

Chapter 2: Laila

LAILA

BY **KHALEEDA SHARIF**

A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION AND TRANSLATION

BY **HELEN SHAW**

In 1942 Khaleeda Sharif published a short story, *Laila*, which shook the Urdu-speaking world. Born in Lucknow, India, Khaleeda Sharif was part of an aristocratic, literary family. At the age of nineteen, Khaleeda left home to join the literary movement Aag or Fire. The Aag collective's explicit purpose was to challenge societal norms. Its manifesto states:

We live in a sick society, plagued by an overbearing patriarchy, a decadent feudalism and a corrupt polity. We witness the exploitation of the peasant by the master, the degradation of the wife by the husband, and we refuse to be silent any longer. Our pain ignites our pens, our pens are the fire that will burn through the façade; through our writing we aim to expose the corruption and hypocrisy of these institutions. And if in the process we shame, humiliate or anger you, then we have achieved our purpose.

Khaleeda Sharif is one of the signatories to this manifesto and one could even speculate that she helped to draft it. Her story *Laila* appears in the October 1942 of *Naya Daur* [The New Age], the literary journal published by the collective. The English language press, closely followed by the vernacular press, vehemently denounced the story as immoral and licentious. The few defenders of the story were silenced when a blasphemy case was brought before the author and the collective as a whole. Undeterred, Sharif fought the case. Unfortunately, she was assassinated on the day that the case was decided in her favor.

In what follows, I present Khaleeda Sharif's short story, *Laila*, in its first English translation. At the end of the story I offer three different feminist readings of the story, which I hope will unravel some of its complexities.

DR. HELEN SHAW

BOSTON, 2006

Laila

BY KRUPA SHANDILYA

Who doesn't know the story of Laila's love for Majnun?

This too is a love story, or rather a story of impossible love, but not the kind you are imagining. Listen closely to the story of Laila now....

The story begins when Laila's mother sends her to buy vegetables. This is something Laila does every day, and today was no different. But Laila had wandered to the market very slowly today, lost in her thoughts. By the time she reached the market it was evening and the vegetable sellers were packing up. Laila panicked. She looked down the street and saw an old lady who hadn't started packing yet. She sprinted over and picked up a bag of onions, a sprig of coriander and some tomatoes. Today there was no time to haggle, so she thrust a few coins in the old lady's calloused hand. The old lady held her hand for a moment. Laila could feel her rough, papery skin trace a figure on her palm. Frightened, she loosened her hand from the old lady's grasp and thrust the vegetables in her bag.

A moment later the old lady had disappeared. The street was eerily empty. It had been light a few minutes ago, but the pale, shimmering moon rubbed out the last signs of twilight. The night had descended swiftly and silently. She had never gone to the market this late, and felt quite nervous. She hurried her steps and had almost reached the end of the bazaar when she heard a rough, husky voice peal through the sky.

Laila was transfixed. She couldn't move, couldn't breathe. The voice gripped her with both hands and pinned her to the earth. It coursed through her body like a sheet of rain, wiping her clean. And then slowly, gently, the voice seeped into her, filled her, swelled her until she was nothing but the voice.

She watched as men, young and old wearing fragrant jasmine garlands on their wrists filed past without so much as glancing at her. A portly bearded man came lumbering down the street and before Laila could step out of his way, he had walked right into her. Laila began apologizing, but the man walked straight through her. Puzzled, she held up her arm and noticed that it had become translucent. She was disappearing rapidly.

With all her strength she plucked herself from the earth and began running home. As she left the street behind her, her body reappeared slowly, one limb at a time. By the time she reached home, she was whole again. She thrust the bag of vegetables into her mother's arms and hurried into her room, locking the door behind her. She quickly removed her clothes and stood naked before the mirror. Yes, she was here, solid flesh, but her skin had become luminous, and a triangle of light hovered above her pubis.

She heard the lock click as her mother tried to enter the room. Laila pulled on her clothes and opened the door. Her mother stepped aside, startled. Without a word,

Laila went to the kitchen and began the process of lighting the stove. Once her mother had turned away, Laila tucked two pieces of coal into her pocket.

At dinner that night she complained of a headache and went to her room before the others had finished eating. She lay in bed and conjured the voice, its deep, husky longings rippling through her body. The soft blue curtains in her room breathed and sighed, swaying slightly even though there was no breeze. Laila rose from the bed, lay newspaper on the floor, removed the two pieces of coal from her pocket and drew the voice with swift, sure strokes. A naked woman--hands, body, breasts. And then on her pubis she wrote *laam alif*. La Oblivion. The lines burned and shimmered on the paper.

Then she removed her clothes, lay down on her bed and waited. She heard the paper rustle and turned to watch it embrace the curtain and slide to the floor. The curtain simmered and sighed. And then the voice emerged and came to her. A naked woman, a perfect blue form. She lay beside Laila and began stroking her gently. Laila felt her breasts swell, her nipples harden and contract. The soft strokes became insistent and Laila quivered. She rolled over to touch the voice, caress it in turn. Hand moved to neck, then breast, then the gentle roll of the stomach and then softly she put her hands between her parted thighs. Laila moaned and sighed. *Laam alif*. La. The no which is a yes.

The next morning Laila opened her eyes and lay languorously on the bed. She stretched out her arms and felt the warmth of her pillow, the damp moistness below her groin. She rolled over and looked for her drawing. The newspaper lay on the floor by the curtain. She bent down to pick it up. In place of her sketch there was a silhouette of a naked woman. And there, right in her the center were the words *laam alif*, burnt into the floor.

THIS DESIRING BODY:
THREE READINGS OF KHALEEDA SHARIF'S LAILA
BY HELEN SHAW

The story *Laila* begins with a reference to the star-crossed lovers Laila and - Majnun (also known as Qais).¹ The first extant version of the story is by Nizami, a sixteenth-century Persian poet and has been retold countless times since then. Laila and Qais meet when they are very young and fall in love. Qais is the son of a tribal leader who has sworn enmity with Laila's father, the leader of an opposing tribe. Hearing of Laila's love for Qais, her father locks her in the house where she mopes and cries. Qais, rejected by his father, leaves his home and wanders the streets singing of his love for Laila. He acquires a reputation for madness and with it, a new name, *Majnun*, or the one possessed by madness [lit. one possessed by djinns].

Laila's father refuses to marry his daughter to a madman and arranges her marriage to a wealthy, handsome nobleman instead. Laila threatens to kill herself if her new husband dares to share her bed. Hearing of Laila's marriage, Majnun abandons the town and wanders to the desert, singing of his love for Laila. Laila eventually dies of heartbreak. Majnun hearing the news rushes to her graveside and cries tears of blood, until he loses all his blood and dies there.

The story of Laila and Majnun serves as both a counterpoint and a corollary to Sharif's story *Laila*. While there are several points of contrast between the two stories, in this essay, I focus on the use of *laam alif*, two letters from the Urdu alphabet which form the word La, and which are crucial to both stories.

The word La means oblivion and is also the Sufi call to the divine. The prayer *La illallah* means I am Allah's and Allah is mine. In other words, it means--in Allah I lose myself and find oblivion, which is another name for Allah. The Sufi doctrine of tawhid or oneness insists on the unity between god and man. They have been condemned for this blasphemy by other branches of Islamic thought, who maintain a hierarchy between God and man. In the context of the story of Laila and Majnun, Majnun wrote the letters *laam alif* for Laila because like the divine lover, he was part of Laila and Laila was a part of him.

In this paper, I think about the significance of La in the context of three disparate theoretical contexts—Freudian psychoanalysis, French feminist psychoanalysis [L'écriture féminine], and finally Foucauldian feminism. The Freudian/Lacanian psychoanalytical reading posits Laam Alif as signifying a fear of castration. Both the other two readings that follow undo this reading, suggesting instead that Laam Alif signifies the multitudinous pleasures and plurality of female sexuality.

A Freudian/Lacanian Psychoanalysis Reading of Laam Alif

In the context of Freudian psychoanalysis, the words Laam Alif on the pubis suggests both the fear of castration and the pubis as the place of oblivion, the *vagina*

¹ See Nizami, *The Story of Laila Majnun* (trans.) Rudolph Gelpke (Omega Publications; 1996).

dentata [the toothed vagina]. Laila paints the words Laam Alif because of the terror presented by the specter of female homosexuality. This fear is suggested by an earlier moment in the text when she hears the voice for the first time and realizes that she is becoming invisible. Instead of embracing her invisibility, she runs home. This suggests that she fears becoming invisible or more metaphorically being consumed in the oneness of female sexuality. Hence she externalizes this fear onto her drawing of the woman, hoping to create a barrier between herself and this other, which is also her. We see here that she has internalized the male fear of castration, for the pubis appears to her as *vagina dentata*, the toothed vagina, which will tear her apart and swallow her. The lovemaking scene that commences after this is autoerotic confirmation of her (hetero)sexuality. Although the story doesn't explicitly state as such, the fingers entering the vagina could be read as the Lacanian phallus, that which sutures her lack.

A French Feminist Psychoanalytical Reading of Laam Alif

From the perspective of French feminist re-readings of psychoanalysis, Laam Alif on the pubis is a classic instance of *L'écriture Feminine* or writing the body as both the origin and the endpoint of desire. As Luce Irigaray argues in her provocative essay, "When our Lips Speak Together," woman writes desire in "white ink," her pleasurable orgasmic ejaculation.² In this instance, Laila embraces her lesbian lover and recognizes women's genitalia as the place of oblivion. Oblivion here is not constructed as fear of death, but rather in the vein of psychoanalytic feminism the obliteration of self and other. As Irigaray argues, women's bodies are not divided by a patriarchal order, the two lips speak as one, there is no "you" and "I" in their pleasure but simply an "all" (Irigaray 79).

This reading aligns with the Sufi context in which Laam Alif means simultaneously no and yes or rather the no, which is a yes. The no represents death and the yes life, for it is only in death that one achieves god. In the context of the short story, Laam Alif signifies the multitudinous pleasures of the female body, particularly the moment of climax, the orgasm, or the "little death" to quote Emily Dickinson, which is also life. The climax is also a moment of ecstatic union with the other (god), wherein the boundaries between self and other disappear.

A Foucauldian Feminist Reading of Laam Alif

In the context of Foucauldian feminist thought, power resides in the woman's pubis, the origin of life. Thus when Laila inscribes the words Laam Alif on the pubis it is meant as an act of defiance against patriarchal structures of power. Note that in the original story, Majnun – not Laila – writes Laam Alif. By usurping his words, which incidentally are also the Sufi call to prayer, Laila asserts her power in both the earthly world and the divine world. In this context we can read the woman in her bed as an autoerotic moment—Laila does not need a lover (Majnun) for she is at once divine

² See also Cixous, Hélène. "The laugh of the Medusa." 1976 (1975): 245-64.

beloved and mortal lover. Thus when they make love it is Laila loving herself and god, who here is also a woman, and in this disrupting, quite literally, the patriarchal status quo.