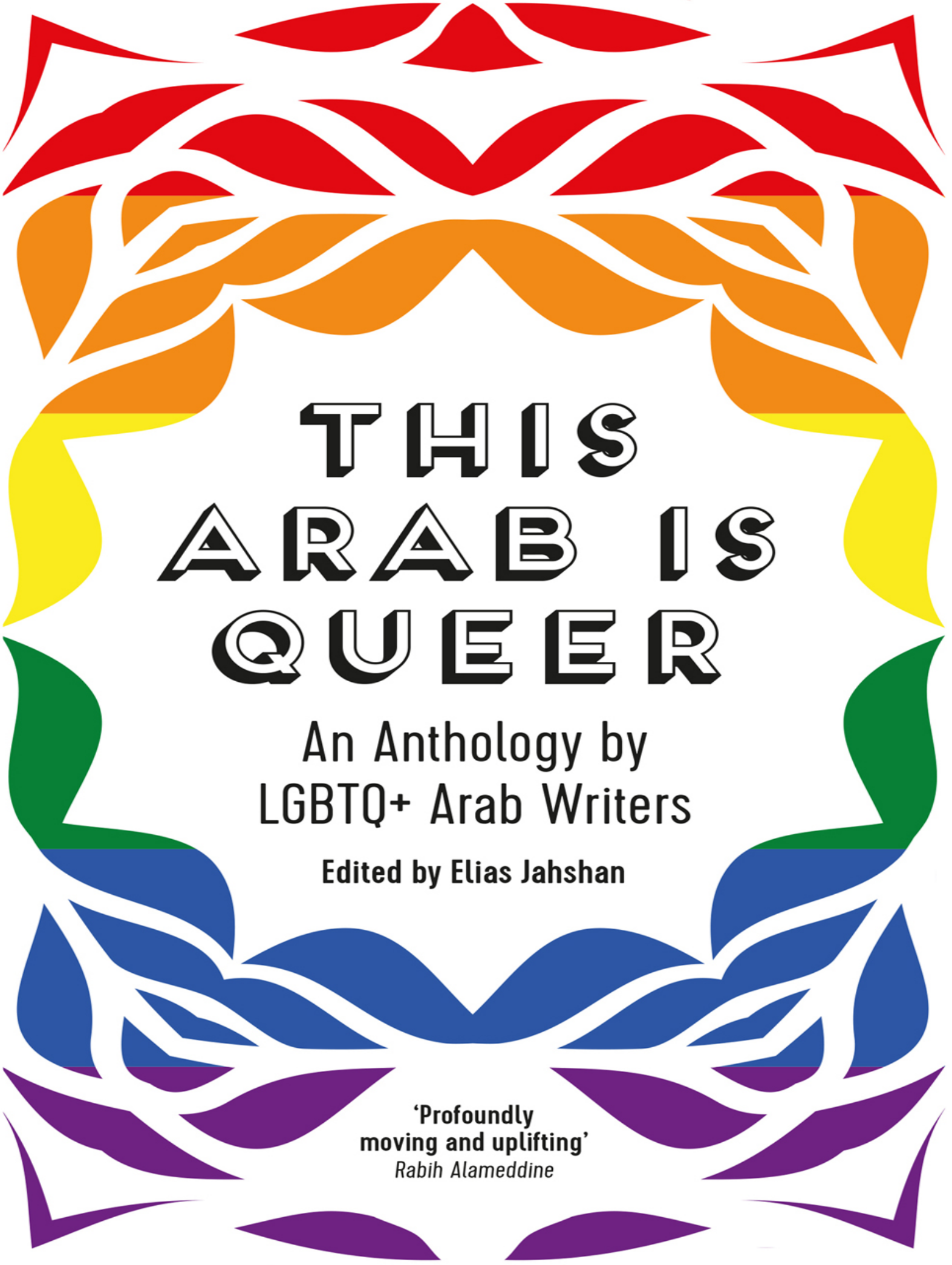

THIS ARAB IS QUEER

An Anthology by LGBTQ+ Arab Writers

Edited by Elias Jahshan

'Profoundly moving and uplifting'
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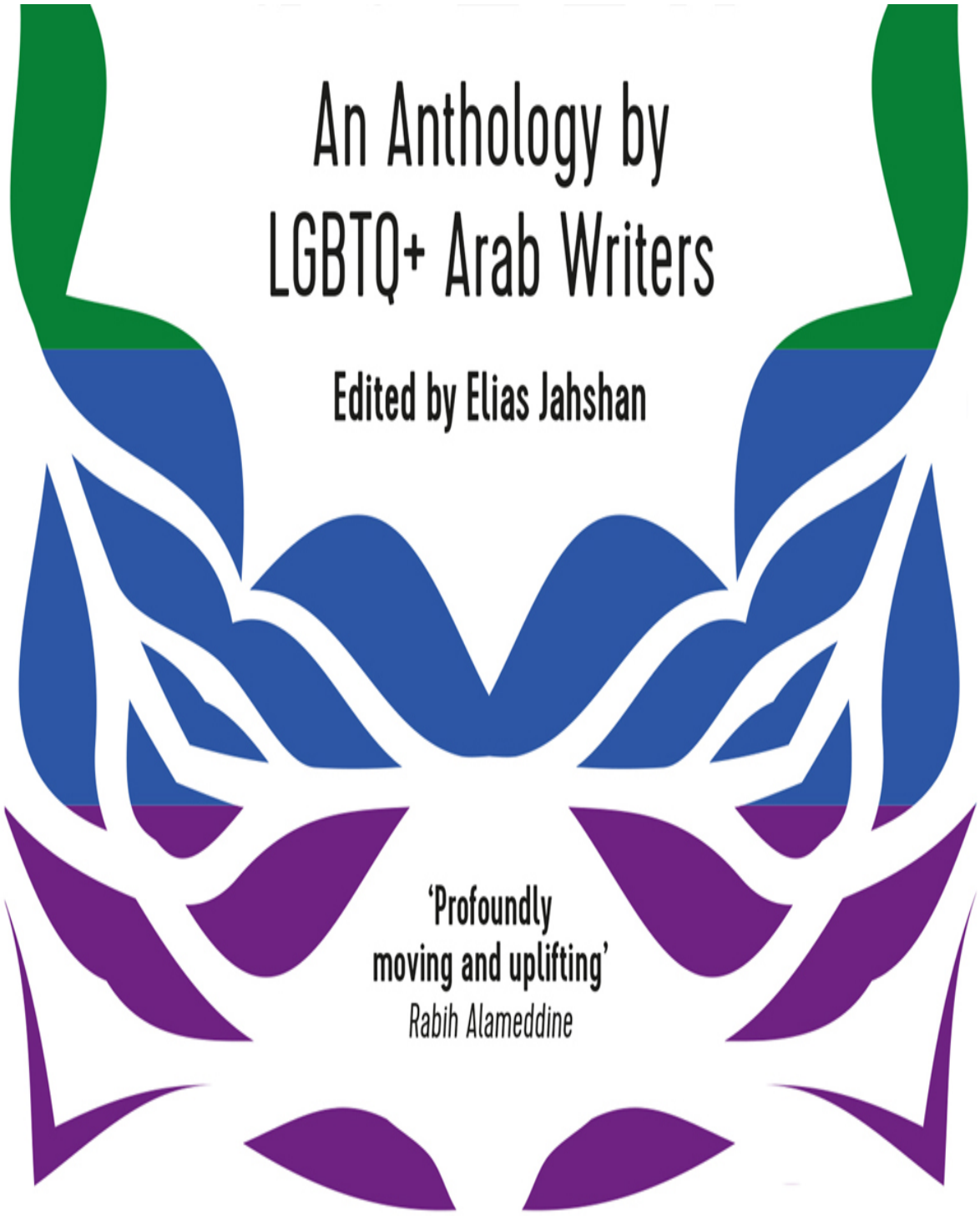

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Elias Jahshan (he/him) is a Palestinian-Lebanese-Australian journalist and writer. He is a former editor of *Star Observer*, Australia's longest-running LGBTQ+ media outlet, and a former board member of the Arab Council Australia. His short memoir 'Coming Out Palestinian' was anthologised in *Arab Australian Other: Stories on Race and Identity* (Picador, 2019), and he has written freelance for outlets including *The Guardian, SBS Voices, My Kali* and *The New Arab*. Born and raised in western Sydney, he now lives in London.

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ELIAS JAHSHAN

INTRODUCTION

In *This Arab is Queer*, eighteen writers share a personal story that is close to their hearts, one which they haven't had the platform to write about before now. This ground-breaking collection subverts stereotypes and elevates voices identifying across the full LGBTQ+ spectrum – lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and non-binary – and hailing from eleven Arab countries, both from the Gulf, Levant and North Africa, and from the diaspora (either as immigrants, children of immigrants, or recent refugees).

These writings assert our existence and agency as a community, and also celebrate our varied experiences. Here, readers will find stories of love and pride, heartbreak and empathy, courage and humour. This is a space where the microphone is entirely the writers' own. To the best of my knowledge, it is the first collection of its kind.

Many readers will know that most Arab countries criminalise homosexuality. The level of enforcement varies from country to country. In Egypt, recent police crackdowns carried out on queer people have resulted in scores being imprisoned, and sometimes tortured. In Lebanon, laws against homosexuality are not generally enforced, allowing for a visible queer community to thrive in the capital Beirut. In a few countries – namely Jordan and Palestine (except for the Gaza Strip) – homosexuality is not a crime, though laws protecting the community from discrimination are virtually non-existent. In a handful of

other countries – Saudi Arabia, Yemen and in some cases in the UAE and Iraq – homosexuality is punishable by death.

It is interesting to note that many of these restrictions stem from inherited European colonial laws that were informed by a Christian understanding of morality. When the West talks about homophobia in the Arab world or among global diasporic communities, the focus is on how Islam or traditional Arab attitudes are at the root of hostility toward LGBTQ+ Arabs, which is an essentialist and simplistic approach. On the flipside, patriarchal norms are deeply embedded in Arab culture and is an important reason for the rampant discrimination, criminalisation and deep cultural stigma of queer people.

As a gay Arab writer and journalist, and in my stint as editor of Australia's longest-running queer media outlet, *Star Observer*, I have observed that Western media outlets often focus on sensationalist news stories. Well-known examples include gay men being thrown from rooftops during Daesh's reign of terror in Syria and Iraq, or homophobic attacks in Morocco after Instagram influencer Sofia Taloni told her followers to use gay dating apps to locate and publicly out gay people. The issue isn't that these events are covered of course; it's that the media seemingly only pay attention to negative stories, and rarely engage with Arab voices directly.

A rising number of LGBTQ+ Arabs are stepping forward to tell stories about queer life, however. Their stories are complex and go beyond the usual narratives of state-sanctioned discrimination or family homophobia and transphobia.

While queer Arab writing in the Arabic language is scarce, mostly due to government-enforced bans and censorship, in the West it is not a new phenomenon. Since

the 1990s, we have been gifted with wonderful works written by and about queer Arabs. To name a few: the trailblazing *Koolaids: The Art of War* (1998) by Rabih Alameddine; Abdellah Taïa's *Salvation Army* (2006); Saleem Haddad's *Guapa* (2016); Danny Ramadan's *The Clothesline Swing* (2017); Leila Marshy's *The Philistine* (2018); Amrou Al-Kadhi's *Life as a Unicorn* (2019); and Zeyn Joukhadar's *The Thirty Names of Night* (2020) – or more recent works by Zeina Arafat (*You Exist Too Much*, 2021), Randa Jarrar (*Love Is an Ex-Country*, 2021), Omar Sakr (*Son of Sin*, 2022) and Fatima Daas (*The Last One*, 2022). Such voices may not always be visible in mainstream outlets, but they are becoming more prolific.

LGBTQ+ Arabs are often asked how it is possible to be queer in our culture. We are expected to explain the ways in which homophobia can make our coming-out journeys a challenge, should we choose to embark on that journey. The question implies that Arabs do not have the capacity to be progressive. It also limits our ability to tell our stories on our own terms. In *This Arab is Queer*, we reclaim the narrative and show how we can comfortably be both.

Certain themes that are central to many lived experiences for queer Arabs emerge in this collection, such as coming-out stories, how it feels to be shoe-horned because of your identity, what it means to be unseen, or to have seen too much. The importance of friends, family and community is understood more keenly when read in tandem with essays on displacement and loneliness, such as in Dima Mikhayel Matta's *This Text Is a Very Lonely Document*, which articulates solitude and how it plays out with the journey as a non-binary person from Lebanon, with such eloquence; or Madian Al Jazerah's piece *Then Came Hope*, which

explores the particular heartache of a gay Palestinian man who has been made diasporic three times over – from Palestine to Kuwait, then onto Jordan and the US. In *The Artist's Portrait of a Marginalised Man*, Danny Ramadan looks at how his cultural identity and sexuality play out in his writing, exploring the fraught path of a marginalised writer who is obliged to represent an entire community in their work, while being denied the artistic licence to centre on characters whose lives are not carbon copies of the writer's own. Together, these pieces paint a portrait of what queerness across the Middle East and the diaspora looks and feels like today. In fact, it's true to say every text in *This Arab is Queer* delivers on this.

While some of the writers whose work is published in this collection live in the Middle East, some are now living elsewhere. As a result, this book travels across time and space; from Baghdad to Vancouver, Lisbon, Dubai, Belgrade, Mecca, New York – and across locales, touching down in hospitals, schools, opera halls, suburban Sydney homes, Cairene concert arenas, Cypriot bookshops and bedrooms, balconies, literature festivals, the backstreet ruins of Beirut's port silos and the lush surrounds of the Blue Nile. Many pieces straddle more than one place, such as Ahmed Umar's essay *Pilgrimage to Love*, which revisits his formative years in Saudi Arabia and Sudan, offering readers an intimate and unique insight into what it was like growing up as a queer person in the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa.

Some essays, such as Amina (pseudonym)'s *An August, a September and My Mother* deal with events whose fallout was felt the world over; in this case, Amina offers a rare, on-the-ground story around Sarah Hegazy's tragic death and how it impacted her as a member of Egypt's queer

community. Intertwining the personal with a wider social context, Amina offers readers a sense of solidarity and hope, as well as paying homage to Sarah. Other writers focus on experiences behind closed doors, on private affairs of the family. Anbara Salam considers the silence around taboo subjects in Arab families in *Unheld Conversations* and how our sexualities can be the elephant in the room at family gatherings. In *Dancing Like Sherihan*, Hasan Namir writes about his multiple coming-out journeys as a gay Iraqi, and the love and loyalty of his sisters and newfound sister-in-law, who offers to be surrogate for Hasan and his husband's unborn child.

Many of the writers express their complex, varied relationships with their parents, and how the importance of family is drummed into our psyche from a young age. In *You Made Me Your Monster*, Amrou Al-Kadhi articulates how Arab children are seen as an extension of their parents – not individuals with their own agency – and reveals the complicated family dynamics this causes. At the same time, the importance of family, and the instinctive yearning for family approval and acceptance, is apparent throughout. Perhaps nowhere is this more so than in Raja Farah's *The Bad Son*, which follows a dutiful son who is the primary, yet somewhat resentful, caregiver for an aggressive, hypermasculine father. Unsurprisingly, the son's sacrifices for his family have a profound impact on his dating life.

Rebellion against one's parents, and even whole culture, is carried out in both private and public spheres. Indeed, many of these contributors are no strangers to speaking out publicly. In *My Kali: Digitising a Queer Arab Future*, Khalid Abdel-Hadi details the trials he faced as the founder and editor in chief of *My Kali*, the Arab world's longest-running queer media outlet, and how he and his sexuality

were made public by the Jordanian media and government. Speaking out goes hand-in-hand with being seen and heard, considered by Hamed Sinno's a meditation on the power of the voice in *Trio*. Sinno highlights the role their voice plays in transgressing social norms and customs in public. From contemporary to classical music: Zeyn Joukhadar explores how his journey as a trans man saw him fall in love with opera all over again in *Catching the Light: Reclaiming Opera as a Trans Arab*. Zeyn also details his experience of how class boundaries intersected with trans identity on his journey, through his examination of notable (orientalist) operatic works and spaces. Many of these pieces demonstrate the perceived transgressive existence of queer Arabs, taking pride in a community that is not afraid to push the boundaries, and showing that these transgressions are needed for us to evolve and progress.

All of these pieces interweave the personal and the political – how could they not? Some writers tackle the spaces where politics and sexuality meet head on. Mona Eltahawy returns to the 2011 revolution in Egypt, as Hosni Mubarak was ousted from office, in her piece *The Decade of Saying All That I Could Not Say*. She shows how a traumatising event around this time served as an awakening of sorts for her both as a feminist and as a queer, polyamorous woman who came out in her forties. Amna Ali's *My Intersectionality Was My Biggest Bully* bravely articulates the struggles of growing up queer, Arab and Black in a society that denies its own racism and is comfortably, openly homophobic. In a critically important piece, Amna goes into detail about her upbringing in the Gulf, while, on the other side of the world, Tania Safi's *Dating White People* looks into how she internalised racism within the lesbian community in Australia to the point

where her own brother questioned if she herself was a white supremacist.

Of course, there couldn't be a collection that centred on sexuality without sex, complete with all its stigma, shame and glory. In *Pilgrimage to Love*, Ahmed Umar recalls his fear after a religious teacher shared his understanding of God's wrath against homosexuals and the suitable punishments that should be meted out to those practising same-sex relations; while Madian Al Jazerah's *Then Came Hope* recounts with both sadness and humour his mother's graphic, blind assurance that only the 'bottom' is gay in a male same-sex coupling. Sometimes sex is inextricably linked with humour, a dash of racism aside. One contributor, who chooses to remain anonymous, encapsulates this in *Trophy Hunters, White Saviours and Grindr*, where they detail some awkward moments from their time dating while living in the US.

The taboos around premarital sex intensify the desire of the experience for those who have to postpone, plan and conceal sex. Sex positivity is sorely needed in our Arab community, and it is found here, where the joy and importance of sex and of self-discovery coincide. Omar Sakr's concluding piece *Tweets to a Queer Arab Poet* is a poetic compilation of tweets in conversation with Adonis, that serves to inspire and encourage queer Arabs to celebrate who we are and to explore our desires.

Sometimes, celebration and mourning become one. Saleem Haddad's piece *Return to Beirut* laments the loss of his homeland and what it represents in the wake of the Beirut port explosion, while also mourning a romance he briefly rekindles. But at the same time Haddad shows the agency we have when we put down roots in a place and at a time of our choosing.

Not every piece speaks directly to queer Arab identity; but where they do, as many questions are raised as answers suggested. This is because the plurality of experiences shows without a doubt that one size doesn't fit all – there is no set formula for life as a queer Arab. Yet together, this collection inspires readers to imagine a bright future for the Arab queer community and for the possibility of love in spite of the stigma we face.

My hope is that *This Arab is Queer* encourages a safe space for conversation and validation, as well as a changing climate among LGBTQ+ communities. If this book becomes the first of many that centres on queer Arab experiences, and encourages broader engagement with queer Arab writing, it will have fulfilled its mission. I look forward to discovering the plethora of unique stories that are waiting to be told.

MONA ELTAHAWY

THE DECADE OF SAYING ALL THAT I COULD NOT SAY

I am writing this almost exactly ten years after I died.

I am able to write this because I died ten years ago.

The Mona I used to be died on 24 November 2011, on a street called Mohamed Mahmoud, near Tahrir Square, Cairo. Riot police beat her, broke her left arm and right hand, sexually assaulted her and then dragged her to their supervising officer who threatened to have her gang-raped by more of his men. She was detained incommunicado for six hours by the Interior Ministry and another six by military intelligence who blindfolded and interrogated her.

When she was finally released, she bequeathed me a new life and the things she could not say. The past ten years have been the Decade of Saying All that I Could Not Say.

Like nesting dolls – where one doll opens to reveal an identical doll fitting inside it, which then opens up to reveal another identical doll inside it, and so on – every time I spoke a secret I found a more intense version of myself which in turn demanded I say more of what I could not say, and so on, until I got to the core of my silence.

I wrote about taking off my hijab, which I wore for nine years. I wrote about being raised to wait until marriage before I had sex. I wrote some more about the latter, to amend it and say that I was raised to wait until marriage

before I had *sex with another person* – and I obeyed – although I'd been having sex with myself since I was eleven years old. (And thank all the goddesses for that, or else I would have lost my fucking mind waiting for that Egyptian, Muslim cisgender dick to make a decent woman out of me.)

One broken silence led to another silence nestled within it, which led to another, and so on.

I wrote about the two abortions I had. I wrote about menopause and how it was affecting my sex drive. I was on a roll. Shame had nothing on me. When you are shameless you cannot be shamed.

What more? What else? What was that smallest doll nesting inside all these silences I'd smashed?

It took Ireland and Bosnia to force a reckoning with my nesting dolls of secrets.

Of all the countries I have travelled to for work in the Western world, I have always felt most understood in Ireland. Unlike many other European countries which prefer to deny and distance themselves from talking about where I am from – Egypt and the surrounding region – and say, 'It's shit over there', Ireland understood: 'It's shit over here too'. The stranglehold of the Catholic Church on everything from politics to education to geopolitics fostered understanding and empathy whenever I spoke there.

In 2015, Ireland became the first country to hold a referendum on marriage equality. The reckoning that such a referendum was required inspired Ursula Halligan, one of Ireland's most high-profile journalists, to come out at the age of fifty-four. (At the time of writing, I am also fifty-four). She wrote poignantly about a secret she thought she would take to her grave.

'I was a good Catholic girl, growing up in 1970s Ireland where homosexuality was an evil perversion,'[1] she wrote.

‘It was never openly talked about, but I knew it was the worst thing on the face of the earth. So when I fell in love with a girl in my class in school, I was terrified.’ Halligan’s words gave me whiplash.

When I was sixteen years old, I was a good Muslim girl, growing up in Saudi Arabia where homosexuality was an evil perversion. I too fell in love with a girl in my class. But unlike Halligan – and this I now realise had been my denial and distance – I was in love with a girl and a boy at the same time and thought everyone else was too. I did not have a word for it, and I could not explore it beyond feeling jealous when the girl I was in love with told me she was in love with a boy and crestfallen when she did not say I, too, was an object of her love. It would take another three decades until I kissed a woman. But, tellingly, it would also take another decade until I kissed a man.

At around the age of seventeen, I began having nightmares that I had married the wrong man. Even when, at the age of twenty-one, I left gender-segregated Saudi Arabia for the more relaxed Egypt, my country of birth, I wanted very little to do with men. I was that good Muslim girl who was waiting for marriage and, much like Halligan, poured myself into work.

When I read Halligan’s coming-out essay, I marvelled at the almost identical teenage love for a girl and I wondered how our journalism careers had helped us hide. I knew that I, at least, was hiding in plain sight.

Was I brave? Of course I was: I wrote articles that exposed the human rights violations of a regime that tapped my phone, had me followed, summoned me for interrogation at State Security several times, threatened to imprison me, and eventually made good on its threats that night on Mohamed Mahmoud Street in November 2011.

Was I brave? Of course I was not. I could not say, for the longest time, that I desired men *and* women. How could I when, for the longest time, men alone were off limits. How was I to figure out what I desired when desire for anyone was off limits?

Still, I hid in plain sight.

Before I left Egypt for the United States in 2000, my feminism had focused solely on misogyny, which I understood was protected and enabled by patriarchy. I knew there was an LGBTQ+ community in Egypt, as there is in all countries. When I attended a conference in 2004 for LGBTQ+ Muslims organised by al-Fatiha, one of the first ever organisations of its kind, I began to combine feminism with the fight for LGBTQ+ rights. Our enemy was the same: the patriarchy, specifically a heteronormative patriarchy that privileged heterosexual relationships. Several more Muslim LGBTQ+ organisations exist today.

Soon after, I began to openly support queer people and issues. Some assumed me to be a good ally and asked me to blurb their books or began to follow me on social media, knowing they had an empathic and enthusiastic supporter. Others would slide into my DMs where they would be met with a kind and friendly, 'I am flattered but I am not gay.'

When I travelled to Beirut in 2009, I spent my first evening at the kind of event I never imagined I could attend in the Middle East at the time. In a theatre on Hamra Street, two women on stage who openly identified as lesbian read in Arabic and English from a book being released that night called *Bareed Mista3jil* ('Express Mail'), a collection of forty-one personal, anonymous oral narratives by lesbian, bisexual, queer and questioning women, and the trans community in Lebanon. The stories cover women from across the country – rural and urban,