


ROUNDTABLE
SOVIET–ARAB LINKAGES AND MIDDLE EAST STUDIES

21st-Century Arabic Literary Remixes of the Arab-Soviet Romance

Margaret Litvin 

World Languages and Literatures, Boston University, Boston, MA, USA
Email: mlitvin@bu.edu

After an absence of more than fifteen years, Russian and Soviet themes began to reappear in contemporary Arabic fiction around 2005, as Russia started to regain prominence in Arab politics and Arabic writers began rediscovering some of the transnational entanglements that the Cold War's unipolar ending had largely occluded. Contemporary Arabic fiction writers have put Russian and Soviet material to many uses; this essay focuses on four: satirizing Soviet internationalism through depictions of dormitory racism; mocking the gender assumptions behind Arab nationalism and internationalism; humanizing jihadi fighters; and speaking beauty to power. The sheer diversity of these uses (and of others not covered here) shows that “How has Russian literature influenced Arabic literature?” is the wrong question. Future research should ask, rather, what local hungers the Russian/Soviet legacy has fed, what artistic and rhetorical resources it has offered, and how Arab writers have reimagined it.

Rihla Novels, Soviet Style

Between 1960 and 1990, tens of thousands of men and women from Arab countries traveled to the USSR for education or training. Most studied engineering or medicine; a tiny but articulate minority pursued journalism, literature, filmmaking, theater, or art. Fanned out to universities and institutes in seventy Soviet cities, the Arab students saw Soviet attitudes to art, culture, and social difference even as they mingled with a motley array of classmates including fellow Arabs; other internationals such as Africans, Latin Americans, East Asians, and Eastern Europeans; non-Russian Soviets such as Ukrainians, Central Asians, Azeris, Georgians, and Jews; members of Russian minorities such as indigenous Siberians and Tatars; and of course, ethnic Russians. Subjected (especially after 1968) to mandatory ideological coursework, the students also encountered the full range of Soviet ideological stances, from loyalism to outright cynicism to curiosity about the outside world.¹

Arabic literature offered a ready receptacle for their experiences: the *rihla* novel. This modern genre builds on the medieval *rihla* narrative, which documents or fictionalizes a

¹ Constantin Katsakioris, “Burden or Allies? Third World Students and Internationalist Duty through Soviet Eyes,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 18, no. 3 (2017): 539–67. See also chapters by Katsakioris, Litvin, and Takesh in *Russian-Arab Worlds: A Documentary History*, ed. Eileen Kane, Masha Kirasirova, and Margaret Litvin (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2023).

knowledge-seeking journey to faraway lands.² In its 19th- and 20th-century form, the *rihla* is a memoir or autobiographical bildungsroman typically chronicling an Arab student's voyage of self-discovery in France, England, or the United States. Encapsulating the intercultural predicament on an intimate scale, many *rihla* narratives pair a male Arab student-traveler with a female representative of the local culture such as a European girlfriend who temporarily eclipses a modest Arab girl-next-door waiting at home.³ This structure concretizes the modernity-versus-tradition dilemma, depicting the West (and its women) as liberated but spiritually vacuous.

To my knowledge, the heyday of Soviet internationalism produced few USSR-set *rihla* novels, but mostly a crop of travelogues praising the Soviet hospitality and accomplishments and some incidental Russian characters in Arabic novels, such as the repressed Russian Aswan High Dam employees in *Najmat Aghustus* (August Star, 1974) by Egyptian writer Sonallah Ibrahim (b. 1938). Later in the Soviet period, the literary reportage *Lahzat Gharaq Jazirat al-Hut* (Moments from the Sinking of Whale Island, 1997) by Muhammad Makhzangi (b. 1950), set amid the Chernobyl disaster and the USSR's collapse, depicts students from seven countries finding fellowship over contaminated fish and strawberries in devastated 1986 Kiev.⁴ Twenty-first-century narratives paint a fuller picture: icy streets, surly dorm attendants, warm student gatherings, and acrimoniously shared kitchens and bathrooms, all lit up by flashes of true interpersonal connection or of xenophobic or homophobic violence. Sonallah Ibrahim's belated autobiographical novel *al-Jalid* (Ice, 2011) is set in a Moscow student dormitory in 1973; it reprises the numbly factual tone of Ibrahim's scandal-making debut novella *Tilka al-Ra'iha* (That Smell, 1966, trans. 1971 and 2013) but adds a bitter critique of Soviet hypocrisy and squalor. (The book's Egyptian characters reap plenty of criticism, too.) Bending Ibrahim's real-life experience of three years as a nondegree student at Moscow's All-Soviet Institute of Cinematography into a chilly January-to-January circle, *al-Jalid* is not only an Eastern bloc *rihla* variation but an example of the willfully ugly transnational genre I have termed the *obshchiaga* (Rus: dorm) novel.⁵ Likewise published with a four-decade delay, Kuwaiti painter Thuraya al-Baqsamī's autobiographical novel *Zaman al-Mizmar al-Ahmar* (In the Time of the Red Flute, 2012) covers many of the same themes—including everyday dorm racism and xenophobia—but gives them a light-hearted female protagonist and a comic spin.⁶

² Roxanne Euben, *Journeys to the Other Shore: Muslim and Western Travelers in Search of Knowledge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Houari Touati, *Islam and Travel in the Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

³ Muhammad Mustafa Badawi, *Modern Arabic Literature and the West* (London: Ithaca Press, 1985); Nedal M. al-Mousa, "The Arabic Bildungsroman: A Generic Appraisal," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 25, no. 2 (1993): 223–40; Rasheed El-Enany, *Arab Representations of the Occident: East–West Encounters in Arabic Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2006).

⁴ Reissued as Muhammad Makhzangi, *Lahzat Gharaq Jazirat al-Hut* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2006), translated by Samah Selim as Mohamed Makhzangi, *Memories of a Meltdown: An Egyptian between Moscow and Chernobyl* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2009); fish and strawberries at 53–54.

⁵ Sun' Allah Ibrahim, *al-Jalid* (Cairo: Dar al-Thaqafa al-Jadida, 2011), translated by Margaret Litvin as Sonallah Ibrahim, *Ice* (London: Seagull Books, 2019). See also Mohamad Malas, "Portrait of a Friend: Sonallah Ibrahim," trans. Margaret Litvin, *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 36 (2016): 201–25; Margaret Litvin, "Fellow Travelers? Two Arab Study Abroad Narratives of Moscow," in *Illusion and Disillusionment: Travel Writing in the Modern Age*, ed. Roberta Micallef (Boston: Ilex Foundation, 2018), 96–118; and Margaret Litvin, "Intimate Foreign Relations: Racist Inclusion in the Soviet Dormitory Novel," *Comparative Literature* 75, no. 2 (2023): 153–71.

⁶ Thuraya Baqsamī, *Zaman al-Mizmar al-Ahmar*, 1st ed. (Beirut: Dar al-Farasha, 2012); Thuraya Baqsamī and Monira Al Qadiri, "Sweet Talk: A Conversation with Thuraya Al-Baqsamī and Monira Al Qadiri," *Bidoun*, 2018, <https://www.bidoun.org/articles/sweet-talk>.

Satirizing the Russian Girlfriend Fantasy

At the heart of much Arab male reminiscence and writing about the USSR—including Ibrahim's *Ice* and Makhzangi's *Memories of a Meltdown*—is a Soviet discourse of feminine moral fortitude and sacrifice that I have termed the “Russian girlfriend fantasy.” This archetype stems from 19th-century Russian literature both directly (gleaned from characters such as Liza in Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*) and indirectly (from interactions with Soviet women and men who have internalized this archetype as fact or ideal).⁷

The archetype is so familiar that it is ripe for parody. For instance, the novel *Layla, al-Thalj, wa Ludmila* (*Layla, the Snow, and Lyudmila*, 2007) by Soviet-educated Jordanian writer Kafa al-Zu'bi (b. 1965) begins by mocking the female protagonist's Jordanian friend Rashid:

Originally a communist true believer, Rashid arrived in early-80s Russia overwhelmed by revolutionary ideas. The image of Matilda, his beloved, friend and comrade, wonderfully sung in the poems of the famous Pablo Neruda, still burned in his imagination. Rashid knew these verses by heart. Over time, he invented his own Matilda and wrote in large letters on the door of the dormitory wardrobe: “Clean that rifle, comrade! / Kiss me again, beloved!”

Rashid wrote out these lines, even though his image of the comrade-beloved was shattered after he arrived in Leningrad. He was stunned that those light-eyed, plump girls, whose photographs he had previously admired in Arabic-language issues of *Sputnik* magazine (driving tractors, standing at factory machines, or working in the fields among sheaves of wheat) understood nothing about politics or the revolutionary struggle! Still, they listened patiently as he tried, in his broken Russian, to describe the horrors of capitalism as someone coming from a country suffering under its colonial oppression. . . Rashid tried with all his might to prove to them the justice of the socialist ideology under whose protective wing they lived. The girls fell silent, waiting for the right moment to ask if he could offer them a bit of that “abroad”: jeans, accessories, jewelry, makeup, perfume, or one of those cute photo albums with clear pockets to put pictures in.⁸

The rest of al-Zu'bi's 549-page novel, set during the perestroika and immediate post-collapse period (1986–1990s), replays the USSR's dissolution as a melodrama of Soviet and Arab moral collapse. The novel depicts Arab–Soviet relationships as sterile: Laila and her dashing friend Andrei never consummate their love; Rashid does have a son with his Russian wife Galina, but after Galina's spectacular infidelity and death he comes to doubt the boy's paternity, eventually shooting himself; the child disappears from the narrative. Mixed children are the embodied consequences of intercultural desire; this novel avoids them. Al-Z'ubi (perhaps unwittingly) echoes the morally conservative home-is-best attitude of the earlier, European-set *rihla* novels.

The short, bitterly funny novel *'Ali wa Ummuhu al-Rusiyya* (*Ali and His Russian Mother*, 2010, trans. 2015) by Russian-Lebanese writer and scholar Alexandra Chreiteh (b. 1987) goes further into the tragicomedy of mixed children.⁹ Set during the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war,

⁷ The “Russian girlfriend fantasy” is explored more fully in my forthcoming book *Red Mecca: The Life and Afterlives of the Arab–Soviet Romance*.

⁸ Kafa al-Zu'bi, *Layla wa-l-Thalj wa Ludmila* (Beirut: al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya li-l-Dirasat wa-l-Nashr, 2007), 21–22. The quotation is from Pablo Neruda, “El Amor Del Soldado,” in *The Captain's Verses/Los Versos Del Capitán*. Rashid has reversed the order of the lines; in Neruda the kissing precedes the cleaning.

⁹ Aliksandra Shrayti, *'Ali wa-Ummuhu al-Rusiyya* (Beirut: al-Dar al-'Arabi li-l-'Ulum, 2010), translated by Michelle Hartman as Alexandra Chreiteh, *Ali and His Russian Mother* (Northampton, MA: Interlink, 2015).

the novel describes a bus—a Russian evacuation convoy carrying post-Soviet women and children to safety abroad—as a microcosm of the complex post-Soviet Lebanese community. Bookended by a sushi lunch in Beirut and a desperate rant at the Moscow airport, the bus ride unites a squabbling group of Russian and post-Soviet women and their half-Lebanese children, including the college-aged female narrator and her recently rediscovered childhood friend Ali. There are Russians and Ukrainians (their differences newly salient), children in beach cover-ups or hijabs, sex workers, and moms. As these characters search for phone cards and water bottles, the narrative seeks new ways to represent complex identities erased by the frantic nationalism of state and society.

Ali and His Russian Mother foregrounds the moral obtuseness of ‘Ali, who embraces his homosexuality but closets his mother’s secret Jewishness. A queer child of internationalism, ‘Ali could be well placed to question the rigid myths of Arab nationalism; instead he overcompensates, flushing red “as tomato paste” while shouting anti-Israel slogans that even the narrator perceives as canned. The novel presents this antihero as a sad case, unable to reap the analytical fruits of an in-between identity to understand religion, gender, nationalism, and the many ways to be human in the world.

Humanizing Jihad

An even bolder use of Russian and Soviet thematics in 21st-century Arab novels focuses on jihad. Mohamed Mansi Qandil’s 2004 Arabic-language novel *Qamar ‘ala Samarqand* (*Moon over Samarqand*, 2004, trans. 2009) and Leila Aboulela’s 2015 English-language novel *The Kindness of Enemies* each paint a lush and sympathetic portrait of Islamist warriors fighting regime oppression in Uzbekistan’s Ferghana Valley or the northern Caucasus.¹⁰ Written under the Mubarak regime’s censorship and during the West’s war on terror, these novels use their exotic Russian borderland settings to humanize jihad, planting a sympathy that they extend even to Islamists at home.

The former travel writer Qandil, criticizing the brutal incompetence of Egypt’s military, romanticizes the devotion of Egyptian thinker Sayyid Qutb (a real historical figure, 1906–66) and Uzbekistan’s rebel Lutfallah (a fictional one); he uses Soviet and post-Soviet Uzbekistan as a crooked mirror for Egypt’s secularist repression.¹¹ Scotland-based Sudanese novelist Aboulela, using but rewriting Orientalist eyewitness accounts of a brutal hostage-taking in Georgia, romanticizes Imam Shamil’s fifteen-year Sufi insurgency in Chechnya and Dagestan. Both novels, although they take care to criticize naive Salafism, bravely (given their production contexts) depict Islamist militants as thoughtful and sincerely spiritual. Both end up endorsing a Sufi vision resonant with what Shahab Ahmed has called “post-classical Islam”: a humanistic culture steeped in the social forms of Sufi brotherhood and the philosophy and literature of the Islamic tradition. It is difficult to imagine any Arab-authored novel set in a Western society depicting jihadists this way. The sympathy is licensed and supported by the Russian or (post-) Soviet setting, which harnesses everything the Egyptian or British intended reader already knows or is willing to imagine about the godless brutality of tsarist or Soviet rule.

¹⁰ Muhammad Mansi Qandil, *Qamar ‘ala Samarqand* (Cairo: Dar al-Hilal, 2004). For the uncensored version, see Muhammad al-Mansi Qandil, *Qamar ‘ala Samarqand*, 3rd ed. (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2013). The full manuscript was translated by Jennifer Peterson as *Moon over Samarqand* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2009). Leila Aboulela, *The Kindness of Enemies* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2015).

¹¹ Margaret Litvin, “Egypt’s Uzbek Mirror: Muhammad al-Mansi Qandil’s Post-Soviet Islamic Humanism,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 42, no. 2/3 (2011): 101–19.

Speaking Beauty to Power

A final example of a 21st-century Arabic novel with Russian and (post-)Soviet themes and characters is *al-Hayy al-Rusi* (The Russian Quarter, 2019) by exiled Syrian novelist Khalil al-Razz (b. 1956, also spelled Alrez). Written in transit from war-torn Syria through Turkey and Greece and eventually to Brussels, where he now resides, it is a sweet, quirky, and unexpectedly moving novel about the Syrian civil war.¹² Its setting is the titular Russian Quarter, a fictional neighborhood on the eastern edge of contemporary Damascus next to rebel-held Ghouta. In the Russian Quarter's zoo lives a lively human and animal community of Syrians, Russians, various pets and zoo animals, and a mute but fully agentive giraffe. The post-Soviet denizens (zoo director and retired journalist Victor Ivanitch, Afghan hound dog Raia Petrovna, and pensioner Arkadii Kuzmich) add courtly charm. So does the unnamed narrator's girlfriend Nonna, a sparkly embodiment of the Russian girlfriend fantasy whom the narrator had known in Moscow and has now re-met on the Russian Cultural Center steps in downtown Damascus.

The opposite of Sonallah Ibrahim's *Ice*, *al-Hayy al-Rusi* cultivates a leisurely three-part structure and a beautiful, polished prose style to speak of the war's destructiveness and even—in a devastating conclusion—of Russia's role. The novel's deliberate prose lovingly knits a self-contained magical realist world, but Alrez also makes a point of exposing that imaginary ecosystem to the blunt force of real-world violence. As the war between the Russian-backed al-Asad regime and Ghouta's extremist rebels moves inexorably closer, neither the zoo residents' courage nor their cowardice is enough to protect the peaceful neighborhood. When the violence floods in, it swamps a tide pool whose colorful, delicate creatures the reader has unwittingly grown to love.

Conclusions

Russian and Soviet material has provided contemporary writers with resources to revisit personal and national histories, to question received pieties about gender and nation, to escape the bilateralism of endless postcolonial encounter with the West, and to innovate formally. As Russia's role in Middle Eastern events keeps shifting, and as the mixed children of Arab–Soviet internationalism come of age and find their voices, this fertile field can be expected to bear fruit for many decades to come. Scholars interested in Arabic literature's global entanglements should pay attention.

¹² Khalil al-Razz, *al-Hayy al-Rusi* (Beirut: Manshurat Difaf, 2019); excerpted in Margaret Litvin, "The Intellectual Is a Hybrid Creature": Khalil Alrez's "The Russian Quarter," in Kane et al., *Russian-Arab Worlds*, 341–52.