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### Love and Marriage in the Work of Abdul-Baki, Abu-Jaber, and al-Razzaz

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**Volume 16 Issue 3 (September 2014) Article 10**  
**Qusai A.R. Al-Debyan and Shadi S. Neimneh,**  
**"Love and Marriage in the Work of Abdul-Baki, Abu-Jaber, and al-Razzaz"**  
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**Abstract:** In their article "Love and Marriage in the Work of Abdul-Baki, Abu-Jaber, and al-Razzaz" Qusai A.R. Al-Debyan and Shadi S. Neimneh posit that love, marriage, and sexuality represent important aspects in Mu'nis al-Razzaz's 1997 novel *Alive in the Dead Sea*, Kathryn K. Abdul-Baki's 2000 novel *Ghost Songs: A Palestinian Love Story*, and Diana Abu-Jaber's 2003 short story "Madagascar." Issues of love, marriage, and sexuality in these texts suggest a rebellious attitude on the part of women protagonists against taboos of religion, politics, and sexuality and Abdul-Baki, Abu-Jaber, and al-Razzaz employ descriptions of sexual intimacy to reflect the social and political conditions of characters' lives. Al-Debyan and Neimneh argue that the narration of women's lives and women's attitudes toward love and marriage in the texts analyzed — written by two women and one male writer — reflect the emergence of a more open and liberal conception of gender relations in a changing Arab world.

## Qusai A.R. AL-DEBYAN and Shadi S. NEIMNEH

### Love and Marriage in the Novels of Abdul-Baki, Abu-Jaber, and al-Razzaz

In the introduction to *Woman's Body, Woman's Word*, Fedwa Malti-Douglas writes that "consciousness of gender and arguments about the roles of men and women ... have always been major and fully conscious preoccupations of Arab writers who have filled their literature with chapters and books on women, their roles, and problems, and the like" (6; on modern and contemporary Arab-language literatures see Allan, Kilpatrick, Moor; DiMeo <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1875>>; Nasser <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss3/12>>; on Arab American literature see Fadda-Conrey; Salaita; on Arab-Canadian literature see Dahab). We believe that this is true in a general context. However, the language used, the explicitness, the tones and intentions differ from writer to writer and from period to period. Arab novelists of the 1940s and 1950s represented sexual scenes by hints only and without graphic descriptions. This approach of allusion to sexuality seems not to have suited the themes and purposes of modern Arab writers. Further, according to Fahd Salameh modern Arab writers found in sexuality an expression of political and social phenomena where the narration of oppression and exploitation provided a paradigm of politics and society and that society and sexuality can thus be interchangeably employed to serve writers' ideological intentions (*The Jordanian Novel* 68-69).

In the texts we analyze in the study at hand, descriptions of sexuality are used to reflect on social and political conditions as a tool to rebel against social practices dominating Arab society and as a means of liberation and achieving more freedom. This attitude toward love and sexuality seems to be "progressive" for the writers who depict changing sexual mores in the Arab world as a result of openness to a global culture and to feminism as an international movement. In this regard, we should consider the fact that the authors whose work we analyze are one Arab writer writing in an Arab country and two others writing in the West: Kathryn Abdul Baki was born in the United States to a Palestinian father and a US-American mother and received US-American education, Diana Abu-Jaber was born to a Jordanian father and a US-American mother and also received education in the U.S., and Mu'nis al-Razzaz was born in Jordan and lived and worked most of his life there. Note that Abdul Baki and Abu-Jaber write within the canon of Arab American literature.

al-Razzaz writes in the experimental Western tradition of Anglo-American and European modernism (see, e.g., Salameh, "Alive" 32) and thus his relationship with a feminist perspective should neither seem odd nor new because "currently feminism is experiencing a flurry of male attention" (Eagleton 17). Therefore, our feminist critical approach is a combination of what Elaine Showalter calls "feminist critique" (as the analysis of works by male authors in terms of their depiction of women) and "gynocriticism" (see, e.g., Showalter). Most literary critics and scholars agree that the basic function of feminist criticism is studying how literature "reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women" (Tyson 83). For Jonathan Culler, feminist scholars "champion the identity of women, demand rights for women, and promote women's writings as representations of the experience of women" and they assume "a theoretical critique of the heterosexual matrix that organizes identities and cultures in terms of the opposition between man and woman" (122). In the study at hand, we explore how the works under consideration undermine, in one sense or another, structures of patriarchal power. In addition, we analyze in the texts a broad conception of gender relations as a "set of social relations that pervade many aspects of human experience from the constitution of the 'inner self' and family life to the 'public worlds'" (Flax 326).

The narration of love and sexuality between the protagonists in al-Razzaz's novel 1997 *Alive in the Dead Sea*, Abdul-Baki's 2000 novel *Ghost Songs: A Palestinian Love Story*, and Abu-Jaber's 2003 short story "Madagascar" shows aspects of the situation of women in Arab countries and their social, religious, and personal loci and situation and the situation and actions of Muslim men compared to that of Muslim women. We compare themes, characters, and values in the texts and contrast them to present our analysis about how perceptions about women and men are in the literature of the Arab world. We are aware that our take on said matters can run against conservative Muslim perceptions and practices including literary scholarship, but we hope that our thought would be not taken as an adoption or appropriation of Western values: instead, our objective is to analyze and promote a development toward Muslim women's emancipation towards self-realization on its own terms, as well as

Muslim men's recognition of the value of women's importance in social and personal spheres to men's own benefit.

Our first example of the intersections among love, marriage, and sexuality is al-Razzaz's novel *Alive in the Dead Sea*. The novel is a political text that abounds with symbolism, a political and social vision of a male writer: al-Razzaz "attempts to portray the real conditions in the Arab world through the eyes of an educated outsider. It is a world of political oppression, suppression through prisons, torture, sustained suffering and restriction of freedom, destruction, psychological and physical humiliation, rape and even murder ... The novels of Al-Razzaz are predominately a struggle for freedom against ruthless, intolerant and autocratic regimes. The outcome of the struggle is predictable, since there is no compatibility between the individuals who resist and the autocratic power that causes them" (*The Jordanian Novel* 91-92). We posit that women in particular can defy political oppression and female sexuality can be used to undermine power structures and expose the impotence of patriarchy to resist or, alternatively, to reinforce hegemonic powers. The mere fact that the work of Razzaz exposes the political exploitation of female sexuality endows his work with feminist potential. *Alive in the Dead Sea* shows how sex is used as a weapon against women. It also shows the narcissistic attitude of men toward women whereby sex is a weapon in men's hands for revenge and a means to humiliate a woman and her family.

al-Razzaz shows that some men — the Major and 'Inaad are his examples in the novel — believe that sex is a pleasure for the man only and the woman should be a passive recipient who does not have the right to enjoy sexuality (on this see also Hejaiej <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1573>>; Nasser <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss3/12>>; Olatunji <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2176>>). Suzy, the wife of the Major — he is the leader of a big political party — first dislikes and then hates her husband because of his selfishness. She is an educated woman who appreciates poetry and reads French literature. She chooses to marry the Major although she does not like his character and deplors many of his habits which she considers disgusting. She marries him because he represents power and because according to Arab society's rules her own status derives from the power and status of her husband. Thus Suzy's situation is a reflection of women's situation in Arab societies: once married, she has no identity and what identity she has is only a reflection of her husband's. However, Suzy rebels against her husband when he has an affair with 'Inaad and in the relationship she achieves sexual satisfaction she does not have with her husband and who instead of paying attention to her sexuality "begs me to talk to him in French while making love to me ... I relent after he insists ... He doesn't know one single French word. I hardly say two words, not even completing a meaningful sentence, when he climaxes and deserts me, barren. He leaves her alone on the bed in the middle of her trip through orgasm" (65, 169-70). Suzy's affair and thus the idea of sex as a tool of both sexual satisfaction lacking in marriage and hence revenge is a recurrent theme in the novel. However, Suzy discovers that she herself is no more than a tool used by 'Inaad who, in turn, wants to avenge himself on Suzy's husband and that is the sole reason of his affair with her. 'Inaad thus shows the same attitude the Major has toward women's sexuality and this becomes clear when during their intercourse 'Inaad rejects Suzy when he reaches his orgasm while she remains unsatisfied:

I opened my eyes after the satisfaction was complete. I saw the fire of desire still flickering in her eyes ... She trusted me completely and was not scared of my climaxing. But I moved away from her. I was stormed with disgust. I rolled on the bed leaving her unsatisfied desire in a waste land. I gave her my back and lit a cigarette. I smoked silently. I broke her. I stabbed her dignity ... My silence entered her like a scream ... I smoked my cigarette, disgusted and nauseated. We stayed like this for about an hour without uttering one single word ... Then she asked in a broken voice finally understanding my motive: You were leading me all along ... to take your revenge from the major? I turned deaf and dumb. She choked on the words, her eyes unmoving ... I wanted her to leave me and go, so that I could celebrate my victory alone. She said slowly in a voice that sounded broken: War is a trick? ... Do you want me to put on my clothes and leave? I did not utter one word. I did not turn around ... I just smoked. Silently, she slipped out of bed. She put on her clothes ... She said spitting her words: You're not any different from the Major ... a Bedouin beast ... and the biggest fool in the world ... She disappeared ... I heard her sobs. I got my revenge from the major by sleeping with his wife. (175-76)

'Inaad's feelings and behavior show how some men believe that sex is meant to satisfy his own want of pleasure only. We posit that in the novel the story of the Major, Suzy, and 'Inaad describes Arab men's "love" and its corollaries of politics and power whereby men's behavior suggests the "coloniza-

tion" of the female body. In particular, for many Muslim men to show and enact love and emotions to a woman is considered a weakness and this is suggested when Suzy's husband says that "love was not something to be proud of because it humiliated manliness" (125). Razzaz censures such attitudes and seems to be talking on behalf of women who are unable to criticize openly such behavior and attitudes. The Major is a political leader who has a position, privilege, authority, and status in his society and thus in the novel a representative character of a wide range of men in Arab societies whose behavior as leaders is thus questioned.

The narration of sexuality in *Alive in the Dead Sea* is also employed to describe and refer to it in a negative context, namely in torture and punishment. Mariam, who is an educated woman, understands the core of the Oriental approach towards women's rights and social position and criticizes it. She is a revolutionary woman, both in social and political terms. When she is tortured for her political activism against Israeli occupation by the Arab police, she says that "They didn't rape me in Asqalan prison only ... but also in another Arab prison ... In both prisons, they looked at sex from the same point of view" (105). At one point 'Inaad describes what Mariam told him: the "'men from Asqalan extinguished their cigarettes. They addressed me in Hebrew' ... She did not look at me. She then pointed to her back. 'Here the Arab jailers stepped on me.' I automatically rolled up my sleeve as if to play along. 'Here they broke my arm twice. Then I took off my shoes and socks and pointed to my fingers they plucked out my toe nails'" (119). Relevant for our discussion is that while both men and women are tortured in the prisons on both sides of the Middle Eastern conflict, women are also sexually abused. Further, in addition to torture and rape, Mariam experiences another type of degradation: the police produce false letters and fake pictures of Mariam "naked making love with someone under a picture of Lenin emerged. There was also a photocopy of a letter in her handwriting swearing at the president and accusing him of chauvinism" (127). Mariam is a rebel against conventions and traditions by having an open, sexual relationship and she deplores men who use women's sexuality for defamation and humiliation. Her feelings and thoughts contrasted to her lover's patriarchal attitude are perhaps best expressed in a passage where her love-making is described as follows: "She [Mariam] took off her clothes while I was in the kitchen trying to fix a cup of coffee ... She was getting undressed laughingly. "Here is my body, so advance you knight." I suddenly became old. Nude, she came close to me. But I retreated without looking ... Her fingers ran through my hair. Her laughter suddenly stopped. I was shaking as if an earthquake was striking in my heart. She whispered soberly: "Does my body scare you?" We were silent ... She continued: "Do you think that making love is humiliation to the woman? Does it break her pride?" She was reading my thoughts. She made me feel naked even though I was hugging the coat around me. She exposed my privacy in spite of the underwear, the wool sweater, and the heavy coat" (104-45).

Unlike Suzy, Mariam starts the sexual act and she asks to have sex, becoming the one who controls and decides to start it. She seeks pleasure and wants to prove that the woman should not be a mere toy for man's pleasure. She refuses to be the objectified, passive partner. The above quotation does not only show her power as a leading and active character, but it also shows and reflects her views about the role the modern woman should play. She presses for the woman's right in sharing sexual pleasure with the man she is with and sees no humiliation in a woman's having sex with a man. Mariam refuses to assume the role of the tamed and domesticated woman. When her comrade Al-Ghazzaawi says that he expects, once they are married, that she will stay at home until their future son 'Adil reaches the age of four, she shows her disapproval and replies saying "No way, man! I will never stay at home like domesticated wives ... and why do you assume that my first would be a boy? Why won't I have an 'Adela, a girl?? You're a male chauvinist ... You're a backward man who only claims revolution!" (203).

Our second example is Abdul-Baki's novel *Ghost Songs: A Palestinian Love Story* in which Salma, the main protagonist, represents an independent woman. She is educated and unconventional and she refuses to follow what society and traditions expect her to do. The relation between Salma and Ameer, Salma's cousin, is a passionate love relationship (note that in the Muslim world second cousins can marry each other). At the beginning, Salma rejects Ameer's proposal for marriage although she loves him and feels that he could be the most appropriate for her as a husband: "Although as my cousin Ameer was considered an ideal marital choice for me, his proposal had come as a shock. Growing up, he had seemed to belong to my mother's generation rather than my own, and I had had little to do

with him outside of family gatherings. I used to be frightened by his boisterousness in those days, shying away from this cousin who was more than ten years older than I and who mostly seemed to enjoy teasing me" (16). Although Salma seems to consider and accept Ameer as her ideal marital choice, she feels that he belongs to a different generation because of his age. Further, because of Ameer's "boisterousness" and teasing attitude toward her in the past and because she is aware of his past and adventures with women, she declines his proposal. Salma works in Jordan thus away from the struggle and war in the West Bank and she feels secure and independent in her life. More importantly, Salma, by saying that she had little to do with Ameer outside the family gatherings, shows her rejection of traditional arranged marriage. She wants a man whom she knows well, understands, loves, and interacts with before even the idea of marriage is entertained or discussed. This is one of the major aspects of the relation Salma is hoping for and her feelings are that "I had the distinct impression that he [Ameer's friend] thought I was one of Ameer's women. I had been too embarrassed to enjoy the ride further and had asked to be let out although we were still two blocks from my destination ... the old fashioned tactic of asking for ... [her] hand before offering ... [her] a single hint of love ... I have always rejected the idea of formal, arranged marriages and was piqued by his [Ameer's] stilted manner"" (19). Thus Salma can be seen as belonging to the prototype of the "New Woman" in modern Arabic literature (on the "New Woman" in Arabic literature, see, e.g., Badawī). However, although Salma rejects traditional marriage, she respects the cultural, social, and religious traditions of her society.

Interestingly, Ameer's and Salma's relationship undergoes pressures: she loves him but cannot decide whether to marry him because of her own feelings of independence and objection to traditions. Then, there is the fabricated story that Ameer and Salma cannot marry because they are "milk" cousins" when this is not the case (in Islam "milk cousins" [first cousins] are not allowed to marry) and many other do want them to marry. Aunt Badriya, for instance, is "dismayed about [Salma's] refusal to accept ... [Ameer's proposal]" (15) and she tries to put them in a situation that may help in bringing them closer to each another: matchmaker "Aunt Badriya had insisted that he and I go to the sitting room while she made fresh tea" (17). She wants them to sit alone and talk because might help them understand one another and thus fall in love and get married. Interesting is that Aunt Badriya's intentions also go in some ways against the rules of arranged marriage in Moslem cultures because she is aware of and supports of courtship prior to marriage.

As Salma gets closer to Ameer, she discovers more about him and most importantly she realizes that she felt love for him already a long time ago and that this feeling is now building. In the midst of the mental and psychological dilemma caused by the story that she and Ameer are "milk cousins" Salma resorts to her dreams, to the past, and to her memories of incidents in her childhood or adolescence. It is through these memories that Salma realizes her love for Ameer:

I began to think of Ameer, again, how like his father he was in determination and his charisma and of those evening picnics and swims in Jericho — that one night in particular when I thought he would drown. I was amazed, now, that I had been so wretchedly concerned about him that night, so afraid of losing him, as if I had somehow been aware, even then, of his future importance in my life ... I wanted my own former hesitation to disappear, to give in to the new life that Ameer was offering me — a life of shared aspirations, of nights spent in the arms of a man who loved me, waking up with this same man who would share my happiness and pain, a man I could care for, could love — a life perhaps, whose time had finally come. (24-44)

Thus Salma is getting to a point where she is convinced that Ameer is someone who seems to have what she likes to find in her future husband: "I wanted to go to him, to press my face against him, against his jaw, his neck. I wanted to tell him that I had thought of him all these years but never dared say anything. I wanted to say I love you, but the words were burning up in my throat like charred paper. I wanted him to say it, but I was not letting him" (147).

Another aspect of their love emerges as sexual feelings start to show up. In retrospect, in one of her childhood incidents, Salma remembers that being close to him on his bed gave her a different type of feelings and that were new to her at the time. When Salma had a headache, she was asked to enter Ameer's room and lie on his bed to relax and sleep. She finds Ameer sleeping on his bed. She hesitates first, but then she lies down for a while: "I found myself liking him quite better and ... hoped that he could not wake up and start up with his usual teasing ... I got up and ran back outside partly to



join in the fun, but mostly to escape the pleasing glow that being so close to Ameer had brought" (45). During some of their meetings, Ameer and Salma touch, hug, and kiss each other and she discovers her sexuality: "In Ameer's presence I felt powerless against the most basic, feminine instincts that I thought I had cleverly overcome through professional accomplishments. I was flung back to falter in all the precarious anxieties of a budding young woman" (200).

After discovering that they are able to get married, Ameer and Salma become open to each other and feel free to express their love and feelings including sexuality: "he bent his head to my face. His breath blew across my cheek as his lips settled on my skin, moving lightly across my face like butterfly wings. I inhaled his scent, tasting his lips ... Then his arms closed around me, just as I had imagined they would all those years ago. I breathed in the heat of his skin ... cologne ... [and I] transported out of myself and into the mysterious universe that was his. I forgot all about morality. His hands ... down to my thigh pulling me closer ... drawing his head down to my neck" (250). And so prior to the official act of marriage, Salma submits to Ameer and disregards moral restrictions and limits. Salma's attitude toward Ameer is now different: her past feelings of shame when she was seen with him in his car are no longer there: "Right now, I would have given anything to shout out to all the men in the cafe, to everyone in the street waiting for the bus or a service, that I was his woman, that he belonged to me" (275). However—to draw on Simone de Beauvoir's feminist thought—Salma is one of those women who find it difficult "to accept at the same time their status as autonomous individuals and their womanly destiny" (de Beauvoir 1414). This accounts for her initial hesitation in this relationship and her later consent to marriage.

Our third and last example is Abu-Jaber's "Madagascar." This is a story about an Arab American couple, Hanif and Sirine, who are developing a new relationship. From the start their relationship is charged with physical attraction: they are not married and nothing suggests that marriage would be their intention. To our mind, the story is about how a modernized, Westernized Arab woman views her sexuality. Abu-Jaber narrates the attitude of the progressive Arab woman's toward premarital sex and adultery within contemporary globalized culture. Unlike Ameer and Salma, who love each other with the purpose of getting married, Hanif and Sirine are in a relationship that involves first and foremost erotic love and sexuality. Sirine is exposed to the US-American way of life and Western education. She visits Hanif in his apartment, stays with him for the night, drinks wine with him, and thus has a free, open attitude toward premarital sex. The story describes how Hanif and Sirine show their sexual attraction to one another, the way they touch each other, the way they let their bodies touch, making their bodies the site for the free performance and display of their sexuality and all this is of course anathema to Muslim culture. Hanif deals with Sirine as if they were US-American and this commences with their first night together in his apartment. In other words, he does not follow Muslim traditions and acts instead in a Western mode whereby even in this he behaves less than traditional as would conservative US-Americans. He tells Sirine that he wants to embrace the US-American lifestyle for her: "I wanted to play some American music for you but I guess I don't actually own any. I mean for tonight to be all American for you" (69).

Sirine shows her surprise about Arab men who prefer to have non-Arab girlfriends: for a man to have a relationship with a girl of Muslim background and origin could, for many, mean commitment and marriage in the first place and thus for an Arab man seeking sexual pleasure is more likely suggesting that he would seek it with a US-American girl. At the same time, Sirine is open-minded with regard to the liberal US-American way of life and is irreligious since she has not been "raised with formal religion" (70) and never tried praying before. Similarly, Hanif has not "prayed in some time [and he is] out of practice" (70). Similar to *Ghost Songs*, in Abu-Jaber's text there is emphasis on the body and sexuality although in Abu-Jaber's text also eroticism plays a significant role. For As'ad Khairallah, the body is "the place of all questioning, all exploration of the self and the other, all doubt and fascination, hope and despair, tenderness and violence" (210) and in *Ghost Songs* sexual feelings run through the protagonists' bodies as they "lean in toward each other as if magnetized" (69). In one scene, Hanif sits across Sirine and lets his knees skim hers and then "they touch and she feels it again, the cellular flash like an x-ray. She's skinless and he passes directly through her ... Their knees gaze again; a radiant point of heart" (69). Their gazing at each other in rapture lead them to deeper physical contact and body touching: "The soft evasion in his eyes draws her in. It's as if he isn't entirely in the room: his gaze subtly refocusing between her face and a hidden, internal place. His eyes

reflect both the kitchen light and the night clouds ... At times he seems to lure her forward, as if he would take her arms and pull her into a kiss, and at times she panics a little and pulls back, over excited and startled by the way he stirs her up" (69, 72). When they wash the dishes together after dinner, they bump their shoulders, then their elbows, then their hips. They also drink tea and wine from one cup. All of these actions and indications show their sexual attraction to each other, one that is purely physical. Sirine is excited and ready for a sexual relation: "He holds her palm cradled in one hand and traces his finger up along the inside of her arm to the inner crease of her elbow then up to her shoulder. Everywhere he touches her it feels like it must be glowing, as if he were drawing warm butter all over her skin. 'It just goes and goes.' He circles her shoulder ... [Then] his hand rises to her face and she can feel that he's trembling and she realizes that she's trembling too. 'I'll take you,' he whispers" (73).

While Ameer and Salma were driven by love that eventually leads to marriage, Sirine and Hanif are led by lust, sexual desire, and erotic love. When Hanif kisses her while they are in his car, "the backs of her thighs go soft and her breath dissolves and her eyelids float over her eyes. She wants to press one hand against her sternum. Instead, though, her hands slip over his shoulders and she moves even closer" (73). The kiss paves the way for the real physical interaction. Unlike Salma, Sirine does not care if she is seen with Hanif in his car since she is more open and lives in a liberal society that allows such actions. As a woman, Sirine is more assertive of her sexual nature and more defiant of the societal norms of her ethnicity and upbringing.

In conclusion, in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter* Judith Butler emphasizes the performance of gender roles not only with regard to clothing, but also in the gestures we make, the often stylized interactions we have with each other including touching and physical contact. Of course, what Butler says is with regard to Western cultures, but what is relevant for our discussion is that this gestural and physical contact is not available for women (or men) in Muslim culture and thus this is what inhibits free expression whether basic gestures or physical contact in public and leads to the non-allowance of women's active participation in society including their role and behavior in personal relationship as the three texts suggest. The texts we analyze are "gendered" texts and thus exceptional in Arab literature whether written in Arabic or other languages and whether published in Arab countries or elsewhere. Fiction such as by Abdul-Baki, Abu-Jaber, and al-Razzaz force us to question and re-examine Muslim gender roles and their intersections with regard to society, politics, ethnicity, and religion expressed in literature.

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