



— LOVE, SEX, & CONTEMPORARY RELATIONSHIPS

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

Love, Sex, & Contemporary Relationships

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.

Love, Sex, & Contemporary Relationships

Love and sex are an important part of Arabic literary writing, just as they are an important part of human life. While writing about sex, and particularly women's sexuality, came under a cloud of censorious suffocation for much of the twentieth century, twenty-first century authors are writing fresh stories about many different aspects of human love and sexuality, in their most ugly and beautiful aspects, from violence and exploitation to pleasure and delight.

The 2021 anthology *We Wrote in Symbols: Arab Women Write Lust and Love*, edited by Selma Dabbagh and published by Saqi Books, gives a valuable glimpse of Arab women's writing about sex, love, and their attendant frustrations. In it, there are works translated from Arabic, as well as those translated from French and originally written in English. Yet it is the Arabic work that builds the anthology's foundation. The book's Palestinian-British editor says that the project, which brings together poetry and prose by 75 different women, was inspired by classical Arabic poetry. What struck Dabbagh about those long-ago poems by women was that the writing about sex "seemed to sort of absent itself from a sense of shame, both in terms of being shy—they weren't shy—but it was also not a provocative voice, not trying to shock people necessarily. It woke something up in my brain, these older writers." In just this way, the best of contemporary Arabic writing about love, sex, and relationships is neither shy nor aimed primarily at provocation.

Classical Arabic writing about sex and relationships was penned both by both high-status women, such as the Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid's sister, Ulayya bint al-Mahdi and by women writers like "Zad-Mihr, Slave Girl of Abu Ali ibn Jumah." In *We Write in Symbols*, these vibrant pieces are brought into conversation with contemporary writing about sex, sexuality, and relationships. A few of the writers included in the anthology, such as Leila Slimani, will be familiar to European readers. Perhaps a handful of the authors who write in Arabic—like Salwa Al Neimi and Joumana Haddad—might be as well. Most will not be, and there are many discoveries to be made within, from the hot erotic poetry of Moroccan writer Mouna Ouafik to the intensely visceral excerpt of Palestinian novelist Samia Issa's *Fig Milk*, which tackles the difficulties of sexual pleasure while living in a refugee camp. Meanwhile, in "Housefly," Moroccan writer Malika Moustadraf writes about the contrasts between real-life and online erotic relationships in Morocco, while Syrian author Rasha Abbas has a wildly surreal and sexy short story about masks and relationships: "Simon the Matador."

Love and sex are an important part of literary writing, in Arabic as in other languages, and the good, bad, and ugly of modern relationships are chronicled by writers ranging from Saudi novelist Badriya al-Bishr (*Love on al-Asha Street*) to young Egyptian short-story writer Muhammad al-Hajj (*Nobody Mourns the City's Cats* and *Two Stories on Masculinity*). There are funny portraits of contemporary relationships, such as Ghada Abdel Aal's popular *I Want to Get Married*, which was a blog, then a book, then a TV series; and there are examinations of the difficult and sometimes predatory relationships women experience, as in Alexandra Chrietieh's *Always Coca-Cola*. There is romance married to science fiction, as in Ahmed Naji's *And Tigers To My Room*; and there are queer romances, as in Sahar Mandour's *Mina* and Areej Gamal's *Dear Maryam, I Am Arwa*.

Although love stories might be universal, they are also embedded in social context. Like good crime novels, good love stories are often also social critiques: of gender constraints, of homophobia, of class and racial hierarchies. As novelist Ahdaf Soueif wrote in *The Guardian* in 2009, when recommending five great Arabic love stories, “The Arab novel is concerned with love, but cannot see it or deal with it independently of society.”

Classic love stories of Arabic literature

Many early Arab poets were renowned both as lovers and as fighters. Two whose stories turned into classic love tropes are: ‘Antarah (525-608) and “Majnun Layla” or “Mad for Layla,” (645-688). These stories continue to echo and re-echo through Arabic literature. Although some of ‘Antarah’s poetry is preserved, the “‘Antarah and Abla” love story was written down and embroidered by later authors, some of whom lived centuries later. The basic story is this: ‘Antarah loved his cousin, Abla, but he was dark-skinned and the son of an enslaved woman, whereas she was light-skinned and freeborn. Thus, Abla’s father set ‘Antarah with fairy-tale-like impossible tasks before he could marry his beloved. In some versions, they end up together; in others, they don’t.

In the Majnun Layla tale, which originated in the seventh century and was adapted down through time, the ending is always tragic. In brief, Layla and Qays are in love from childhood, and Qays is so besotted with Layla that he wanders around reciting love poems for her, which makes him unacceptable to Layla’s family. Layla is married to another, and Qays heads off into the wilderness, composing poetry and finally dying near Layla’s grave, having carved his final poem onto a stone near the gravesite.

The story traveled widely, both in space and time. There have been adaptations of Majnun Layla in many languages, including Arabic, such as Egyptian poet Ahmed Shawqi’s nineteenth century tragic play, “Majnun Layla,” Bahraini poet Qassim Haddad’s twentieth century poetry collection *Majnun Layla*, and rap artist Omar Offendum’s twenty-first century song, “Majnoon Layla.”

In addition to the medieval classics, there are also modern Arabic classics of twentieth-century love and romance. Among these are Taha Hussain’s *The Prayer of the Curlew* (*Do’aa al-Karaman*), a 1934 novel made into a beloved 1959 film. In the book, Amna aims to avenge the death of her sister, who was seduced by a good-looking young engineer and killed for this relationship by an uncle. But as Amna tries to entrap the young man, she falls into her own snare. The story is sometimes hailed as a triumph of love over revenge.

Another twentieth-century romantic novel that has become canon is Latifa al-Zayyat’s 1960 novel *The Open Door* (*al-Bab al-Maftuh*). Like *The Prayer of the Curlew*, the film adaptation also starred popular actress Faten Hamama. *The Open Door* novel also foregrounded a woman’s choices in a social milieu that offered her few good options for life and love. It was one of the few mid-twentieth-century Egyptian films based on a novel written by a woman, and in the decades since, *The Open Door* has become a foundational classic of Arabic feminist romance.

Feminist and nationalist romance

As one might expect, the Arabic genre of feminist romance has been dominated by women writers, and many love stories—especially those patterned after al-Zayyat’s—have also been nationalist, anti-colonial ones. *The Open Door* is set during Egypt’s mid-twentieth-century struggle for independence, and its main character seeks both liberatory love and liberation for Egypt. The protagonist, Layla, must experience failed infatuations before she finds her eventual beloved, who offers both love and freedom, writing to her (in Marilyn Booth’s translation): “Go forth my love, open the door wide and leave it open, and on the open road you will find me my love, waiting for you, because I trust you and trust your ability to soar, and because there is nothing I can do but wait . . . wait for you.”

Many romances have followed in this general mold, whereby young women must fight family demands and expectations before they find—or don’t find—a man who they can really love, and who accepts them as they are. Among the successful versions in this mold are Kuwaiti novelist Bothayna al-Essa’s *Kabirtu wa nasaytu an ansa*, translated to English as *All That I Want to Forget*, which also features a “Majnun Layla”-esque trope of two young poets falling in love, while the young woman’s family doesn’t approve. In this case, the young woman’s brother locks her up and eventually marries her off to a man who doesn’t accept or love her true self. Unlike the Majnun Layla story, however, the fated pair doesn’t die, and the man isn’t the hero. Here, where both lovers are poets, the protagonist frees herself and eventually finds her way back to the man who she loved—with some help from a friend.

This novel, which is both a moving romance and a critique of Kuwaiti social structures, has resonated strongly with international readers. As one GoodReads reviewer puts it, “The love story was also deeply satisfying and I appreciate the author not making this one good man in Fatima’s life her savior. She was her own savior.” The romance at the center, between Fatima and Isam, is a sweet contrast to nearly all the other relationships in Fatima’s life—certainly all her relationships with men.

Romance novels are a popular genre not only in Kuwait, but throughout the Gulf, where romance is often twined with a woman’s search for self-determination. Saudi author Laila al-Juhani’s 2006 novel *Jabiliyya* riffs off the “Antarah and Abla” story. In *Jabiliyya*, Leen is fair-skinned while her lover Malek is Black, and for this, he is physically attacked by her brother. The novel is both a romance and a critique of aspects of Saudi patriarchy, and it was among the novels that Ahdaf Soueif chose for her *Guardian* list of five great Arabic love stories.

Other contemporary Gulf novels about love weave together multiple love stories, in an interlinked *Thousand and One Nights* fashion, contrasting different approaches, personalities, and social and economic strata. In Saudi author Badryah El-Bishr’s *Love Stories on al-Asha Street*, three women try to find themselves in the turbulent 1970s, when color TVs and Egyptian films come and sweep through their Riyadh neighborhood, at the same moment that a wave of religious extremism is also sweeping through, which leads to the occupation of Mecca’s Grand Mosque. *Love Stories on al-Asha Street* is a kaleidoscope of intertwined love stories, mostly told through women’s points of view, with one moving into the next as they do in the *Nights*.

El-Bishr's *Love Stories on al-Asha Street* is both a series of love stories and also a look at the ways in which competing social narratives change our ideas of what's possible in love. And while the new narratives coming through 1970s TV and film are important, so are the ancient love stories. Here, from an excerpt translated by Sawad Hussain: "I saw Awatif taking her prayer shawl and draping it on her head before going up to the roof. When I asked her why, she said that Sa'ad had starting asking her to cover her face from him, because it was *haram* – forbidden – for him to see it. I thought to myself, 'Did Layla hide her face from Qays?'"

Saudi novelist Raja Alem's novel *Sarab* is also a social-critique and love story set in the 1970s and early '80s, as a young Saudi woman struggles to find her way in love and the world. The narrative centers on the 1979 occupation of Mecca's Grand Mosque, when two fighters on opposite sides—a Frenchman and a Saudi woman dressed as a man—stumble their way into an unlikely romance.

Certainly Gulf authors aren't the only ones who write feminist romance. Many contemporary Egyptian feminist romances, for instance, still work in the shadow of Latifa al-Zayyat's *The Open Door*, marrying romance and nationalism, as with Egyptian author Eman El-Emary's *The Heart Always Wins* (2020). This novel, a nationalist-feminist love story, brings together lovers Seif and Dana, who fall together because they both aim to save an estate in Egypt from a wealthy Gulf prince who wants to buy it. As critics noted, the book doesn't describe Dana's appearance; rather, it focuses on Seif's attractiveness as the spark for their romance. Although part of Dana's liberation comes not through struggle, but through simply erasing patriarchal figures: her father and uncle are both dead.

Queered romance

Medieval women's writing in Arabic is full of queered romance. Just as "Zad-Mihr, Slave Girl of Abu Ali ibn Jumhur" wrote of having sex both with men and women, there were also medieval lesbian love stories. According to [anthropologist Gina van Raphael](#), "The first lesbian documented love story in the Arab world was the long-lived passion between Hind Bint al-Nu'man (known as Al-Hurqah...and Hind Bint al-Khuss al-Iyadiyyah from Yamama in Arabia, known as al-Zarqa'." This love story was written down by Abul Hasan Ali ibn Nasr al-Katib in the 10th century, in his *Encyclopedia of Pleasure*.

Arabic's long and vibrant tradition of writing about sex has also inspired contemporary authors. Palestinian writer Raji Bathish, who has said he has made the "conscious decision to write queer, sexualized texts," also said, in a recent interview, that he builds on work by medieval poets who wrote about sex, such as Abu Nuwas (756-814) and Safi al-Din al-Hilli (1276-1349). Bathish's most recent novel, *The Apartment on Passy Street*, follows his debut novel, *Yola and His Brothers*. In *The Apartment on Passy Street*, Amir and Jamil move to Paris in 2001, and the novel tells the ups and downs of these two queer Palestinian migrants in search of a life of freedom. Although they find open desire, they also find a sharply stratified Parisian society, as well as sexual exploitation and racism. All of this is subject to Bathish's sharp and sometimes mocking gaze.

Egyptian author Areej Gamal's *Dear Maryam, I Am Arwa* is a very different queer love story, set during the great hopes of the Egyptian revolution. The book—like al-Zayyat's *The Open Door*—is also a search for identity, and for “self-revolution,” as the author has put it in an interview, “a revolution against the repression of the body and emotion.” The novel is set around a love story between two Egyptian women, Maryam and Arwa, who meet near a metro station during protests and feel an instant quickening of attraction. The foreground takes place in the early, heady months of 2011, while the background takes us through each woman's backstory.

Sahar Mandour's *Mina* tells the story of a messy queer romance, with the main character (Mina)'s lover betraying her after the two are outed by the press, and photos of them together in bed are published. Although there is flirting, love, quarreling, and jealousy in the book, there is also betrayal, as Mina's lover caves to the social pressures placed on both of them.

There are still relatively few Arabic novels that foreground queer romance, yet there has been a notable surge in literature about trans and transitioning characters, some of which is more voyeuristic than sincerely engaged with trans people. Most of these are not worth mentioning, although Saudi author Yousef Alkhazami's *Bidoon* or *Without* is a compelling portrait of an intersex character who we first meet as a girl and who transitions to a boy, as Alia becomes Ali. Through the process, she falls in love with a classmate in England. There isn't a happy ending, although Ali is constantly searching for himself, both in body and in love.

Love and lust during war and exile

It might be impossible to read through Iraqi novelist Dunya Mikhail's *The Bird Tattoo*—which was shortlisted for the 2021 International Prize for Arabic Fiction—if not for the flashbacks to tender romance between a young widower with a small child (Elias) and a young woman (Helen) who lives in a remote mountain community. The foreground action shows Helen's life as a woman enslaved by Daesh forces in Iraq, and the many horrors of that life. But while the foreground of the novel is suffocating and difficult to read, the backstory is its opposite: a light, tender romance. Elias meets Helen when he goes bird-trapping in her mountain village, and she talks him into releasing his trapped bird. As Mikhail said in an interview with International Prize for Arabic Fiction organizers, this romance was necessary in order to balance the book's darkness: “I had to come up with a great deal of beauty to strike a balance with the dark, nightmarish world that controls the novel's events which are also the facts of contemporary history.”

Samia Issa's *Fig Milk*, which was excerpted in the anthology *We Wrote in Symbols*, is also a novel that blends ugliness and desire. It tells the story of a Palestinian woman whose husband has been killed, and who is then compelled to live in a refugee camp. The novel addresses what it's like to live in such an un-private space on a day-to-day basis, how it's possible (or not possible) to continue to take pleasure in the body. *Fig Milk* is controversial novel that depicts refugees not as pure, noble souls but also beings filled with desire, who sometimes masturbate in public latrines to find a little relief in physical pleasure.

In Huzama Habayeb's *Velvet*, a second-chance love story unfolds between Hawwa and Munir, Palestinian refugees living in Jordan's Baqa'a camp. Although there is also grit—and a memorably awful bedbug infestation—Habayeb's is much more a story in the tradition of the Arabic epics. Here, Habayeb takes us on dramatic ups and downs, while showering us with fleshy abundance, gold and velvet, weeping and love.

There are also a number of notable historical romances, many of which are set during wartime. A notable one is Sudanese novelist Hammour Ziada's *Longing of the Dervish*, set around the fundamentalist political movement that takes power in Sudan in the 19th century. In the novel, the freed slave Bakhit is let out of prison with the overthrow of the Mahdist state; the memory of his beloved Theodora has sustained him through the seven years of his imprisonment, and he vows revenge on her killers.

Modern love

Contemporary Arabic novels showcase many different aspects to modern love. These range from more traditional meetings between potential spouses in family living rooms, as one finds in the popular, satirical blog-to-book phenomenon *I Want to Get Married*, by Ghada Abdel Aal, to stories about hookups and hash among downtown Cairo's twentysomethings.

Ahmed Naji and Muhammad El-Hajj are two writers who excel in their portraits of love, sex, and hash. Naji is author of a small but broad range of works, including several that foreground romance. These include the bleak, beautiful short story "Siniora" and his sci-fi-dystopic romance novel *And Tigers to My Room*. Through these works, Naji creates gentle and hypnotic portraits of contemporary sex and relationships in current and future Cairo. In "Siniora," the narrator leaves his hash-dealer girlfriend and tries to have a respectable life. But when he wakes up from a car accident, he realizes he doesn't want that life at all. What he wants is his old girlfriend, even if she won't accept him as a lover, and they can only be together as business partners. "I couldn't lose that pleasure, ephemeral as it was, so I didn't get too close or try to touch her." In Naji's most recent novel, *And Tigers to My Room*, love sours and blossoms between three characters—Farah, Ahmed, and Nasseem—first, in the realistic past of 2012 and 2013, and next in a near-future city in the Gulf in 2030. Through it all, the relationships are at the center; Naji has particular a gift for crafting believable, yet spellbinding women characters.

The interlinked stories in Muhammad El-Hajj's *Nobody Mourns the City's Cats*, which won a prestigious Sawiris Award, also follow the relationships of 20something Egyptians through the blaring Cairo landscape as they try to find a space for themselves in a city that is both overwhelmingly large and indifferent, but also ridiculously small, surveilling every aspect of the characters' sex lives and relationships. The collection features compelling breakups and getting-back-togethers of characters who are intensely relatable and also distinctly Cairene.

Two novels shortlisted for the 2020 Sawiris Awards—Nora Nagy's *Camelia's Ghosts* and Donia Kamel's *Random Arrangements*—are also millennial Egyptian stories about relationships and the complications of romance in contemporary Egypt and, in Kamel's case, between Egypt and the Gulf. As in al-Zayyat's *The Open Door*, family remains an important part of navigating romance.

In *Camelia's Ghosts*, Camelia discovers the journal of her disappeared aunt, whose life was full of promise—until she fell in love. In Kamel's epistolary novel, romance is also interwoven with inescapable family relationships.

Like Egypt, Lebanon has been fertile ground for exploring the contradictions and complications of twenty-first century romance. In addition to Sahar Mandour's work mentioned above, two more novelists with a particularly deft view of modern love are young writers Alexandra ChrieteH and Hilal Chouman. In ChrieteH's debut novel, *Always Coca-Cola*, the women characters are constantly struggling to negotiate contemporary relationships, sexual assault, harassment, the desire for respectability, as well as the commodification of women's bodies. All of this is done with a fresh, fun humor.

Hilal Chouman centers relationships in the interlinked stories in his third book, *Limbo Beirut*, as well as in his 2017 novel, *Once Upon a Time Tomorrow (Kan Ghadan)*. In the latter, Khaled, a recently divorced journalist, tries to find out what happened to his neighbor's wife, who disappeared during the Civil War. During this search, he ends up falling in love with a friend of his ex-wife, who joins him in his detective work. The novel, which peels back the layers of tragic absurdity that are part of daily life in Beirut, also tells a story where Khaled gets his own sort of happy ending.

Lebanese novelist Alawiya Sobh is also a prominent chronicler of love stories, notably with her 2009 novel *It's Called Love (Ismubu Al-Gharam)*, which was longlisted for the 2010 International Prize for Arabic Fiction, and her 2020 novel *To Love Life (An Taasbeq al-Hayah)*, which was shortlisted for the 2021 Sheikh Zayed Book Award. Both novels feature characters who struggle between bodily illnesses and bodily passions, and the fight to achieve the latter.

As for contemporary Arabic Young Adult literature, for the most part it treads lightly in its story lines about romance, which are more likely to feature hand-holding than heavy petting. Fatima Sharafeddine's *Faten* and her *Cappuccino* both feature a gentle romance, while Taghreed Najjar has noted that some young readers of her *Mystery of the Falcon's Eye* wanted her to add more details to the romantic story line. Hopefully, in the future, we can expect more adventurous romance from Arabic YA fiction.

In recent years, a growing number of Arabic-language authors have been inspired by the language's long literary engagement with love and lust in their many iterations, writing not just "Layla and Qays"-inspired stories of love and separation, but also stories of lust inspired by, or in kinship with, those of medieval poets. Many love stories reflect the specific context of author or characters, with the suffocating nature of love in a refugee camp or sex in small spaces, and the difficulties of queer romance in tight-knit families and communities. There are also a number of stories about modern love that echo the concerns of readers around the world: balancing interconnectedness with autonomy, the needs of family with the needs of a partner, and—particularly for women—falling in love while holding on to their essential selves.

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