



# — THE MANY LIVES OF ARABIC POETRY

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

The Many Lives of Arabic Poetry

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



The present essays are published by iReMMO in cooperation with ArabLit and Literature Across Frontiers in the framework of the LEILA Research project supported by the Anna Lindh Foundation.

The LEILA Research Project represents the initial research phase of the cooperation project LEILA - Promoting Arabic Literature in Europe coordinated by iReMMO and co-financed by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union.

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These texts have been reviewed by authors and literary critics Iman Mersal and Selma Dabbagh.

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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.

## The Many Lives of Arabic Poetry

*Although European readers might be familiar with a few of the classics of Arabic poetry—perhaps a handful of authors from the medieval era as well as two powerhouses of the twentieth century, Adonis and Mahmoud Darwish—contemporary poets are sadly little-translated, particularly the work of contemporary women poets, who are doing some of the most exciting writing in Arabic today. And while Arabic poetry is in dialogue with its millennium-and-a-half-long history, European readers need not know al-Khansa or Imru al-Qays in order to be swept into the many worlds—sarcastic, banal, erotic, eerie, lush—of contemporary Arabic poetry.*

Arabic poetry is remarkably under-translated into European languages, with the majority of exciting contemporary writers—especially women poets—being little-represented or even unrepresented in translation. A handful of the great poets of the twentieth century, such as Mahmoud Darwish and Adonis, have been widely translated into European and other world languages, to varying degrees of success. Yet this represents only a small corner of a rich and varied tradition that ranges from erotic poetry to poetry about war, from myth-making epics to small poems of daily life. In many languages, translations of Arabic poetry have unfortunately been more scholastic than artistic, reducing readers' pleasure. However, with a new generation of translators, that is changing.

Arabic poetry is in conversation with both its own long history—which includes more than 1500 years of vibrant poetic writings—as well as with the poetries written in other world languages, translated to Arabic. Since the mid-twentieth century, the poetic forms borrowed from English and French poets have been key influences on Arabic poetry. However, this has never displaced poets' relationships to the Arabic poetic legacy. Indeed, the influence of the poems of Mutanabbi (915-965), Abu Nuwas (756-814), Abu Tammam (d. 845), and al-Ma'arri (973-1057) has not yet waned. In the last two years, several re-interpretations of Mutanabbi have appeared, including Egyptian poet Youssef Rakha's *Walakinna Qalbi: Mutanabbi al Alfya al Thalitha* (And Yet My Heart: Third Millennium Mutanabbi, 2021). Moreover, there has been a growing movement to look for ancestors among women poets from classical times, from al-Khansa, a seventh-century poet who composed verse in what is now Saudi Arabia, to the eleventh or twelfth century Iberian Jewish poet Qasmuna bint Isma'il. This is clear not only through essays and interviews with poets, but in multi-generational anthologies such as *We Wrote in Symbols: Love and Lust by Arab Women Writers*, ed. Selma Dabbagh.

But while Arabic poetry certainly feeds off its long and inventive history, contemporary readers need not know the work of Mutanabbi in order to understand contemporary Syrian poet Rasha Omran, any more than they need read Beowulf in order to appreciate Louise Glück. For that reason, we won't linger on history except to say that there are many classical poets who could be as exciting to translate afresh as Beowulf or The Odyssey, whose works have not yet been translated into European languages with an eye to beauty, or to enriching the target language. To wit, while this paper was being composed, poet-translator Yasmine Seale announced that she had signed a contract with the Library of Arabic Literature project to translate a collection of poetry of al-Khansa, who was called by her contemporary Al-Nabigha Al-Dhubyani the "finest

poet among humans and jinn.” That collection is sure to be an event; Seale is not only an award-winning poet and translator but the grand-niece of the beloved Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani (1923-1998), and also a descendent of the prolific and popular Syrian writer Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulsi (1641-1731). Seale is not unusual in weaving together an interest in the gems of classical Arabic poetry with a vivid practice in contemporary verse.

### **The early twentieth century and Arabic poetry**

Contemporary Arabic poetry has many styles and forms, from popular performance poetry, both spoken and sung, to a capacious blank verse that can range in register from the colloquial Arabic spoken in everyday life to the literary Arabic shared with much of classical Arabic writing. There is also a rich strain of contemporary poetry that blends these forms to brilliant effect, speaking simultaneously in Arabic’s multiple voices.

Twenty-first century readers can certainly find themselves reflected in classical Arabic poetry, as here with Ulayya Bint al-Mahdi (777-825), in Yasmine Seale’s translation:

To love two people is to have it

coming: body nailed to beams,

dismemberment.

But loving one is like observing

religion.

Yet it is in the Arabic poetry of the twentieth century that we find ever-more familiar forms, the sort of poetry we might read to search for answers to the questions of our own lives. Egyptian poet and scholar Iman Mersal helpfully differentiates between the poets she reads during the daytime, at her desk, and those who she reads at night, and keeps on her bedside table. Among Mersal’s “night poets” are mid-twentieth century Syrian writers Saniya Saleh and Da’ad Haddad, who we say more about below. Unfortunately, the writing of both of these women has been sidelined, both in Arabic and in translation. Saleh’s work in particular was overshadowed by her husband’s, the beloved and gifted Muhammad al-Maghut (1934-2006), who was sometimes called the “artistic conscience” of Syrian poetry.

Throughout the twentieth century, Arabic poetry saw enormous shifts and the broad influence of translated work, particularly the poetry of T.S. Eliot, which was first translated to Arabic in the early 1940s. Poets such as Nazik al-Malai’ka and Nizar al-Qabbani published work that led the way for other stylistic shifts, such as popular Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani’s 1944 collection *The Brunette Told Me* and Iraqi poet al-Mala’ika’s 1947 collection *Cholera*, in which she re-makes the elegiac form.

Starting in the 1950s, largely independent literary magazines played a critically important role in the poetry scene, including: *al-Hikma* (1951-1965), *Al-Adab* (founded 1953), *al-Majallah* (1956-1969), *Sbi'r* (1957-1970), *Anfas-Souffle* (1966-1972), and *Mawaqif* (1968-1998), among many others. A number of poetic and political issues were worked out in their pages, as the Rabat, Morocco-based *Anfas-Souffles*. This magazine, founded by Abdellatif Laâbi and a handful of other avant-garde poets, which called itself “a manifesto for a new aesthetics in the Maghreb,” brought together experimental poetics and politics by both Arabophone and Francophone authors. And in the Mashreq, *Sbi'r*, founded by Adonis, Yusuf al-Khal, and Ounsi el-Hajj, pioneered a new “prose poetry” that leaned in to translation and eschewed previous poetic forms.

### The next generation of ‘prose poets’

Many significant poets were born in the 1930s, ‘40s and ‘50s, including the globally admired Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008), whose works have spawned new poetic forms in languages as distant as Assamese. Other important Arabic poets born in this period include Egyptian poets Salah Abdel Sabour (1931-1981), Amal Dunqul (1940-1983), Iraqi poet Sargon Boulus (1944-2007), Bahraini poet Qassim Haddad (b. 1948), Lebanese poet Wadih Sa’adeh (b. 1948), Moroccan poet Mohammed Bennis (b. 1948), Kurdish-Syrian poet Salim Barakat (b. 1951), and Iraqi poet Ra’ad Abdulqadir (1953-2003). All of these can be read as night poets; their work is not only “important,” but can still shake and re-make us.

The Iraqi-Assyrian poet Sargon Boulus, like many other key twentieth-century poets, began publishing in *Sbi'r* magazine in the early 1960s. He then set off on his own path, settling in San Francisco in the late 1960s. In addition to writing his own groundbreaking individualist verse, he also translated many major English-language poets into Arabic, including beat poets like Allen Ginsberg and ecological stylists like W.S. Merwin. A key poetry prize—the Sargon Boulus Award—has been named for him.

The Bahraini poet Qassim Haddad (b. 1948) is notable not only as a poet, but also because he launched, in 1994, the first major Arabic poetry website, *Jebat al-Sbi'r*. This remained a significant resource until 2018, when it unfortunately stopped updating due to a lack of funding—although the archives are still available. Poetry scholar and translator Huda Fakhreddine describes Haddad as always on the search for interlocutors. “He converses with other poets, as poets often do, but he also strikes up conversations with artists of other mediums. He has collaborated with musicians, visuals artists, and theater directors on joint projects[.]” Haddad also collaborates with tales from Arabic’s rich history; he worked with the great Iraqi visual artist Diaa al-Azzawi on an illustrated edition of his poetry collection *The Chronicles of Majnun Layla*, which builds on the classic story of the doomed lovers Layla and Qays.

Wadih Sa’adeh (b. 1948), is a Lebanese émigré who has lived in Australia since 1988. Despite his physical distance, Sa’adeh remains an important part of Arabic poetry conversations and communities. As Fakhreddine has written, “From distributing poetry on the street to publishing

all of his work online, Sa'adeh is committed to the immediacy of poetic experience and to an unmediated relationship with his reader, without attending to the critical consequences.”

In “Shadows,” from Sa'adeh's 1992 collection *Most Probably Because of a Cloud*, shadows become unstuck from their bodies. Here, translated by Robin Moger:

Passing the fields some had  
their shades part from them and sleep there  
and shades clung to the rocks, stretched out  
and brought them back again.

They came away until they came  
to water, wearied  
while overhead the sun searched for a needle  
to reattach them to the shadows.

Salim Barakat is another poet who lives far from home. The Kurdish-Syrian poet and novelist, born in 1951 in Qamishli, has lived in Sweden since 1999. Yet he remains famous for his brilliant inventive wordplay, which brings the rhythm of Kurdish into Arabic. Barakat is also a novelist, and his Swedish translator, Jonathan Moren, has said, “It's truly remarkable that there is no full-length translation into English of what is to my mind the most original novelist writing in Arabic today.” He is much-admired by Adonis and by the late Mahmoud Darwish, who wrote about Barakat in “The Kurd Has Nothing But the Wind,” the final poem in his collection *Don't Apologize for What You've Done*.

Despite work by a few brilliantly talented women poets, the twentieth century was largely a male-dominated decade for Arabic poetry. This was to shift in the last decade of the twentieth century.

### **Poets of the '90s and beyond**

The “Poets of the Nineties” or “Nineties' Poets” refers not to poets born in the 1990s but to a generation who came to prominence in the mid-1990s, and who largely focused on individualist poetic projects rather than grand nationalist or anti-nationalist narratives. Among the most brilliant are Egyptian poets Iman Mersal and the reclusive Emad Abu Salih, who recently won the 2020 Sargon Boulus Award. Iman Mersal's most recent collection *Until I Give Up the Idea of*

*Houses* (2013) was much-lauded by fellow poets, and this collection blends Mersal's signature irony and dark humor with observations of Egyptian life, politics, and life as an emigrant. Abu Saleh, meanwhile, was praised by the Sargon Boulus prize jury for his poetry of "the small concerns" that make up a person's life, largely focused on rural Egypt, where he lives.

Here, Abu Saleh's "Sometimes She Does Not Remember How to Swallow Water," from his collection *An Old Man Pained by Laughter* (1997), translated by Salma Harland:

Dumped  
  
On the pavement,  
  
Half-dissolved in rain water,  
  
Patting cats  
  
That feast on her knees,  
  
Fishing,  
  
With her worn out shoes,  
  
For whichever smiles  
  
That pick their way stealthily  
  
From doorways.

Another remarkable younger poet, who began publishing in the early 2000s, is Golan Haji. This Kurdish-Syrian poet, translator, prose artist, and physician is based in France. He is the author of five books of poetry and is—like many contemporary Arabic poets—an accomplished translator. He has also translated his own poetry. Along with translator Stephen Watts, Haji co-translated a selection of his poems in a volume titled *A Tree Whose Name I Don't Know* (2017). He has also co-authored poetry in an innovative conversational style with Palestinian-American poet and translator Fady Joudah.

Other notable Syrian poets who began publishing in the early 2000s include Ghayath al-Madhoun (b. 1979). Like Bahraini poet Qassim Haddad, al-Madhoun also collaborates with other artists on different forms, including visual art and poetry films.

### **The superiority of women?**

In interviews, Golan Haji has said he is particularly interested in the work of his female counterparts. As has Egyptian poet and novelist Yasser Abdellatif, who said in 2017, "It seems to me there's been a wonderful female invasion of poetic territory. Or, as my friend Alaa Khaled



said, *Poetry lately has recovered its female character*. From Syria alone, recent years have brought forward dozens of distinguished poets, among them a large number of Kurdish women writing in Arabic, and sometimes Kurdish. In Egypt, too, there is a clear quantitative and qualitative superiority of women poets over men.”

At a July 2021 webinar about women’s writing in Arabic, Iman Mersal echoed what Abdellatif had said. Mersal said she has spoken about this issue with Abdellatif and others, and “we come up with different reasons, but really maybe it needs to be studied. So far, Yasser might talk about masculinity and femininity. Old female poets in the ’40s and ’50s used to borrow the masculine voice. I think since the ’90s, female Arab poets don’t have to do this at all.”

Mersal said that “prophecy” was an important mode of twentieth-century Arabic poetry, which was largely dominated by men. But, she added, in the twenty-first century, “prophecy is defeated. The masculinity is defeated. But it doesn’t mean that this will make a woman a good poet, just because she is not a prophet or masculine. There are so many things that we need [to be a good poet]—I don’t even know what [they are].”

Mersal added that many of the male poets writing now “writing about broken masculinity, which I don’t like either. So maybe women are free of this, relatively. And maybe they are marginalized, so they have more opportunity to think, to write.”

With help from Mersal, Haji, Abdellatif, and others, we have put together this list of thirteen remarkable collections by women poets, writing in Arabic, from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. They can be found at the end of this article.

It is also worth mentioning that there is another movement—pioneered by women poets—and that is the transition *out of* European languages back *into* writing in Arabic. Among the most notable is the great Lebanese poet Zeina Hashem Beck, whose first several collections appeared in English, and who has a collection forthcoming from Penguin Books, which includes some of her bilingual “duets,” written in both Arabic and English. Furthermore, she has now begun publishing poetry in magazines in Arabic, and inspiring others who began publishing in English to not fear also writing in Arabic.

## Poetry and performance

Performance has perhaps always been an important aspect of Arabic poetry. Since pre-Islamic times, there have been poetry competitions, as in the Souk Okaz market, in what is now Saudi Arabia. These competitions took place at least from the sixth century. Now, there are televised poetry competitions, including big-budget affairs such as Million’s Poet and Prince of Poets, both filmed in Abu Dhabi, but also smaller shows around the region.

There are also stage and stadium performances. Like the star Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, the iconic Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish could hold a reading in a stadium and draw tens of

thousands of fans. As his poetry became progressively more complicated, he managed to bring his fans along on the journey, enriching their poetic tastes.

Although there are still large readings held by individual poets (none on quite the scale of Darwish) there are also performances of colloquial and popular poetic forms. Poetry slams—such as the Beirut Poetry Slam, founded by the Raw Voices collective—straddle popular and literary forms. There is also a vibrant tradition of setting poetry to music. Work by younger poets such as Palestinians Najwan Darwish and Marwan Makhoul, and Egyptian Mido Zoheir, have been successfully set to music.

And while not everyone has access to a TV studio, nearly any poet can record and post their performances on YouTube or Instagram, where some have developed large numbers of followers. Farah Chamma has posted her popular poetry performances at her own YouTube channel, while other poets—such as the popular Tamim Barghouti—have fans posting videos of their performances.

There are also a handful of poets like Ghayath al-Madhoun, and animators like Nissmah Roshdy, who work in the genre of poetry films. Al-Madhoun has perhaps been part of the poetry-film scene for the longest; in 2020, he won the ZEBRA Award for the Best Poetry Film, a prize sponsored by the Haus für Poesie.

Although most translation energy is directed toward the novel, Arabic poetry remains a vibrant literary form, with a great deal to offer readers in languages around the world.

### **More resources:**

\*Many contemporary Arab poets have been translated to European languages on [lyrikline.org](http://lyrikline.org).

\*Qassim Haddad's poetry website, [jehat.com](http://jehat.com), is no longer being updated. However, the archives remain online, and there are (at least approximate) translations into several European languages.

\*For those who know Arabic, the Maqsouda podcast on the Sowt network, co-hosted by award-winning poets Zeina Hashem Beck and Farah Chamma, is an invaluable resource on Arabic poetry, and Zeina (@zeinabeck) is on Twitter with poetry recommendations and occasional translations to English.

\*For suggestions on books that would be brilliant to translate, please see the remarkable collections by women listed below.

### **From authors' recommendations, a list of remarkable collections by women poets writing in Arabic:**

**Saniya Saleh (1935-1985), *Complete Works (Syria)*.** In an essay about searching for Saleh, Iman Mersal writes about how she was astonished to encounter another poet writing about motherhood, and called Saleh “a mother who must give birth to herself.”

**Da'ad al-Haddad (d. 1991), *Collected Works* (Syria).** About this poet, Golan Haji said, “Regardless of the superlative ‘most notable’ woman poet in the Arab world, I could mention Fatima Qandil or Sanyyah Saleh, but I’d love to talk about Da’ad Haddad who died in 1991. ... Her ‘naïvety’ is astounding sometimes, like raw brut art paintings.”

**Siham Jabbar, *As Old as Hypatia* (Iraq).** About this collection, Mersal said, “I’d wish to see these poems read widely in the Arabic-[reading] world and translated into different languages.”

**Soukina Habiballah, *There’s No Need for You* (Morocco).** Habiballah introduces compelling and unexpected personifications into her narrative and filmic poems.

**Asmaa Yaseen, *A Box of Colorful Stones* (Egypt).** Yasser Abdellatif called this collection one of the notable books of 2017.

**Iman Mersal’s *Until I Give Up the Idea of Houses* (Egypt).** This incisive, satiric collection was a favorite of Egyptian poets when it was released in 2013, chronicling an outsider’s view of Egyptian politics and society and the dual lenses of an emigrant.

**Fatima Qandil, *My House Has Two Doors* (Egypt).** In a chapter in *Arab Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide, 1873-1999*, Hoda Elsadda writes that Qandil “gives voice to conditions of human existence that cannot be summarized or conveyed using other means of expression. She weaves the strands of her lexicon with the utmost care and then scatters them on paper, creating meanings that quietly pierce deep into the walls of consciousness.”

**Amal Nawwar, *Intimate to Glass* (Lebanon).** Golan Haji said, “Amal Nawwar’s internal worlds in *Hers Is Blue Wine* and *Intimate to Glass* and *The Jungle Woman* originate from various experiences in Lebanon and abroad. Her dense poems grow like dark flowers at the edge of an abyss inside the poet herself, and no one can jump into it since it’s already full of restless words and muffled emotions.”

**Rasha Omran, *The Secret Wife of Absence* (Syria).** Omran’s sixth collection offers a sustained meditation on love, loneliness, and heartbreak through a series of concise, image-dense poems, this one, “Normal Life,” translated by Phoebe Carter:

Because I, too, know that no one dies of love,

I live my life like a normal woman.

I wake up in the morning, drink my coffee, do all the things any single woman like me would do.

Then, before going to sleep, I sweep up the death that's piled up on the floorboards  
throughout the day

Every day I do this

and every day I forget to plug the hole you dug in my soul when you left

this hole leaking death like dust leaving my body.

And so

I stay alive as certain proof that no one dies of love.

**Rana al-Tonsi, *The Book of Games* (Egypt).** Al-Tonsi writes achingly and sparsely on motherhood and love.

**Asmaa Azaizeh, *Don't Believe Me If I Talk To You Of War* (Palestine).** As Amira Abd El Khalek wrote of Azaizeh's work, her "poems are potent yet delicate renderings of seemingly simple everyday things."

**Hoda Omran, *Naive and Cinematic* (Egypt).** Yasser Abdellatif called this one of the notable collections he read in 2017.

**Mouna Ouafik, *Sharp Edge of Half of a Broken Plate* (Morocco).** Ouafik is a Moroccan poet, short story writer, and photographer whose work was published in English translation for the first time in the anthology *We Wrote in Symbols*, as translated by Robin Moger; her writing on ordinary life and sexuality is simultaneously hot and banal. From "Orgasm": "Quick as that, the tissues of my clitoris fill up with blood./ Each time I see white plastic gloves / I get turned on."

**Mona Kareem, *Femme Ghosts* (Stateless, Kuwait).** You can read this trilingual publication, which includes Kareem's poetry in Arabic, English and Dutch. It's filled with straightforward women's voices speaking from and to a place of deep emotional resonance.

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*With thanks to Iman Mersal for her valuable advice and corrections.*