

ARAB STUDIES JOURNAL
VOL. XXIV, NO. 2

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THE TROUBLE OF LOVE IN THE ARAB WORLD: ROMANCE, MARRIAGE, AND THE SHAPING OF INTIMATE LIVES

By Corinne Fortier, Aymon Kreil, and Irene Maffi
Special Section of the *Arab Studies Journal*

The word love has many definitions, and the concept embraces a wide range of feelings. Family, God, nature, the nation, the army, or a pet animal can be objects of human love. Political leaders evoke love to foster feelings of belonging or solidarity. Preachers remind people of the love they owe to their god(s). Artists describe moments of bliss and sorrow alike in terms of love. This special section in *Arab Studies Journal* focuses on how heterosexual couples construct and mobilize love in Jordan, Egypt, and Syria. The articles explore how social, political, and economic constraints shape local expressions of this emotion.

In much writing on international politics, affective relations between couples seem to matter mainly for their impact on demography. There are strong hints of crypto-colonialism¹ in approaches to relations between the Middle East and the West that are tainted by the assumption that Middle

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Easterners' reproduction may cause an overflow of Muslims into Western countries. Islamophobia is on the rise, and the recent refugee crisis triggers fears of cultural invasion.² Some authors also call for a "sexual revolution"³ in the Arab world liberating individuals from traditional ties. In its current shape, however, "sexual democracy"⁴ sets the West as a superior model and justifies imperial politics.⁵ Such discourses appeal to teleological and ethnocentric conceptions of love according to which "there is a historical sequence of 'progressively more loving society.'"⁶ By contrast, Middle Easterners appear as if they are trapped in sexual and affective repression. Yet, though romantic love is culturally coded and expressed,⁷ it is by no means an exclusively Euro-American discourse.⁸ This section of *Arab Studies Journal* departs from these Euro-American narratives to inscribe the emotional relations in Arab countries in their specific contexts and in the intricacies of individual experiences.

As elsewhere, reform of the family has long been part of public debate in the Middle East.⁹ Since the nineteenth century, these reform projects have been a battlefield for competing conceptions of cultural authenticity and modernity, and a means of drawing borders between cultures and moral orders.¹⁰ New conjugal models were central to these modernizing projects in the Middle East. The prevalence of monogamous heterosexual couples with few children still appears to many commentators to be a necessary condition for social progress.¹¹ As the articles of this section show, kinship logics, cultural conceptions, economic constraints, and political regimes are crucial to determining available models of love and patterns of feeling. But public debates afford only limited insight into the intimate dilemmas that love generates.

Senses of community, affective bonds and duties to the family, and individual attractions often collide. In the name of love, people sometimes temporarily reverse hierarchies of norms and gender roles, putting their personal feelings over other considerations, as Corinne Fortier shows in her work on Mauritania, where the beloved woman in poetry is the mistress, not the wife.¹² Most often, people eventually seek reasonable compromises between social conformity and individual desires when it comes to marriage. Referring to Egypt, Samuli Schielke explains that "nowhere else are the conflicts and contradictions of romantic love, sexual mores, respect, and family connectivity as strong and as urgent as they are in the struggle

to bring love and marriage together.”¹³ Marriage, in this regard, appears as an act of force or of reason to solve inherent dilemmas, either by imposing a partner’s choice to the parents or to the person to be married, or by seeking for a reasonable compromise between imperatives of love, status, alliance, and norms of respect. As such, Schielke shows, local discourse links marriage to destiny (*nasib*) as it involves coping with contradictory demands beyond the grasp of individuals.¹⁴

The selected articles for this special section complicate the narrative of love and marriage as products of destiny. Fida Adely explores how young people in Jordan assess compatibility (*insijam*) to cope with the uncertainties of love. Caution against romantic love prevails among Adely’s interviewees. Compatibility criteria permit rationalizing the choice of marriage partners, whether for themselves or for relatives. These criteria include religious affiliation and class, as well as a desire for mutual understanding that is more elusive. “Fate does not mean we should not think or act,” as one of Adely’s interviewees puts it. On the basis of her inquiry, Adely reassesses the meaning of love and the conditions it requires.¹⁵

Aymon Kreil’s article on Valentine’s Day in Egypt focuses on the economic dimensions of romantic love. Valentine’s Day owes its recent success in Egypt to the circulation of Western imaginaries through the media, coupled with the availability of affordable gifts due to trade with China. Thus, commercial romantic models reach broad markets through new consumption habits. The economic constraints of marriage often foil romantic aspirations, however. Two definitions of true love compete—the impossible love and the silent love born of conjugal union. Kreil questions linear representations of generational change by highlighting the alternation of age roles among the same individuals.¹⁶

Rebecca Joubin analyzes the gender and love politics of Syrian television series produced since the start of the 2011 uprising and subsequent civil war. These television dramas unequivocally address love and sexual egalitarian models. Previously, the series used the figure of the “tough man” (*qabaday*) as a means of indirect critique of the authoritarian regime. Since the uprising, however, television series alternate between critique of the self-destructive impotence of society, escapism influenced by Gulf funding, and narratives of resilience that center around dishonored women. As Joubin shows, far from being trapped in pre-existing models of national honor, love

and sexuality in television series provide a space for reimagining social ties.

Over the last decade, anthropologists have developed an increased interest in love as a phenomenon, encompassing strong symbolic, sexual, affective, religious, political, and economic dimensions.¹⁷ This trend resonates in recent anthropology of the Middle East.¹⁸ As recently as 2012, however, Lara Deeb and Jessica Winegar commented that “there is little research on love, an emotion with extraordinary elaboration in regional popular culture.”¹⁹ The articles in this special section demonstrate the value of sound ethnographic research on love and marriage. By exploring public debates, specific sociocultural contexts, and intimate dilemmas, Adely, Kreil, and Joubin depart from conceptions of romantic love as a transcendent force roaming through history. They puncture ossified conceptions of love and marriage as a set of rigid institutions predetermined by unchanging culture. They emphasize instead the fluidity and variety of ideas and experiences of love and marriage that people reformulate through daily practice.

NOTES

- 1 We borrow this term from Michael Herzfeld, "The Absence-Presence: Discourses of Crypto-Colonialism," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (2001).
- 2 Raphaël Liogier, *Le mythe de l'islamisation: Essai sur une obsession collective* (Paris: Seuil, 2012).
- 3 Shereen El-Feki, *Sex and the Citadel: Intimate Life in a Changing Arab World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2013); Mona Eltahawy, *Headscarves and Hymens: Why the Middle East Needs a Sexual Revolution* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2015).
- 4 Éric Fassin, "La démocratie sexuelle et le conflit des civilisations," *Multitudes* 26, no. 3 (2006).
- 5 Judith Butler, "Sexual Politics, Torture, and Secular Time," *British Journal of Sociology* 59, no. 1 (2008).
- 6 John R. Gillis, "From Ritual to Romance: Toward an Alternative History of Love," quoted in David Lipset, "Modernity Without Romance? Masculinity and Desire in Courtship Stories Told by Young Papua New Guinea Men," *American Ethnologist* 31, no. 2 (2004), 208.
- 7 William R. Jankowiak and Edward F. Fisher, "A Cross-Cultural Perspective on Romantic Love," *Ethnology* 31, no. 2 (1992).
- 8 Lipset, "Modernity Without Romance?"
- 9 Bettina Dennerlein, "Writing Against Islamic Dramas: Islamisches Familienrecht neu denken," *Asiatische Studien/Etudes asiatiques* 64, no. 3 (2010); Frances Hasso, *Consuming Desires: Family Crisis and the State in the Middle* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011); Kenneth M. Cuno, *Modernizing Marriage: Family, Ideology, and Law in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Egypt* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2015).
- 10 Lila Abu-Lughod, *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- 11 Hasso, *Consuming Desires*; Abu-Lughod, *Remaking Women*.
- 12 Corinne Fortier, "Séduction, jalousie et défis entre hommes: Chorégraphie des affects et des corps dans la société maure," in *Corps et affects*, ed. Françoise Héritier and Marguerite Xanthakou (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2004).
- 13 Samuli Schielke, *Egypt in the Future Tense: Hope, Frustration, and Ambivalence Before and After 2011* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 94.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 93-101.
- 15 It is worth noting here that a very similar discourse about partners' compatibility is evident in the work of Eva Illouz in the United States. She shows how compatibility and the "work of love" are necessary to ensure a longstanding and happy couple. Eva Illouz, "The Lost Innocence of Love: Romance as a Postmodern Condition," *Theory, Culture & Society* 15, no. 3-4 (1998).
- 16 Kimberly Hart comes to a similar conclusion in her study of a Turkish rural village where a discourse on modern subjectivity related to romance and love marriages is adjusted to other local logics creating a variety of arrangements and compromises. Kimberley Hart, "Love by Arrangement: The Ambiguity of 'Spousal Choice' in a Turkish Village," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13, no. 2 (2007).
- 17 See, for instance, Holly Wardlow and Jennifer S. Hirsch, *Modern Loves: The Anthropology of Romantic Courtship and Companionate Marriage* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006); William R. Jankowiak, *Intimacies: Love and Sex Across Cultures* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Mark B. Padilla et al., *Love and Globalization:*

Transformations of Intimacy in the Contemporary World (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2008); Jennifer Cole and Lynn M. Thomas, *Love in Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

- 18 See, for instance, Matthew Carey, “‘The Rules’ in Morocco? Pragmatic Approaches to Flirtation and Lying,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2, no. 2 (2012); Aymon Kreil, “Love Scales: Class and Expression of Feelings in Cairo,” *La Ricerca folklorica* 69 (2014); Schielke, *Egypt in the Future Tense*, 83-104; Laura Menin, “The Impasse of Modernity: Personal Agency, Divine Destiny, and the Unpredictability of Intimate Relationships in Morocco,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 21, no. 4 (2015); Luca Nevola, “Love, Mobile Phones, and the Codification of Intimacy in Contemporary Yemen,” and Senni Jyrkiäinen, “Online Presentation of Gendered Selves Among Young Women in Egypt,” both in *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 9, no. 2 (2016).
- 19 Lara Deeb and Jessica Winegar, “Anthropologies of Arab-Majority Societies,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41, no. 1 (2012): 550.