

RIVISTA DEGLI STUDI ORIENTALI

NUOVA SERIE

Organo scientifico del

DIPARTIMENTO DI STUDI ORIENTALI
SAPIENZA, UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA

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Pubblicato con il contributo
di «Sapienza», Università di Roma

Q-6-806



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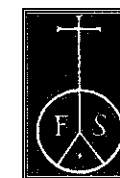
DESIRE, PLEASURE AND THE TABOO:
NEW VOICES AND FREEDOM
OF EXPRESSION IN CONTEMPORARY
ARABIC LITERATURE

EDITED BY

SOBHI BOUSTANI, ISABELLA CAMERA D'AFFLITTO,
RASHEED EL-ENANY, WILLIAM GRANARA

SUPPLEMENTO N° 1

ALLA RIVISTA DEGLI STUDI ORIENTALI
NUOVA SERIE
VOLUME LXXXVII



PISA · ROMA
FABRIZIO SERRA EDITORE

2014

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RIVISTA DEGLI STUDI ORIENTALI

NUOVA SERIE

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Print and/or Online official subscription rates are available at Publisher's website www.libraweb.net.

I versamenti possono essere eseguiti sul conto corrente postale n. 171574550 o tramite carta di credito (Visa, Eurocard, Mastercard, American Express, Carta Si)

FABRIZIO SERRA EDITORE

Pisa · Roma

Casella postale n. 1, Succursale 8, I 56123 Pisa

Uffici di Pisa: Via Santa Bibbiana 28, I 56127 Pisa,
tel. +39 050542332, fax +39 050574888, fse@libraweb.net

Uffici di Roma: Via Carlo Emanuele I 48, I 00185 Roma,
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Fabrizio Serra editore incorporates the Imprints Accademia editoriale, Edizioni dell'Ateneo, Fabrizio Serra editore, Giardini editori e stampatori in Pisa, Gruppo editoriale internazionale and Istituti editoriali e poligrafici internazionali.

ISSN 0392-4866

ISBN 978-88-6227-702-0

ISBN BLETTRONICO 978-88-6227-703-7



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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 belles-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