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DIPARTIMENTO DI STUDI ORIENTALI

DESIRE, PLEASURE AND THE TABOO:
NEW VOICES AND FREEDOM
OF EXPRESSION IN CONTEMPORARY
ARABIC LITERATURE

EDITED BY
SOBHI BOUSTANI, ISABELLA CAMERA D'AFFLITTO,
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PREFACE

Taboo: As originally used in Polynesia, Melanesia, New Zealand, etc.: Set apart for or consecrated to a special use or purpose; restricted to the use of a god, a king, priests, or chiefs, while forbidden to general use; prohibited to a particular class (esp. to women), or to a particular person or persons; inviolable, sacred; forbidden, unlawful; also said of persons under a perpetual or temporary prohibition from certain actions, from food, or from contact with others. [OED]

BOTH the intention and scope of Arabic creative writing from the pre-modern (classical) period to the present have always assumed, in common with the great literatures of the world, a duality of artistic creativity and concern for the human condition. From the essays of the 9th century Basran belle-lettrist, al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 869) and the 10th century Baghdadi poet Ibn al-Ḥajjāj (d. 1001), whose essays and verses include caustic humour, biting satire, and scatological parodies to challenge the 'bourgeois' conventions of their own societies, to the treasure trove of stories that eventually found their way into the compilations that have come to be known as the *Thousand and One Nights*, Arab poets and storytellers have broken free of literary and cultural conventions in their quest to create new discursive spaces to express themselves. What has come down to us throughout the ages is a corpus of literature that has expanded and continues to expand, not only its own generic boundaries but also those of prevailing social morality, with the aim of telling the Arabic story in all its richness and complexity.

The project of modern Arabic literature, to which this present volume adds its critical perspectives, is deeply rooted in this duality of artistic creativity and concern for the human condition. From the early stages of the Arabic Renaissance of the 19th century, the quest for social justice by means of artistic innovation has been a hallmark of writers and poets who continue to break new ground in broadening the confluences of art and politics. From the satires of 'Abdallāh al-Nadīm (d. 1896) and the globe-trotting travelogue of the great ironist, Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq (d. 1887), to the romantic historical novels of Jurjī Zaydān (d. 1914), Arab writers throughout the 20th, and now in the 21st century, continue to write along similar and new lines.

The present volume brings together an exciting collection of critical studies that explore the ways in which contemporary Arab writers deal with religious, political, social, sexual and aesthetic taboos. In keeping with the long revered tradition of "social consciousness" that imbues the Arabic literary text, our writers represented here continue to observe, explicate, critique, and archive a wide range of human activity that reflects the fears, hopes and aspirations of peoples and nations held in check by the powerful forces of clan and family, mosque and church, state and government. The texts we read

reflect a wide range of artistic expressions that bring together conventions and subversions of novel and short story, poetry and theatre, mythology and biography, as well as comics – all written against the historical realities of rapid change, physical and psychological displacement, identity crises, military invasions and civil wars, political upheavals, social injustice and sexual suppression: all the markings of the human condition in our contemporary world.

The volume has been divided into two sections, the first being “Political and Religious Taboos in Contemporary Arabic literature”. Here authors deal with sensitive socio-political topics such as censorship in modern Arabic literary works (from the 20th century to present day), as well as the breaking of taboos at different levels.

In the second section, “Sexual and Other Pleasures in Contemporary Arabic Literature”, authors tackle the boundaries of sexual taboos and the research of all kinds of pleasure, from the sexual to the hedonistic, in some recent novels and poems.

Whereas in the past scholars focused their studies mainly on Egypt, Syro-Lebanese and the Maghreb (North Africa) countries, today, modern literary Arabic studies have expanded from the centre to the peripheries of the Arab World, towards countries, such as those of the Arabian Peninsula, that nowadays are of increasing interest.

This volume, which contains the proceedings of the 9th International Congress of EURAMAL (European Association for Modern Arabic Literature), held at Sapienza University of Rome (16th to the 19th of June 2010), wishes therefore to contribute to the search for new paths in contemporary Arabic literature.

It is, above all, the will to write and be creative, and the urge to change, that give this volume its purpose and timeliness.

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POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS TABOOS IN CONTEMPORARY ARABIC LITERATURE