

LOVE POEMS
SOUAD M. AL SABAH



DAR SOUAD AL SABAH



Translated by
Mohammed Ali Harfouch

Edited by

M.M.Enani

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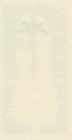
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Introduction

These are universal love poems, representing an attempt to demolish the stone walls separating the female from her femininity, and denying woman's fundamental rights of breathing, speaking, and above all living. While women's right of free speech is objectionable, detestable, and unacceptable in strictly male-dominated societies, talking about love is a horrendous scandal and punishable crime.

Over the ages, the female voice has been associated with the notions of shame, chastity, and protected honour, so much so that some zealots and puritans have regarded woman's voice as a shameful 'part' not to be exposed in public.

Women have had to engage in a protracted struggle in order to regain their confiscated voice and to end a long era of silence and have now re-activated their larynx, rusty due to lack of training and use.

Silencing woman's voice and placing it under "protection" has made Arab society speak through only one voice, that of the male with its hoarse, salty and metallic tones.

Thus her music has never known half-tones and quarter-notes. The chorus sung by the all-male choir remains an unfinished symphony.

By the turn of the 20th century, the Arab woman started to gradually discard the veil imposed upon her face, but the one suppressing her voice was only partially removed. Despite gaining access to knowledge and education, and expanding her intellectual horizons, she only managed to express her point of view in compromised language, voice and freedom.

Despite all its radical transformations, Arab society still regards the female voice as siren song conspiring to overthrow men's influence and power, and views the outspoken woman as an odd, aberrant creature, who must be cured with drugs and antibiotics.

Thus woman's mouth has remained officially sealed with sealing wax, only capable of sipping water and devouring food, a privilege, instinctively, enjoyed by all animals.

Love is a game played by a couple: a man and a woman. Why should the man exclusively hold all the love cards, denying the woman any chance to join the game and have a go?

Why can a man, stricken by passion's spell, say "I love you" to a woman, while she has no right to respond, even when drenched by love's gentle rain, in a rather warmer, sweeter, and more genuine style?

While biological equality is impossible, why can't we achieve a passionate equality at least, given that love is a human

feeling shared by both males and females, which allows no room for social or sexual discrimination?

In this verse-collection, I have attempted to accomplish a sort of "emotional socialism" free of any feudal, tribal, or dogmatic thought and, as a female, to restore my right to express my emotions toward my beloved, feeling no inferiority, no oppression, and no violation of public moral codes.

Overwhelming love has never been a violation of noble values or public morality. It is a fundamental right, the same as waves breaking on the shore, lightning flashing, and birds singing. Why am I denied the right to be a wave, a clap of thunder, a female bird singing under the beloved's window, without being shot dead by the hunters' guns?

Since time immemorial, man has written verse in praise of woman, yet never left her a slight margin of freedom that enables her to reciprocate in equal measure. The initiative in love, as well as the legal, political, economical, and cultural privileges, have all always been man's business..

In our poetic tradition, a handful of women did actually break this monopoly: the Andalusian poetess Walladah Bint Al-Mustakfy who declared her love, and courageously revealed her r amorous cards. However, female love-poems mostly remained shy, hesitant, and fearful of social ostracism and tribal daggers.

Despite its features of modernity, cultural openness, and exposure to the outside world, Arab society still vetoes the

loving women viewing her as a firebrand, whose expression of love offends public sensibilities and national security.

The main question I would like to raise in this respect is: what has national security to do with a woman's heart, desires, dreams, and legitimate and genuine female feelings? I would also like to ask: why isn't the loving man considered a threat to national security and his love poems a threat to social stability and peace?

If we believe in democracy as a basis for our political systems, why don't we implement democracy in love relations? And why do we maintain sexual discrimination against the loving woman and in favour of the loving man?

These are love poems, through which I attempt to establish a "democracy of love" whereby the man and the woman are equal in their freedom of expression, the man has no monopoly over erotic rhetoric and the woman never remains a passive listener to love songs, played, day and night, by the man.

Woman has words of love which have been suppressed for thousands of years, which she wants to say. Allow her to let her fount of emotion flow, and to release the thousands of captive birds off chest.

Let her remove the padlock from her mouth, and say to her beloved, "I love you", without being slaughtered by the road side like a hen.

For one time in history, let her know the equality of love and breathe the air of freedom.

Souad Al-Sabah

Love Poem 1

Addressing this letter to you,
I expect no reply.
Your reply hardly matters.
My lines are the heart of the matter
To me, writing dialogue,
Before my dialogue with you.
I can recall your memory
Regardless of your physical presence.
I can also stroke your body,
Though it's not by my side.

Don't delude yourself that I'm an
Idealist,
A mystic,
Or a woman as cool as a cucumber.
However, on paper
I draw your facial features
As I like,
And reshape them at ease,
And flirt with them at ease.

I'm writing
To divert my internal floods
That have devastated all my dams.
To get rid of this extra electric charge,
Burning my nerves.
Of these lightning bolts,
Flashing in my veins,
Finding no outlet.

I drop you a line

Not to satisfy your vanity, as you might think,

But rather to celebrate -for the first time-

My birth as a woman in love.

And to let my emotions explode in the face of the world.

Writing

Takes me to an artificial paradise

I cannot enter,

Gives me liberty

I can never enjoy,

Makes me azure isles

I can never reach.

To you, writing

Is a safety valve preventing my explosion.

The only boat I board

When the storm chews me up.

I'm writing,
To defend every inch of my femininity,
Occupied by colonial forces,
Yet to pull out.
Writing is my weapon
To crack what I cannot break:
Medieval castles,
The walls of forbidden cities,
And the guillotines of the Inquisition.

I am writing
To get rid of myriad squares and circles
Restricting my thought,
To emerge from the belt of pollution
That has poisoned all rivers
And beliefs,
And aborted thousands of books
And intellectuals.

I'm writing to you,
Or to somebody else,
Or to any man at all.
I want to tell the paper
What I can never reveal to others.
Those others
Have been scheming against femininity
Over the past fifteen centuries.
I want to hack a hole in the flesh of the sky.
My city
Only likes to listen to cock-crows,
Steeds whinnying
And fighting bulls bellowing.

I'm writing
To have a short break from my masks,
From the olive-and-cheese bundle,*
Carried on my mother's head,
Ever since her breasts appeared.

I'm eager to spill the beans:
It is incredible,
That I should love you so fantastically,
Yet have to keep my secret like a fetus in my womb
For fifteen centuries.

• An image of subordination: the Arab woman brings her husband the meal to the field.

I am writing
To get rid of myriad squares and circles
Restricting my thought,
To emerge from the belt of pollution
That has poisoned all rivers
And beliefs,
And aborted thousands of books
And intellectuals.

Yet a woman

Writes

In the same way she would deliver a baby,

With the same enthusiasm

She would breast-feed a baby.

The man writes during his leisure time.

The woman during her fertility,

When impregnated with lightning,

And tropical fruits.

Like a mare,
I'll go on neighing upon my papers,
Until I have bitten into the globe,
Like a red apple.

Love Poem 2

Like the formation of April,
Tree by tree,
Bird by bird,
Carnation by carnation,
Your hands are shaping my femininity.
The more you love me
And care about me,
My forest sprouts more leaves,
My heights become higher,
My lips get thicker,
My hair gets wilder.

I owe you

All my almonds,

Plums,

And apples.

Owe you all my regional diversity,

All this richness in my fruits.

Owe you,

Every grain of wheat that grows out of my eye-lashes,

Every fabulous pearl

Found in my bays.

I owe you

All my almonds,

Plums,

And apples.

Owe you all my regional diversity,

All this richness in my fruits.

Owe you,

Every grain of wheat that grows out of my eye-lashes,

Every fabulous pearl

Found in my bays.

My femininity takes shape in your hands
As a rainbow does:
A patch of green,
A patch of blue,
A patch of orange.
When you have finished my portrait,
Through your lips I emerge
As wet as a rose,
As transparent as a lyric.

Into the realm of civilization you usher me in,
Then give me a cushioned upbringing,
Like a spoiled Turkish cat,
Who sleeps all day,
And hides in your arms throughout the night,
Unwilling to venture into the street,
In fear of love-affairs
With alley toms,
Whereby she might lose her blue blood,
Royal descent,
And the right of staying with you!

Love Poem 3

Your voice reminds me
Of the rain,
Your gray eyes
Of the September sky,
Your sorrows
Of migrating birds,
Your face
Of my childhood's prairies,
Your smell
Of the coffee in Rome's cafes.

What can I do for you?

You the man

With lips chapped by sea-salt,

Who has been hunted by pirate ships,

And whose body was scattered across every continent.

What can I do for you?
Traveler!
From one diaspora into another.
Drowning in waves of black ink,
Crucified on writing-paper,
Wanted dead or alive,
By all third world dictators.

I want to slip through
Your open shirt,
And open wound,
Become part
Of your anguish,
Of your distress,
Of your beautiful death.

I want to slip through
Your open shirt,
And open wound,
Become part
Of your anguish,
Of your dizziness,
Of your beautiful death.

What can I do for you?
Traveler
From one diaspora into another.
Drowning in waves of black ink.
Crucified on writing-paper.
Wanted dead or alive.
By all third world dictators.

I'd like to go with you

To the ultimate madness,

To the ultimate challenge,

To the ultimate in my femininity.

I'd like to board your ship,
Bound for no seaports,
No islands,
Never anchoring anywhere.
I'd like to hide you in my breast
When the winds blow
And the storm rages
So that I either survive
Or drown with you.

Love Poem 4

Time and again I ask myself
Childish questions without answers:
Am I your beloved?
Your mother?
Your queen?
Your slave?
Myself?
Yourself?

The motherly feeling in me
Swamps all other sentiments,
So why am I so deeply concerned about you?
Why do I spontaneously stretch out my hand
To put a woolen scarf round your neck
And button up your leather coat,
Before you go out?

Why, every time I visit Khan El-Khalili",*

Do I buy all these Ancient Egyptian charms

And folkloric amulets,

To ward off

The frost of winter

And the chill of blue eyes? **

* Famous traditional market in old Cairo. Title of a novel by the Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz.

** In Arabic folkloric traditions, blue eyes are harmful.

My maternal feeling toward you
Makes me do silly things
Quite against my dignity.
Sometimes I get an epiphany
And decide to cut you nails.
At some moments of overwhelming infatuation,
It occurs to me to dry your hair.
And you submit,
Gentle as a dove.

Sometimes I get carried away;

I bring you the shampoo,

And wait,

Until I have made you feel

Like an emperor.

At particular moments of madness,
I contemplate kissing you
With your face covered in shaving cream.
At moments of socialist realism
I use your toothbrush
To give you the feeling that
My mouth and yours
Are a collective farm.

You little dictator

Cunningly taking advantage of my tenderness,

And weaknesses.

You sadistic child,

You play on my nerves

As you might play with a paper plane.

You messy child,
Who gave me such a hard time,
Who gave me so much happiness.
I won't punish you,
For the utensils you've smashed,
For the curtains you've set on fire,
For the house cat you've throttled.
I'll never blame you for all this nice carnage
You've brought into my life.
Rather I blame my motherhood!

Having decided to punish you,
And, alone, leave for Paris,
I never thought I was going to punish myself,
And commit the silliest folly of my life.
It never crossed my mind that Paris would
Reject me alone;
That street lamps,
News kiosks,
And park statues
Would ridicule me,
And that the Paris Municipality would request my deportation
For violating the tenets of the French constitution.

The magnificent symmetry of Paris
Never accepts a woman having supper alone,
A flower blossoming alone,
Or a cloud raining alone.
Paris is a musical duet,
A lovely poem,
Written by a man. And a woman.

Why didn't I read Parisian history
Before embarking on my visit?
Why didn't I appreciate its architecture?
Its emotional architecture.
Why didn't I recognize
That all its streets
Are paved with love-stones?
That every tulip in its parks
Is a love letter?

That each of its statues
Is carved by the hand of love?
And each dress displayed in its shop windows
Designed in the name of love?
Why didn't I respect the conventions of this splendid city
That gave the world
Its first love lessons?
Why did I break its symmetry,
Its harmony,
And became the one false note
In this grand concerto?

I draw back my room curtains on a Paris

That I cannot recognize.

Is this the same Paris I knew while in

Your company

Or is it Bangladesh?

Is this Place Vendome

Or my execution site?

Is this the fountain of the Place de la Concorde

Or my tears?

Is this the great Arc de Triumph

Or the monument to my defeat?

I go out onto the balcony to refresh my memory.

Is this the city of Eluard and Aragon,

Baudelaire and Rimbaud,

Or is it Hiroshima?

Is it the same Paris which I explored with you,

Street by street,

Bookshop by bookshop,

Museum by museum,

Theatre by theatre?

Is this the true Paris

Where I was taught by you

How to explore the dimensions of my femininity

And of my liberty?

Never ask about my Parisian tour,
For it never took place
Nor were there tourists.
From Charles De Gaulle Airport
To my hotel room
And vice-versa,
Was the disappointing tour-programme.
- What did you do?
- Nothing!
- Did you buy new clothes?
- None whatsoever!
- Did you buy any bottles of perfume?
Not one!

- Whom did you join for dinner last Saturday night?
- Ghosts!
- Whom did you dance with?
- Ghosts.
- What did you do then?
- I cursed myself. Cursed you. Cursed
Voltaire, Rousseau, and Victor Hugo.
Shed a tear for the heavenly martyr to love,
My friend Marie Antoinette.

I rang the bell,
And ordered dinner for one.
The waiter cast a pitying look at me,
And said in extreme courtesy
And impeccable French:
"My lady!
A woman with your dark eyes
Never dines alone in our city.
This is an affront to Parisian traditions,
And manners."
Then he closed the door,
Vanishing down the dark corridor.

I tried to watch T.V.
Celebrations, commemorating the bicentennial
Of storming the Bastille,
Were in progress.
Who will storm my jail
And set me free
From the chilling room?
Who will open the bottle of my annoyance and let me out?

The *Paris Match* left on my bed
Tries to break my loneliness,
And engage me in an intimate chat.
I decline the offer.
"Sorry, I'm fed up with travels."
Then I burst into tears.

I tried to give you a ring

From a telephone box in the Sixieme Arrondissement

To say:

"You're my king. My beloved. The sun of my days."

But gave up.

I tried to shout the top of my voice,

"I Love You!"

And cry till I had no more tears.

But gave up.

I tried to say:

"The weekend I

Have spent away from you

Became a dagger in my heart,

And an ache furrowing my brow"

But I feared your arrogance would multiply,

And your ego

Would become inflated,

Leaving me hanging alone

On the ropes of my grievances.

I was going to call you and say

"Take the first night flight to Paris

And end my dilemma."

Baguette is uneatable without you

Espresso is undrinkable without you

Le Monde is unreadable without you.

The Eiffel Tower has lost its physical fitness,

Becoming hunch-backed,

Napoleon Bonaparte packed up his bags

And left the Invalides,

The Fifth Republic no longer raises its flags.

I was going to confess
I had been lonely in Paris
To the point of pain,
Lost to the point of pain,
Missing you to the point of pain.
Yet I feared you would gloat over my misery,
And dance upon my ashes.

I was going to seek shelter in the woods of your voice,
Hoping it would save me the frost piercing my bones.
I wanted to clutch at your hands,
To regain my stability.
Without you I'm a wounded bird,
And a sinking boat,
But I feared you would bury me
In the snows of your indifference,
And hang up in my face.

I was going to tell you
The Parisian sky would rain on your raincoat only,
The "Mona Lisa" would smile only to you,
Notre Dame's bells would only toll upon your arrival,
The Latin Quarter Cafes,
The Louvre,
Pompidou Centre,
Would never be splendid without your presence.
I was going to disclose my secrets to you,
I feared, however, you would ridicule my thoughts
And hang up.

I was about to suggest
You invite me to that small restaurant
On the Rue d'Amsterdam,
Which transformed French cheese brands
Into a symphony.
I feared you would disappoint me
And let me go to sleep on an empty stomach.

My tour's most disturbing finding was that
Paris is on your side,
Not mine.
She neither welcomes me alone
Nor receives me with beautiful flowers at the airport,
Never visits me at the hotel,
Never invites me when I seek refuge in her domain alone.
She only appreciates us together.

Sir! You are manipulating my fates
In good measure,
Planning my travels as you wish.
I brought with me to Paris
A whole file
Detailing all your abuses, violations,
And sentimental crimes.
Yet Paris tore my documents into pieces
And backed you.

Love Poem 6

Climbing up the moon-roof
I pluck you a poem.
Climbing up the poem-roof
I pluck you a moon.
I climb up to spaces
Never navigated by a woman before.
I commit talk of love
Never perpetrated by Arab women before,
-And-I think- never will be again.

I am involved with you,
To the point of no return.
With you I walk with no umbrella
In the rains of scandal.
With you I go to the last dot in language
And to the last drop of my blood,
In order to be worthy of your love.

One thousand light-years I fly
To land on your shoulders.
At 32,000 feet I hover
To touch your hands.
Should I reach you in pieces,
Like a derailed train,
Please try to stitch my parts back together.

I defy the old script of femininity,
And invent my own
I identify the location of my lips, the colour of my eyes
As I wish.
Emerge from Antar Bin Shaddad's mantle*
And take up yours.
Run away from my camel-fur mattress,
And lie on the grass of your chest.
Emerge from the gorge of myth and the tribal chief's
Teeth,
From Arabic coffee-cups,
Off my feet and mind,
And join you in the realm of absolute freedom.

Arab legendary hero and poet in the Pre-Islamic Era.

You, man who can not be seen by the naked eye.

You, gypsy who married the sea

And suitcases,

Who held me hostage in the palm of his right hand,

And put the keys in his pocket,

I pretty well know

I'm betting on a man who will never exist,

And a horse that will never win.

You're as mysterious as legend.
As fluctuating as mercury.
Never mind if you don't materialize,
I'm digesting you in my dreams,
Like a fruit.
Thus sugar flows down the walls of my memory.
Never mind if you materialize.
In my loneliness I read your palm
And foretell my future,
Smell your manhood
Then give birth to twenty babies.

You, man who led me to the stage of
Evaporation and extinction,
I love you
With all the fluctuations and follies of the sea.
Never get fed up with my outbursts.
To me, moderation is the worst option,
Likewise moderate love
Is the worst sort of love.
The most timid poems are those
That find the middle ground.

You man, exhausted by your vanity,
And tired of your diversity,
I have no luck with you.
I either find you gluttoned with women,
Or gluttoned with poetry.
I either find you sleeping with a new woman
Or a new poem.

You, Phoenician sailor

Bound for no particular harbours,

Having no addresses,

No loyalties,

Take notice:

Your favourite hotels are always fully booked,

Your embrace is always fully booked.

I'm no good at waiting.

You, great actor

Killed by your stardom,

I have no hope of getting your autograph.

Always I arrive late

As the curtain falls

The lights go out,

And the audience leaves.

Love Poem 7

This letter is addressed to your hands,

Yes it is.

For they are more tender than you,

And more appreciative of women's nature,

Their secrets,

And inner worlds.

My relationship with your hands is
Old. Too old.
My admiration for them is old. Too old.
Ever since I saw them sitting alone,
At the Saint Germain Café in Paris,
One time talking with a *Gauloises* cigarette,
Another with *Le Figaro*,
Another with nothing.
Drawing lines and patterns in the air
That can only be understood
By an Arab woman
Loitering on the pavements of grief – Like me.

Your hands

Are the sandy beach I lie on,

When I am tempest-tossed.

They are two palm trees I shake,

When I am in labour,

Then they inundate me with ripe dates.

I'm writing this letter to your hands,
For I'm fed up with writing to you.
They celebrate my correspondence,
While you throw it into the litter bin.
They behave in a civilized manner,
You behave primitively.
They open one thousand doors for dialogue,
You close every door in my face.

I seek refuge in your strong hands,
When I find nobody to protect me.
I cover myself with their thick fur,
When there is nobody to cover me.
I resort to them,
When there is nobody to provide me with food and drink.

Through thick and thin
Your hands have always been my company.
They were also on my side,
When you thundered and lightened,
Behaving like a typical Arab leader,
Who gives no heed to the opposite view,
Opposite thought,
Opposite sex,
Or like any tribal chief who
Talks about consultation, diversity and open
Dialogue,
But never engages in a dialogue with anybody,
And asks for nobody's advice.

Your hands are two wonderful books

I read before going to bed.

They're dense forests,

Where I seek shelter when depressed.

They're the floating logs I clutch at

When I'm about to drown.

They're two fireplaces I lie by,

When a shiver goes through me.

With me your hands have always been

Two doves of peace.

When you and I quarreled,

They reconciled us.

When you made me cry

They dried my tears.

I visit your hands

When you're outside.

With them I sip the morning coffee.

To them I air my worries and concerns.

I hand them a whole file

Of love lawsuits

I have filed against you

And lost.

Your hands had been my friends,

Before I became your friend.

My relation with them

Is more deep-rooted, warmer, and

Nobler than my relation with you.

Should you decide to travel,

Take all your luggage,

And leave your hands with me.

I never confuse you

With your hands.

They're passive, you're aggressive.

They're tolerant, you're fanatical.

They're sophisticated, you're modestly educated.

They're like water, you're rigid.

I never confuse their modernity with your
backwardness.

Love Poem 8

Today is Saint Valentine's Day.

With due respect to all saints,

Darling! You're my only saint.

With all due respect to the splendour of this

Wonderful day,

You remain the maker of my history,

And master of my days.

It's up to the Europeans to claim their own saint,

It's up to me to seek mine.

They observe their own worship.

I have mine.

They take their saints' miracles seriously.

So do I take yours.

Today's Saint Valentine's Day.

I'll go to your temple, love,

To offer my sacrifices,

And burn my incense,

Then wash your feet in bitter orange perfume.

I have no other place to go.

All roads lead to you,

All pigeons fly to your chest,

All the world's lovers

Ask for your blessings,

And wait for your miracles.

Today is Saint Valentine's Day.
At stationery shops I'll look
For a pen to your taste,
For writing-paper that will tempt you to write,
For a briefcase to keep your papers,
For a frame to encapsulate my photo,
For a notebook to place in your jacket pocket,
Next to which you place me.
I'll look for everything
That will incite you to correspond
And flirt with me.

Today is Saint Valentine's Day.

We'll celebrate our tenth anniversary.

Can you put up with me for one more year?

Can you put up with my endless questions?

My endless contradictions?

My endless follies?

Can you for one more year resist

My crashing waves,

My impossible demands,

My passion, booby-trapped

With a thousand pounds of dynamite?

Today is Saint Valentine's Day.
I confess I have tired you out,
And you deserve a long vacation,
To restore your broken parts,
And racked nerves.
But where would you go without me?
I'm afraid you'll drown as you approach the sea.
I'm afraid the wolf will devour you
As you go to the forest.
I'm afraid you'll lose your virginity,
When you accompany professional women.

Saint! You who taught me
The alphabet of love,
From A to Z,
And painted me in the shape of a rainbow,
Between the earth and the sky.
Taught me the language of trees,
The language of rain,
The blue language of the sea,
I love you.
I love you.
I love you.

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