

*Love and Sexuality
in Modern Arabic Literature*

Edited by
Roger Allen, Hilary Kilpatrick and Ed de Moor

Saqi Books

In-house editor: Jana Gough

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library

ISBN 0 86356 062 8 Hb
ISBN 0 86356 075 X Pbk

© Roger Allen, Hilary Kilpatrick and Ed de Moor, 1995

This edition first published 1995 by
Saqi Books
26 Westbourne Grove
London W2 5RH

Typeset by Group E, London

Contents

List of Contributors	7
Introduction: On Love and Sexuality in Modern Arabic Literature <i>Hilary Kilpatrick</i>	9
1. Love and the Birth of Modern Arabic Literature <i>Boutros Hallaq</i>	16
2. The Figure of the Lover in Popular Arabic Drama of the Early Twentieth Century <i>Rosella Dorigo Ceccato</i>	24
3. The Romantic Imagination and the Female Ideal <i>Robin Ostle</i>	33
4. Love and Beyond in <i>Mahjar</i> Literature <i>Cornelis Nijland</i>	46
5. The Four Ages of Husayn Tawfiq: Love and Sexuality in the Novels of Tawfiq al-Hakim <i>Paul Starkey</i>	56
6. Erotic Awareness in the Early Egyptian Short Story <i>Ed de Moor</i>	65
7. The Arabic Short Story and the Status of Women <i>Roger Allen</i>	77
8. Love and the Mechanisms of Power: Kamal 'Abd al-Jawwad and Sa'id al-Juhayni <i>Richard van Leeuwen</i>	91

Contents

9. Fathers and Husbands: Tyrants and Victims in some Auto-biographical and Semi-Autobiographical Works from the Arab World <i>Hartmut Fähndrich</i>	106
10. The Foreign Woman in the Francophone North African Novel <i>Susanne Enderwitz</i>	116
11. The Function of Sexual Passages in some Egyptian Novels of the 1980s <i>Stephan Guth</i>	123
12. Distant Echoes of Love in the Narrative Work of Fu'ād al-Tikirli <i>Wiebke Walther</i>	131
13. Sexuality in Jabrā's Novel, <i>The Search for Walīd Mas'ūd</i> <i>Mattityahu Peled</i>	140
14. Women's Narrative in Modern Arabic Literature: A Typology <i>Sabry Hafez</i>	154
15. The Development of Women's Political Consciousness in the Short Stories of the Kuwaiti Author Laylā al-'Uthmān <i>Angelika Rahmer</i>	175
16. Death and Desire in Iraqi War Literature <i>Miriam Cooke</i>	184
17. Nizār Qabbānī's Autobiography: Images of Sexuality, Death and Poetry <i>Stefan Wild</i>	200
18. Love and the Body in Modern Arabic Poetry <i>As'ad E. Khairallah</i>	210
Notes	224
Index	257

List of Contributors

Roger Allen, *University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia*
 Miriam Cooke, *Duke University, Durham (US)*
 Rosella Dorigo Ceccato, *University of Venice*
 Susanne Enderwitz, *Free University of Berlin*
 Hartmut Fähndrich, *Polytechnic, Zurich*
 Stephan Guth, *Institute of the German Oriental Society, Istanbul*
 Sabry Hafez, *School of Oriental and African Studies, London*
 Boutros Hallaq, *University of Paris III, Sceaux*
 As'ad E. Khairallah, *University of Freiburg*
 Hilary Kilpatrick, *Lausanne*
 Richard van Leeuwen, *University of Amsterdam*
 Ed de Moor, *University of Nijmegen*
 Cornelis Nijland, *Dutch Institute for the Near East, Leiden*
 Robin Ostle, *University of Oxford*
 Mattityahu Peled, *Tel Aviv University*
 Angelika Rahmer, *University of Münster*
 Paul Starkey, *University of Durham (UK)*
 Wiebke Walther, *University of Frankfurt*
 Stefan Wild, *University of Bonn*

Introduction

On Love and Sexuality in Modern Arabic Literature

Hilary Kilpatrick

The editors acknowledge help from the University of Nijmegen and a grant from the European Meeting of Teachers of Arabic Literature in the publication of this book.

If the subject of this volume is love and sexuality in modern Arabic poetry, prose and drama, that does not mean that these themes do not have a long history in Arabic, as in other, literatures. From time immemorial they have fascinated poets and tellers of tales, as can be seen from Greek myths, the *Ramayana*, the *Shih Ching* and parts of the Old Testament. In the earliest known texts of Arabic literature, the *qasidas* (polythematic poems) place the evocation of a past love at the very beginning, and while the poem may develop in a number of ways, its initial theme is fixed.

Because of the *qasida's* prestige, the image of the poet weeping at the memory of his lost love is considered the main expression of pre-Islamic literature's concern with matters of love and sexuality. It is by no means the only one. The frank evocation of playful eroticism, for instance in the *Mu'allaha* of Imru' al-Qays, belongs to the repertoire of the poet's boasts about his prowess in various areas of life, as do descriptions of the poet's nagging wife, complaining that her husband squanders all his resources on entertaining guests without a thought for the consequent privations he is inflicting on his dependants.

More profound, even bordering on tragedy, are those stories and fragments of poetry which record a woman's decision to abandon the man who has acquired her as booty from a raid and the children she has borne him and to return to her original tribe. The couple's love for each other is not proof against the constant humiliations to which the woman is subjected by her husband's tribe because she is a prisoner-of-war and thus a slave.

Later Arabic literature developed the subjects of love, sex and marriage in several ways. The unfulfilled longing of lovers kept apart by family opposition, a theme first encountered independently in Umayyad literature, occurs in all periods of pre-modern Arabic poetry and prose, in both élite and popular expressions. The frequency of this theme is connected with its capacity to convey criticism of social norms and constraints, and to express the individual's longing for freedom. Erotic poetry developed in the pleasure-loving circles of the Hijazi aristocracy before moving to the 'Abbasid court in Baghdad. Depending on the poet's temperament and his (or occasionally her) milieu, this poetry could be witty, delicate or obscene. The early 'Abbasid period also saw the beginning of Islamic mystical poetry. The first to have composed in the genre is traditionally considered to be the poetess Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya, but the most sublime exploration of mystical love in Arabic is to be found several centuries later in the poetry of Ibn al-Fārid and Ibn 'Arabī.

In prose literature the many anecdotes about highly cultivated slave girls and their admirers reflect a society where the expression of love and sexuality had become a refined art practised by both men and women. Love stories abound, not only around ill-starred couples, often poets and their beloveds, but also around luckier young people whose adventures end happily, as the weddings which round off stories in the *Arabian Nights* show. Divorce, too, is not unknown in the anecdotal literature, though it tends to be a sudden occurrence, the husband simply being portrayed in the act of repudiating his wife. The increasing domestic disharmony which must often have preceded this moment is seldom represented, except in the telescoped and caricatural form of the lampoon. Only very rarely can the reality of married life be glimpsed, and then thanks to writers such as al-Jāhiz, whose interests extended beyond court circles to the urban middle class and who sought to explore the social reality they perceived around them. But indirect evidence that some profound attachments existed is provided by the stories of Nā'ila bint al-Farāfisa throwing herself between her husband, the caliph 'Uthmān, and his murderers, and Mahbūba risking her life for refusing to sing before the assassins of her master, al-Mutawakkil.

A series of treatises expresses the intellectual reflection in Arab-Islamic culture on the emotion that is so frequently at the heart of both poetry and narrative prose. Some treat it within the framework of the behaviour appropriate to those possessed of elegance and refinement; others—among them Ibn Hazm, whose *Tawq al-hamāma* [The Neck-ring of the Dove] is perhaps the only work of classical Arabic *belles-lettres* to have been widely translated into European languages—are much concerned with psychological, moral or religious aspects of love. Others again, such as the first half of Ibn

Dāwūd's *Kitāb al-zahra* [Book of the Flower], are essentially anthologies of fragments of love poetry.

It might have seemed natural for modern Arabic literature to use this rich indigenous heritage of writing on love as a starting-point for new explorations. But the élite literary tradition developed little during the Mamluk and Ottoman periods, creative vitality being channelled essentially into popular literature. It is only with the cultural contacts between Europe and the Arab world, which started in the seventeenth century and increased markedly in the nineteenth, that Arab intellectuals acquired the impetus to reformulate the foundation on which their literature should be constructed.

The first essay in this volume, by Boutros Hallaq, shows clearly the theoretical positions which informed the writing of four early, and crucial, reformers—al-Tahtāwī, al-Shidyāq, Jibrān and al-Manfalūṭī—and demonstrates the close connection between their attitude to literature and their portrayal of love. Hallaq also suggests an analogy between these pioneers and the Jena Romantics.

Rosella Dorigo Ceccato's essay is a useful reminder that while the early Arab Romantics were striving to create a new literature, popular theatre was continuing a much older tradition. This theatre is characterized by a frankness of expression and a concentration on the physical which can also be found in some élite classical literature but has been very rare in modern Arabic literature until recently. The reticence, and in some cases prudishness, of much writing about love and sexuality in the modern Arab world has generally been ascribed to the influence of Victorian England, but one may wonder whether such an explanation is sufficient, given that British influence was not felt everywhere in the Middle East, and also that a phenomenon as complex as changes in the literary representation of sexuality is unlikely to be due to one factor alone.

The first decades of the twentieth century saw powerful movements for political and social reform, including the emancipation of women and the triumph of Romanticism in literature. Robin Ostle's essay traces this evolution in Egypt, one of the centres of Arabic culture, concentrating particularly on poetry.

Cornelis Nijland discusses the representation of love in the periphery, among some Arab writers in North and South America. Interestingly, his choice of authors demonstrates how women and members of the religious minorities, long excluded from contributing to élite literature, early on rejoined the mainstream of literary activity.

But Romanticism was not the only influence at work in the portrayal of love and sexuality in fiction, as the two essays on Egyptian fiction in the first half of the twentieth century prove. In analysing love and sexuality in

Tawfīq al-Hakīm's novels, Paul Starkey shows a leading writer and thinker grappling with the dilemmas created for society and the (male) individual by the movement for women's emancipation. Ed de Moor's presentation of shorter fiction by writers of the Modern School and Yahyā Ḥaqqī makes clear that these early writers, who were familiar with the works of the French realists and naturalists and the Russian psychological realists, produced some far from idealized pictures of sexuality and eroticism. Indeed, one cannot help wondering whether there are not traces of the earthy humour of the shadow plays in some Modern School stories.

The short story has established itself as a major genre in modern Arabic literature, and since the Second World War it has become widespread all over the Arab world. Roger Allen draws on the immense variety of experiences portrayed by men and women from North Africa to the Gulf in his survey of the roles played by women in literature, from granddaughter to civil servant, and from mother without sons to wife abandoned during a civil war; these roles apparently cannot be separated from women's sexuality, at least in society's eyes. Allen stresses the importance of the innovations—both in theme and in technique—introduced into the genre by women writers.

Love as a revolt against social constraints and oppression, which is discussed in connection with the Romantic writers treated at the beginning of this volume, returns in Richard van Leeuwen's analysis of two major Egyptian works of fiction, Najīb Mahfūz's *Trilogy* and Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī's *al-Zaynī Barakāt*. Despite the differences between these books, they both portray love as incompatible with injustice and moral corruption, as a path to intellectual liberation and as an escape into a world where relations of power do not exist.

In the *Trilogy* it is the father, the patriarch, who embodies the system of power, and Hartmut Fähndrich examines other examples of mainly Egyptian and North African fiction where the father/husband represents authority within the family. Noting the tendency among Egyptian authors to portray family relationships as much warmer and more humane, and the fathers as less savagely authoritarian, than do their North African counterparts, Fähndrich asks whether this is evidence of two distinct regional traditions or styles, or whether different social and political conditions or individual visions lie behind the divergences.

The issue of regional distinctions is also raised by Susanne Enderwitz in her essay on the European woman in North African novels written in French. North African Francophone literature is the only significant body of texts produced in a foreign language in the Arab world and it differs from literature written in Arabic in several respects. Enderwitz notes an evolution

in the portrayal of the European woman by North African writers and shows that these women are generally more convincing than those who appear in Arabic fiction from the Mashreq dealing with relations between Europe and the Arab world.

The violence and repulsive imagery which at least one of Enderwitz's authors employs when writing of sex are paralleled by certain passages in Egyptian fiction of the 1980s. Stephan Guth relates this phenomenon, and also the treatment of formerly taboo subjects such as incest and paedophilia, to a new understanding of realism among Egyptian writers. Perverted forms of sex in their work represent situations of emotional frustration, and they can also be read as an accusation levelled against a harsh, economically oppressive society that does not permit its members a normal life.

In modern Iraqi literature, the association of sex with violence—and in particular the theme of cleansing a family's honour through the killing of any woman member who transgresses the code of relations between the sexes—goes back much earlier, as Wiebke Walther's contribution indicates. The recurrence of the theme may be connected with the influence exerted by tribal values in Iraqi society. But Walther's discussion of Fu'ād al-Tikirlī's work shows how a leading Iraqi author has evolved from simply criticizing social attitudes to sexuality, especially women's sexuality, to using the portrayal of relations between the sexes as a means of expressing rejection of paralysing traditions and political injustice. Al-Tikirlī's most recent work shares the same aims as the texts discussed by Guth.

Another example of the centrality of sexuality is provided by a recent novel of a leading Palestinian writer, Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā. Though sexuality here exhibits none of the abnormalities noted by Guth and Walther, Mattityahu Peled's analysis shows that it is also being employed to reveal weaknesses in a society which the novel's author considers gravely flawed. In addition, the radical change in the hero's sexual behaviour reflects the transition in his life from Palestine to the prosperous milieu of the Baghdad bourgeoisie.

As already noted, one of the characteristics of modern Arabic literature is that it is an enterprise to which, in principle, both men and women can contribute. Sabry Hafez's discussion of the development of women's writing from feminine through feminist to female uses insights derived from the study of women's writing in Europe to trace the different stages in the evolution of a specific consciousness among women of their role in creating Arabic literature.

One of the authors he refers to, Laylā al-'Uthmān, is the subject of the following essay: Angelika Rahmer focuses on the themes of this Kuwaiti author's fiction and shows that her strongly developed sense of women's

oppression goes hand in hand with a deep concern for the direction in which modern Kuwaiti society is developing and an awareness of the injustice meted out to other disadvantaged groups, such as the Palestinians.

Much of Miriam Cooke's essay on Iraqi war literature is also devoted to the discussion of the work of a woman writer, Lutfiyya al-Dulaymī. The texts which Cooke analyses all portray sexuality against the background of a country at war, where death is ever-present; they put sexuality in a new perspective.

The last two essays focus on poets and poetry. Nizār Qabbānī is one of the most important and popular Arab poets today, and he owes his reputation in the first place to his love poetry. Stefan Wild analyses his autobiography for the light it sheds on his attitudes to love and sexuality, discerning in it a genuine sympathy for the plight of many Arab women and a certain machismo, both inseparable from the process of poetic creation.

Finally, in a contribution inspired by a profound familiarity with Arabic poetry since the Second World War, As'ad Khairallah argues that physical love and the body have acquired a new prominence in the work of recent Arab poets, who have used such themes to express the rejection of socialist ideologies and to convey metaphysical, even mystical, aspirations. If this essay is juxtaposed with the two introductory ones, it will become clear what enormous changes have occurred in sensibility and literary expression in the last hundred years of Arabic literature.

The authors of the essays in this volume had at their disposal a number of earlier studies devoted largely to love and sexuality in modern Arabic literature, such as the Egyptian critic Ghālī Shukrī's pioneering *Azmat al-jins fī 'l-qissa al-'arabiyya* [The Crisis of Sex in the Arabic Short Story], the Lebanese Jūrj Tarābīshī's inquiries into the symbolism of women and femininity, Charles Vial's and Tāhā Wādī's analyses of the representation of women in Egyptian fiction and Miriam Cooke's *War's Other Voices: Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War*.¹ *Love and Sexuality in Modern Arabic Literature* is intended as a further contribution to the investigations first undertaken by these scholars.

As will have become clear, however, the essays presented here do not cover the whole range of modern Arabic literature. Fiction, in particular from the very recent past, receives preferential treatment compared with poetry and especially drama. Popular literature has not been given the attention it deserves. Certain countries, for instance Sudan, with a fascinating author like al-Tayyib Ṣāliḥ, or the states of the Arabian peninsula, have been mentioned little, if at all. To some extent this is the result of chance, but it also seems to reflect tendencies in the research now being carried out in

Europe to concentrate on certain countries and genres. An awareness of this fact may encourage researchers to move out into less familiar territory—a development which would be very welcome.

But while this book does not pretend to offer a complete survey of love and sexuality in modern Arabic literature, it indicates certain constants in their treatment. The search for love is intimately connected with the individual's desire for freedom and fulfilment, while the frank affirmation of sexuality, of whatever kind, represents a challenge to a rigid and hypocritical social order. In both cases the act itself cannot be separated from its expression, and innovative attitudes to love and sexuality are bound up with literary renewal. Above all, the writer who takes up these issues knows that his or her handling of them is a social act, implicating the whole community. Much more than in most West European literatures, discussions of love and sexuality in modern Arabic literature are intricately connected with ideas about society and the individual's place in it. They are central to contemporary Arabic culture.