into a richly detailed Ottoman-era history while a re-telling of the Vlad the Impaler story (Dracula) from the point of view of an Ottoman functionary.

While Fagih's novel is not for the faint of heart, there are also a number of lighter historical fantasy novels, including several by Palestinian folklorist and novelist Sonia Nimr. Her award-winning *Wondrous Journeys in Strange Lands* is a medieval historical fantasy that mashes together several centuries of Islamic history, while her *Thunderbird* trilogy narrates history through a time-travel fantasy, where the protagonist travels back in time to visit several historical periods. Another adept historical fantasist is the Algerian novelist Djamila Morani, who expertly weaves together several genres in her historical crime fantasy *The Djinn's Apple*, set in the Abbasid period.

Shared histories: Historical fiction in dialogue with Europe

Many popular Arabic novels narrate the lives of historical thinkers of cross-cultural significance: Hippolyta, Ibn Khaldoun, Ibn Sina, Fibonacci, and Ibn Rushd. A number of recent award-winning and highly accomplished novels have focused on the lives of these figures, from Moroccan novelist Bensalem Himmich's *The Polymath*, about Ibn Khaldoun, to Mohammed Hassan Alwan's International Prize for Arabic Fiction-winning *The Small Death*, about Ibn Sina, to Ashraf Fagih's *Portrait of the Void*, with its focus on Leonardo Fibonacci. While the first two

focus on Arab figures who were influential in European philosophy, the latter focuses on a European mathematician and thinker who was influenced by Arab thought.

There are also many novels that focus on lesser-known aspects of shared colonial histories. Notable titles include Abdelouahab Aissaoui's International Prize for Arabic Fiction-winning *Spartan Court* (2019), which follows the interconnected lives of five French and Algerian characters in Algiers, between 1815 and 1833, at the very start of the French conquest of Algeria. Mohammed Said Hijouj won the 2019 Ismail Fahd Ismail Prize for *Tangiers by Night*, which is set around the 1921 Battle of Annual, fought during the Rif War, and looks at Spain's use of internationally banned chemical weapons on civilians in its colonies in northern Morocco.

There are also migration and travel stories, such as those written by the powerfully talented Lebanese novelist Rabee Jaber. In his historical novel *America* (2009), Jaber writes about Syrians who left their homes in the early twentieth century for the US. His *Druze of Belgrade* (2011) is set after the 1860 civil war in Mount Lebanon, when a number of fighters from the Druze community were forced into exile in Belgrade.

Historical novels are one of the most popular and vibrant genres of Arabic literature, with each country having its particular interests, from the many novels revisiting the Civil War (1975-1990) in Lebanon, to Palestinian novels that revisit 1948, and, in Egypt, many novels are set during uprisings of 1919 and 1952. This paper is just a glimpse at a few recent trends that have stretched across national boundaries, and a look at a few historical fictions that can resonate with audiences around the world.

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