

# Love Politics in The Syrian Uprising

By Leila Asadi

## *Introduction*

What is the relationship between love and politics? When and where do they collide or co-exist and what forms and spaces would they create? Focusing on the narratives of two Syrian women who participated in the 2011 Uprising, I attempt to investigate the role of love and politics in order to see how love manifested as multiple emotions in the space of the Uprising. There is no doubt that many scholars and researchers from various disciplines have already studied the 2011 Syrian Uprising, approaching it from various legal, political, social, and cultural perspectives. Here I analyze the spatial effects of Syria's protests as a 'collective love for justice and dignity' in personal and individual love relations between Syrians. I came across this topic in a few formal and informal interviews during which Syrian women shared their vivid memories and narratives of drastic change in their relationships with families and friends during the Uprising. These changes ranged from animosity and resentment to passion and love. In what follows below, I focus on two stories that took place during the first days of the protests to show how romantic, interpersonal love was transformed in the midst of collective love in the chaotic space of the 2011 Uprising in Syria.

## *The Joys of Love*

I am sitting at the table right in front of a window that opens up to a cold, cruel, and snowy day in Michigan. Though feeling warm and staring at my laptop screen, I am listening to what Sara recalls of 2011. "We met each other through online social media in our trusted circle of friends and activists who planned and strategized protests during the Uprising. But we fell in love as the protests continued. We would see each other either in our meetings or in the midst of demonstrations. I was surprised every time that he would find me so easily in the crowd. He would appear in busy streets recognizing me among all the face-covered protesters while smiling and standing right in front of me. I will never forget those days."<sup>1</sup>

How do we make sense of these yearning looks, shining eyes, and excited, flushed faces of the young Syrian woman and her lover in a crowd prone to rage? It seems that the intensity and "spontaneity" of affection makes lovers pause, give up their control, and indulge in very intimate moments that might be contrasted with the strength of indignation in the crowd.<sup>2</sup> An indignation that gives rise to a rage bringing a strong collective will to the fore to gain autonomy. For this, politics and love have been read and written as separated things, respectively belonging to public and private spaces. Indeed, the intimate and private moments or spaces of longing may function as if they stood in opposition to what the public desires. Furthermore, love itself has been interpreted as a source of oppression for women. For instance, Shulamith Firestone and Carol Smart were the first to critique the common, male-dominated perceptions of romantic love between men and women as liberating.<sup>3</sup> Soon after them, Carolyn Morell argued that male-female relations constitute power structures in which men dominate and women are oppressed.<sup>4</sup> Feminist scholar Wendy Langford echoes this idea when she states that romantic love is a "process by which restrictions, inequality and dissatisfaction are merely obscured."<sup>5</sup> Thus, romantic love in some ways creates symmetry and mutuality by which it disempowers women.

Adding to this view from another perspective, Hannah Arendt depoliticizes the notion of romantic love by asserting, "love and politics are antithesis because politics is transient, but love is unworldly."<sup>6</sup> According to Arendt, love is contrasted with politics, construed as public, materialistic and instrumental. Politics are tools to further one's interests and to possess worldly or material wealth, whereas love is

private, passionate, and unselfish.<sup>7</sup> Rather than focus on romantic love, Arendt introduces ‘love of the world’ as a form of love that is different from other forms of empathy, like charity, forgiveness or care. It requires the acceptance of difference and the welcoming of plurality. The question of whether Arendt’s idea of love can actually be practiced or not, is not my concern here. Two points are significant. First, there are different forms of individual and collective loves that have been and continue to be theorized about by feminists and philosophers. Second, the link between love and politics has recently been highlighted in scholarly debates concerning whether such a link exists to begin with.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue that love is political when is it considered a force of social organization.<sup>8</sup> However, the notion of love they address is not a romantic interpersonal or familial feeling. As Michael Hardt states, it is “a force to reimagine and envision new social worlds. It is highly political transgressing the lines of private and public space and in need to be re-known as potential transformative power serving for multitude.”<sup>9</sup> For Hardt, love is a source of becoming different and including the *other*. Love “stands beyond rationality and calculation of interests for both sides and could be a process or even a field of training for constructing a democratic society.”<sup>10</sup> This concept of love he is elaborating is different from love and friendship as commonly known because “we lose ourselves in love, or in love and we become different.”<sup>11</sup>

My first argument, following some feminists, is that it is important not to conflate the notion of romantic love with keeping women entrapped in the private realm and out of politics. If we agree with the prevalent feminist idea that ‘the personal is the political’, then a clear line can’t be drawn to demarcate the public and private realms. Second, I ask: how can we make sense of the romantic feelings between Sara and her lover in the midst of the Uprising? To answer this question, I will resort to a black feminist’s work on love as a way of “practicing of the self and non-identitarian strategy to structuring political community.”<sup>12</sup> Working on black feminist love-politics, Jennifer C. Nash attempts to move beyond a limiting definition of love, arguing that to love is to transcend the self and produce political communities. In this transient process, bodies are organized around intensities, longings, desires, temporalities, repulsions, curiosities, fatigues, and optimism and all these affects produce political movements.<sup>13</sup> Relying on black feminism and affect theory, I argue that love is emancipatory and communal and it leads to a collective transformation. This is the love that created a space of intimacy in the midst of rage and protests for Sara and her partner. It is the affect of political life that brought her joy and also strengthened her identification with the protesters seeking collective love. Thus, the Uprising for her was a mixture of individual and universal love and it situated longing for dignity and political freedom along with temporalities and desires. Here is where politics and selfless love collided and became transformative for Sara and her lover in the midst of chaos. As scholar Sara Ahmed states, “love becomes a way of bonding with others in relation to an ideal, which takes shape as an effect of such bonding. Then [here] love is crucial to how individuals become aligned with collectives through their identification with an idea.”<sup>14</sup> The ideal of dignity and freedom for Syria moves the lovers’ feelings as they unite with the crowd spontaneously.

### *Unromantic Sorrowful Love*

I am sitting in a coffee shop located in a rather affluent area in South Bloomfield, Michigan. It is a cold and quiet Saturday morning, sometime in the fall, and it feels colder and colder as I listen to Mariam, a single mom who is newly arrived in the US. “He disclosed my hiding place to Assad’s men. Therefore, I had to flee to Turkey. You know [the] Syrian Revolution brought to me liberation but [it was] mingled with a taste of betrayal. As if it opened a window to my smelly room letting the fresh air coming in. It was painfully pleasing.”<sup>15</sup> Mariam fought two battles during the Syrian Uprising: one against Bashar al-Assad’s regime and the other against her husband, who was in the pro-regime camp while she joined the people in the streets. For her, the Uprising began at home and later extended to the street and it mixed the sweet taste of liberation with the bitterness of betrayal.

For Mariam, the Uprising was the right time to demand ‘*karamah*’ (dignity) and to resist oppression in both private and public realms. It opened a space where patriarchal power was crystallized through state power and betrayed marital and familial love. Here, a man’s power worked in tandem with government suppression to subjugate a woman who became rebellious in the house and revolutionary in the public sphere. She transgressed the rules, both in her house and her country. Thus, the messiness and unruliness of the uprising contributed to exacerbating domination and control for Mariam. In this case, love was still political. As Wilkinson states, it “is not just about collective joy, but also love as fear, love as disappointment, love as rage, love as domination.”<sup>16</sup> This painful love also shows the hierarchical relations in the multitude. What is interesting in this story is the role of the dominated subject of love. This subject identifies with the revolutionary collective love through which she emancipates herself from a rigid social hierarchy that ruled her private life by breaking away from her husband’s authority and control via the catalyzer of collective love. Fighting both the oppressive state and her husband through resisting state power and religious male authority, Mariam overcame fear and oppression. It was as if she had given birth to the courage that then became part of her. She became immunized. Mariam explained: “I overcome fear when I became involved in revolution and when I felt the taste of betrayal.” She refused to remain subject to her personal love and instead sought a collective love in its political manifestation. Mariam’s experiences demonstrate Sara Ahmed’s notion that acting in the name of love can work to enforce a particular ideal. Here a committed housewife and mother worked on others by requiring that they live up to that ideal. She refused “being for the others” while welcoming difference and becoming different from what others, especially the husband, wanted for her.<sup>17</sup>

### *Conclusion*

In both stories, romantic love became a force for collective action and transformation that crossed borders. Yet, it can also manifest as a desire for sameness and it is this “love of the same” that may introduce hate.<sup>18</sup> Also, in the space of the uprising, the love of mass or multitude creates multiplication. Sara’s encounter with her lover in the crowded street constitutes the joy and the affect of this political protest. They joined together and increased their collective potential, their power to affect and be affected.<sup>19</sup> In the case of Mariam, the location of the subordinated subject seen in the Uprising creates hate as the affect of patriarchy. Sara Ahmed explains that “the encounters with systemic racism or patriarchy will alter the way in which we are affected”.<sup>20</sup> This is what happened to Mariam. For her, patriarchy changed love from a transformational force to a tense connection between the private and the public. In both instances, there is a transformation and a welcoming of difference; in both stories politics and love are conflated with each other and the uprising makes this conflation possible. Therefore, I would argue that a hybrid space was created by the Syrian Uprising in which romantic love became a “political concept” as theorized by Hardt. It was even a tool for collective transformation that brought a politics of intimacy to the fore. Concurrently, romantic love also became a mode of control and domination, and it altered the experience of the Uprising for at least some of the women involved. As Eleanor Wilkinson argues, love is a mix of ambivalence and incoherence that brings joy or violence, domination and desire to distance.<sup>21</sup> For Sara, romantic love is ambiguous because it sought to unite in political sameness while also looking for gendered difference; for Mariam, subordinated by interpersonal love and state violence, love became an indestructible desire to learn about the world and the *other*.

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<sup>1</sup> Sara Hamad (PhD student) in discussion with the author, December 2017, Michigan.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Shulamith Firestone and Carol Smart, *The Dialect of Sex: the Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1970), 124.

<sup>4</sup> Carolyn Morell, "Love and Will: a Feminist Critique," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 13 no. 2 (1973): 42.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Renata Grossi, "Romantic Love – A Feminist Conundrum?," *The Feminist Wire*, September 2, 2013, accessed May 4, 2018, <https://thefeministwire.com/2013/09/feminist-critiques-of-love>.

<sup>6</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Second edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 242.

<sup>7</sup> Eleanor Wilkinson, "On Love as (im)properly Political Concept," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 35 no. 1 (2016): 51-57.

<sup>8</sup> Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 352.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Hardt, "About Love 1/6", European Graduate School Video Lectures, June 24, 2007, YouTube at 9:53, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ioopkoppabl>.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 7:43.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:15.

<sup>12</sup> Jennifer C. Nash, "Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-Politics, and Post-Intersectionality," *Meridians* 11 no. 2 (2011): 1.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Sara Ahmed, "In the Name of Love," *Borderlands E-Journal* 2 no. 3 (2003).

<sup>15</sup> Mariam Zeydan (teacher and PhD student) in discussion with the author, September 2017, Michigan.

<sup>16</sup> Wilkinson, "On Love as (im)properly Political Concept", 66-67.

<sup>17</sup> Ahmed, "In the Name of Love."

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<sup>18</sup> Hardt, “About Love 1/6.”

<sup>19</sup> Wilkinson, “On Love as (im)properly Political Concept”, 54.

<sup>20</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Notes Toward a Politics of Location*, lecture at the Conference on Women, Feminist Identity, and Society, Utrecht University, 1984.

<sup>21</sup> Wilkinson, “On Love as (im)properly Political Concept.”