LITERARY NONFICTIONS IN ARABIC: TURNING INWARD, LOOKING OUT

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

Literary Nonfictions in Arabic: Turning Inward, Looking Out
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 Barraj (co-translated with Sawad Hussain), published in 2019, and *Wondrous Journeys in Amazing Lands* by Sonia Nimr, published in 2020.

Literary Nonfictions in Arabic: Turning Inward, Looking Out

Literary nonfiction in Arabic is an increasingly powerful and interesting genre. Although there is also the "literary testimonial" work that is popular in translation, there are also many more flowerings of literary nonfiction, which has taken a personal turn. There are intimate personal memoirs paired with social histories, the blending of personal reflections with philology and philosophy, food-writing, fresh takes on travel writing, and more.

Most of the literary nonfiction that has been translated from Arabic into European languages has been of one single type: literary testimonial. Without a doubt, there have been powerful literary testimonials written in Arabic in the last half-century. There have been many important testimonial memoirs written in Arabic—such as those by authors like Egyptian researcher Nawal El Saadawi, Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti, and Syrian novelist and screenwriter Samar Yazbek, Moroccan survivor of Tazmamart Mohammed Raiss—that have offered vivid personal accounts of structural violence. Such compelling testimonial memoirs are still being written: about sex and sexuality, about being a political prisoner, about fleeing war, and more. However, these "testimonials" are often being told in new ways—using humor, illustrations and graphic elements, and weaving together other genres.

Also, in the last decade, there has also been a new flowering of serious literary nonfiction in Arabic. Some of this new, thoughtfully crafted nonfiction has been led by poets moving into prose, such as Iman Mersal, Golan Haji, and Youssef Rakha. Some of it has been guided by new publishing projects, like the inventive "Kayfa ta" or "How To" series founded in 2012 by Maha Maamoun and Ala Younis. This flowering also comes from a recognition of Arabic literature's long genre-crossing history, as, for more than a millennium, authors writing in Arabic composed works that were interested in a wide range of topics—philosophy, petty thievery, poetry, and cookery—and brilliant contemporary authors such as Iman Mersal, Charles Akl, Golan Haji, and Haytham El Wardany are working in this tradition.

Another notable change in the last decade is an increasingly intimate literary nonfiction, which gives Arabic-language readers a closer view of mental-health struggles and family relationships. But while these works of life-writing address the personal, they don't necessarily portray the individual as living in a bubble, but rather also suggest broader historical, political, and philosophical themes.

An increasingly intimate genre

Autobiography has a long history in Arabic, and many medieval authors wove elements of their lives into treatises on medicine, philosophy, and religion. However, these elements generally appeared in order to support the author's argument or demonstrate authority, rather than as any sort of invitation to intimacy. Those who wrote their personal stories, such as Syrian traveler

Hana Diyab, usually did so to demonstrate the world outside them, important people, or important things they had done.

Memoir as we understand it now is a more recent arrival. Egyptian author Taha Hussein (1889-1973) wrote about the details of his life in a groundbreaking three volumes collected as *The Days,* which began appearing in 1926. The publication of the first volume made such an impression that it inspired a teenaged Naguib Mahfouz to write about his own early years. Mahfouz didn't publish those pages during his lifetime, and while he did write autobiographical work late in his life, generally his literary oeuvre took a different direction.

Throughout the twentieth century, many prominent political leaders wrote (or dictated) their autobiographies in Arabic, as did journalists, doctors, singers, poets, and movie stars. In his charming *Midnight in Cairo: The Divas of Egypt's Roaring Twenties,* Raphael Cormack highlights details the many juicy singers' and actors' memoirs published in mid-twentieth-century Cairo. These tell-alls certainly have their charms. But it is generally the work of literary writers that have plumbed aspects of selfhood that are interesting across space and time.

Generally speaking, literary life-writing has grown more intimate over time, moving away from travel tales to more personal journeys; shifting from the masculine and public into increasingly private spheres. The autobiographical work of Egyptian author Radwa Ashour (1946-2014), for instance, grew increasingly personal over her lifetime. She wrote her first literary nonfiction, her *Rihla* (*Journey),* during her student years in the US in the 1970s, and this book is mostly about her observations of the US, and provides relatively little that is personal or embodied about herself or her relationship with her husband, the Palestinian poet-memoirist Mourid Barghouti. Her half-autobiographical, half-meta-fictional *Specters,* published in 1998, is a more intense portrait of self and family that examines separations and reunions with her husband Mourid and their son Tamim, although also through the lens of Egyptian and Palestinian politics. Her final two-part memoir *Heavier than Radwa* (2013) and *The Scream,* published posthumously in 2015, crafts a yet more intimate portrait of serious illness against the backdrop of the 2011 uprisings.

Although there is little like the confessional memoir popular in the US, literary writers have decentered the masculine by opening up to more intimate looks at family life and struggles with mental health. It was 2012 when the groundbreaking *Kayfa Ta* series launched, and 2017 when the poet Iman Mersal published her volume: *How to Mend: Motherhood and Its Ghosts*. The book takes, as its starting point, the only surviving photograph of the poet's mother, and is a deeply personal and poetic exploration of motherhood, photography, alienation and suicide, and how to understand the gap between representation and "the real."

More recently, *Kayfa Ta* brought out Amr Ezzat's *How to Remember Your Dreams* (2019)*,* which followed his popular *Room 304: How I Hid from My Beloved Father for 35 Years* (2019). The latter book, not part of the Kayfa Ta series, compellingly links a son's relationship to his father to a citizen's relationship to a patriarchal, autocratic regime. It manages to give a portrait of patriarchal relationships that is also gender.

There are also an increasing number of Looking at different aspects of mental health. Young Egyptian author Mina Nagy won a 2020 grant to work on his project of exploring his long-term

experience of agoraphobia, through looking at works by Beckett, Kafka, and Cavafy, and his grief following his mother's sudden death.

Another way in which recent life-writing has decentered the masculine is by bringing readers into more intimate spaces, such as the kitchen. The Cairo Image Collective has run a number of workshops on food-writing and produced at least one collection, *Ta'am al-Horouf*, or *The Taste of Letters*. Egyptian author Charles Aql's *Food for the Copt* (2016) is a portrait of family and community through food. The book tells a story of Egypt's Coptic community and history through food, weaving it together with a broader Egyptian history.

Family histories have also taken a personal turn. Instead of recounting the facts and figures of important ancestors, they are more likely to look at more personal events and issues, as with Randa Shaath's compelling 2020 memoir *Jabl al-Raml (Mountain of Sand),* which is also a photo book built around her grandmother's home in Alexandria, and Nadia Kamel's award-winning *Mawlouda (Born)*, a memoir-biography hybrid based on Kamel's recordings of her mother, channeling her mother's voice and weaving it together with her own, mother and daughter blending together to reveal stories from her mother's covert work for the printing press of a 1940s Egyptian Communist cell all the way to the present.

Travel tales: turning inward

Radwa Ashour's first work of memoir was *rihla,* or travel literature, which has been around for a millennium, transforming from the exciting travel tales about places people would likely never go, by writers like Abu Zayd al-Sirafi (893-979), Ibn Jubayr (1145-1217) and Ibn Battuta (1304-1379). Of necessity, this kind of travel literature shifted first in the nineteenth century, with thinkers like Rifa'a al-Tahtawi (1801-1873) traveling West and exploring questions of identity, and then again during the twentieth century, when travel became more accessible, and authors wrote more about personal experiences. Travel memoirs like Louis Awad's *Diaries of an Overseas Student* (1965), Safynaz Kazem's *Romanticisms* (1970), and Hussein Barghouti's *The Third Bank of the Jordan River* (1984) give witty, illuminating portraits of the strange habits of strangers.

By the twenty-first century, even readers who couldn't travel could look up information about other countries online, and travel tales began to illuminate more unusual corners of the world. Palestinian author Hussein Barghouthi's brilliant experimental *Blue Light* (2001) is about Barghouti's time spent among the marginal and homeless in Seattle, USA. There is also, recently, compelling travel writing about journeys closer to home, as Palestinian author Wessal Yousef's *The Last Breath of the Mediterranean,* a travelogue narrating her seven years in Tangier, and the social and linguistic barriers between Palestinians and Moroccans.

Like memoir, travel literature has also become more introspective, as with Ezzat El-Kamhawi's 2020 book *Ghurfat al-Mosafreen* (The Passengers' Hall), a nonfiction work about journeys that takes readers both through the author's experience of travels and through his reflections on the genre of travel literature. This book, shortlisted for the 2021 Sheikh Zayed Book Award, also comes with a translation subsidy.

Funny nonfiction: Satire and sarcasm

Humor doesn't always translate well, often losing essential shared cultural references. Some of the most popular and best-selling nonfiction in Arabic are humor writing, such as Mahmoud El Saadani's popular works from the 90s, such as *A Donkey from the East* (1991), about an Egyptian character in France, and Omar Taher's popular 2011 satiric work *Berma Yoqabel Rayya w Sakina* (Berma Meets Rayya and Sakina). Naturally, the humor makes less of an impact if you don't recognize that Rayya and Sakina were famous early-twentieth-century serial killers.

Certain sorts of popular humor also fade quickly. What might have been funny in 2018 can lose its impact as memes and references shift. When it comes to the humor of popular satirist Belal Fadl, for instance, his funny short stories are usually easier to translate than his nonfiction, since the fiction hinges more on funny situations than current events. So while satiric books are among the most popular, only a few will translate across culture and time.

Yet satiric works can provide great delight, and some also have significant social criticism or literary merit. There are also a number of tender memoirs where the author mocks themselves, as when Osama El-Dinassouri mocks how he deals with his hearing loss, the result of overuse of antibiotics, in *Kalbi al-Harem* (My Beloved Dog, 2007). This book is also one of the great nonfiction works that tells the story of illness and the narrator's experience of health care in Egypt. There are also the often-satiric posts written by the anonymous Sadr City-based blogger "Shalash," which first began appearing in 2005, illuminate the details of life in Iraq with a salty, irreverent tone, about everything from football matches to call-in shows to sectarianism.

True stories: Revisiting the past

One of the most exciting nonfiction works of the last few years was written by the Egyptian poet Iman Mersal and has already appeared in Richard Jaquemond's French translation. Her *In the Footsteps of Enayat Al Zayyat* was a breakaway hit, winning the 2021 Sheikh Zayed Book Award in the literature category. This book, which is in some ways reminiscent of Hisham Matar's *The Return,* takes us into the life of little-known Egyptian novelist Enayat al-Zayyat, who took her life in 1963. Although Mersal is an academic, she said in a podcast interview that, just as there were not strict genre boundaries in classical Arabic literature, she doesn't see a book strictly as academic or popular. *In the Footsteps* is both scholarly and personal, about Enayat and about Iman's search for traces of a lesser-known woman writer more than half a century after her death. The book turns up surprising details about mental-health care in mid-century Egypt, about Enayat's divorce, and about why Enayat had so much trouble publishing during her lifetime. We also find out what happened to her only completed novel, *Love and Silence,* which was published after her death. The details build slowly, one atop another. When we finally reach the moment when Mersal depicts Enayat's suicide, it is deeply resonant and profoundly sympathetic.

Another compelling nonfiction work that blends scholarship, journalism, and literary writing is Mohamed Shoair's *The Children of the Alley: Story of a Banned Book*. It is the first in a nonfiction trilogy that illuminates aspects of the life of Egyptian Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz. While

earlier depictions of the Nobel Prize winner were largely written by his friends and colleagues, Shoair's fast-paced yet illuminating *Story of a Forbidden Novel* that starts out when Shoair is looking for the lost original manuscript of *The Children of the Alley*. The book revisits the novel and, through it, both Mahfouz's life and the social history of his time.

The figures of Raya and Sakina loom large in the Egyptian imaginary, as well as in neighboring countries, as these two sister serial killers were used as bogeymen for scaring children long after their 1919-20 killing spree was over. In Salah Eissa's *Raya and Sakina,* he tells the tale of the most notorious gang of killers in modern Egyptian history, offering insight, humor, drama, and social history. Eissa goes through each of the 17 kills and, as award-winning Egyptian short-story writer Muhammad al-Hajj has written, it "pays off handsomely."

Genre-blending

A number of recent works of literary nonfiction don't fall into any neat category, weaving together philosophy, political and personal observations, as well as philological and historical excavations. In this, they are something like classical Arabic books, which could encompass poetry, history, fictions, jokes, philosophy, and medical remedies all in one text. In one recent cross-genre work, poet Youssef Rakha writes back to the great 10th-cenutry poet Mutanabbi in *Walakinna Qalbi: Mutanabbi al Alfiya al Thalitha* (Albeit My Heart: Third Millennium Mutanabbi, 2021). The book is a collection of twenty poems and a long personal narrative, and the work is also accompanied and translated into surreal drawings by acclaimed Egyptian artist Walid Taher.

The Kayfa Ta series has also created space for authors to cross genre boundaries. The series produced Haytham al-Wardani's luminous *How to Disappear,* one such genre-encompassing book. The book, which could also be called *How to Listen,* examines the relationship between noise and visibility in a way that simultaneously hides and reveals its author. Al-Wardani's follow-up *Book of Sleep,* not part of the Kayfa Ta series, is also simultaneously personal, political, and philosophical. It is a book that examines the nature of sleep, both in practice and as metaphor.

Although much of Maghrebi nonfiction has been written in French, one genre-blending nonfiction writer who writes in Arabic is the Moroccan Abdessalam Ben Abdelali, who writes a lyric literary philosophy akin to award-winning literary critic Abdelfattah Kilito. Ben Abdelali's literary nonfiction, as Moroccan writer Omar Berrada notes, "manages to be at once radical and readable." Berrada writes: "This is philosophy as a literary genre, as a rhythm of thought that you can inhabit. His latest volume, *Harakat al-kitaba* (Writing Movement) is a case in point. The very movement of writing is its real subject, despite its many ostensible topics (untranslatability, wikileaks, cultural tourism, symbols and spectacle, homages to deceased friends and teachers, etc)."

The Syrian Kurdish poet Golan Haji is among those poets who have turned their considerable gifts to prose nonfiction. Haji's first book-length nonfiction was a work on literary testimonial in which he interviewed Syrian women, *Until the War*, which was published in 2016. But like Iman Mersal, he also seems to have an interest in voices from previous generations that may have been lost or forgotten. While Mersal writes about Enayat al-Zayyat, Haji's forthcoming prose

work, *One Hundred Names of Pain,* is in dialogue with the work of Syrian author and poet Kheir Eddin al-Assadi, who was born in Aleppo in 1900. Although al-Assadi published only one poetry collection, *Songs of the Dome,* he wrote many other philological works.

What attracted Haji to writing in dialogue with al-Assadi, he said, was the other man's passion for words. "He wrote entire books about one or two words," Haji said, including a whole book about the phrase *ya layl*, a common refrain in songs, and a 600-page book about the verb "to be" in Arabic. His monumental work was the *Comparative Encyclopedia of Aleppo.* "When you look at al-Assadi, he has not been either studied or translated. Even in Arabic he has been neglected." However, Haji said, "You can start from this book *Songs of the Dome* and go to the whole universe."

Literary testimonials

There are a number of classic literary testimonials, particularly detailing time in prison or other effects of oppressive regimes. From Egypt, there are Nawal El Saadawi's *Memoirs from a Women's Prison* and Inji Aflatoun's *From Childhood to Prison;* from Iraq, Haifa Zangana's *Dreaming of Baghdad;* and from Occupied Palestine there are many, including Mourid Barghouti's *I Saw Ramallah* and *A Party for Tha'ira* (2017), a volume of essays on women's prison experiences, edited by the Iraqi writer Haifa Zangana, who is currently working with Tunisian women on a collection of their experiences in prison.

Yet in recent years, several writers have taken on subjects such prison, torture, and war in new ways, often writing freshly and with humor. Young Egyptian author Ahmed Naji, who was sentenced to two years in prison for allegedly "violating public decency" when an excerpt from his novel The Use of Life was published in a magazine, said in an interview with *The Rumpus* that at first he didn't want to write about his experience in prison, "because I hate prison literature. There is an element of hypocrisy in it: people will write about prison like it's an achievement and like it requires courage."

But eventually, in *Haraz Mukamakum* (A Rot of Evidence), Naji found a way to write about his experiences with a clear gaze and sense of humor, while never looking down on his fellow non-political prisoners. Naji details prisoners' reading habits, his interactions with the prison authorities, and details the language of prison life. The portrait that emerges is absurd, sardonic, and miserable, but also relentlessly humane.

Moving prison memoirs and other testimonials have also started to emerge from Tunisian writers, including *Nazzarat Ummi* (My Mother's Glasses, 2018) a memoir by the writer Ezzedine Hazgui. A member of the leftist collective "Perspectives," Hazgui was imprisoned from 1973-1979, first in the notorious Borj Erroumi prison and later in the 9 Avril Prison. He writes not only about his time in prison, but also about other losses in his life, such as his mother, who died when he was still young: "Perhaps, she decided to leave early, so that I would always be looking for glasses…Glasses that would make my vision clearer. Glasses that I needed then and still need now."

In the last decade, dozens of urgent testimonials have appeared from Syrian and Iraqi writers. There are several that have appeared from poets and novelists, including by Samar Yazbek's *In the Crossfire, The Crossing,* and *19 Women*, Golan Haji's *Until the War* (2016), and Ramy al-Asheq's *Ever Since I Did Not Die* (2016). There are also many literary testimonials from Iraq. Among the most remarkable is poet Dunya Mikhail's *Fi souq al-sabaya* (In the Slave-girls' Market), which details the stories of women enslaved by ISIS, weaving poetry and personal history into these broken life stories.

Writers also testimonies of lived experience. The great Palestinian novelist Sahar Khalifeh's *A Novel for My Story* (2018) recounts her reaction to receiving an offer of place at Birzeit University as a mature student in 1973, a move that was especially daring under Israeli occupation. The globally acclaimed feminist novelist recalls an earlier, bittersweet time in her life when she was short on funds and long on social pressure. *Memoirs of Randa the Trans* (2010), an anonymous account that tells the story of a transgender Algerian woman in Lebanon.

The 2015 memoir *Untha al-Anhar* (*Woman of the Rivers)* by Ishraga Mustafa, a Sudanese-Austrian writer, poet, and translator. An intimate and visceral piece that describes childhood trauma with a chilling lyricism, it deals with the physical loss from gender violence and the emotional loss of trust in family members. It captures the spirit of a defiant child, picking through her losses and planting "the fruit of that pain" so it can grow "into palm trees."

Different forms of Arabic literary nonfiction are bursting into flower. While aspects of the genre are moving into more intimate personal realms, exploring mental health in different contexts, others are expanding outwards, inspired by classical Arabic literature to take a wide interest in different subjects and to eschew genre boundaries.

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