

Mother & Tongue

There is an age-old frustration that survives time and geography—a feeling that follows those who move between a mother tongue and a borrowed one. Inherent to the act of translation is the fact that something vital is always lost in its pursuit. Meaning does not simply transfer from one language to another. Instead, it is negotiated, diminished, sometimes betrayed. Through this process, one discovers that translation is not an act of preservation, but of sacrifice—where something essential must be surrendered so that something intelligible can remain.

I understand this deeply when it comes to my Arabic mother tongue. The language of my ancestors luxuriates in excess, ornament, cadence, and metaphor. Its words carry the spirit of the intricacy that adorns our visual culture—the kind found in vibrant patterned fabrics, palms embellished with henna, gold-threaded calligraphy. The Arabic tongue insists on feeling fully; it tears across boundaries and accommodates the vastness of love, grief, and devotion. It succeeds in accomplishing the impossible—shaping the unspeakable into language and allowing others to recognize themselves in it.

Yet, in journeying to render such sentiments in English, I find I fail. Arabic passion, when rendered in English, loses its lustrous identity: where Arabic exhausts feeling, English abbreviates it; where Arabic embellishes, English sanitizes. Metaphors flatten, exaggerations are mistaken for

melodrama, and what was once passionate and precise becomes muted. The essence of what I mean seems to dissipate somewhere beyond my reach, as elusive as bukhoo smoke rising from hot charcoal. I reach for more words anyway while the foreigner glares, stitching together approximations, unable to shake the feeling of frustration that overtakes me in the process. Somehow, the heart of what I wish to communicate seems to vanish into thin air.

The disparity that results as a consequence of translation has long been a quiet struggle for me. I have learned that certain things will never be understood, that they simply resist intelligibility once they escape their native tongue. In this failure of understanding, we are made to feel alone.

Though English is the language in which I was schooled and socialized, it remains restrained in my life, perpetually ill-equipped to bear the emotional density Arabic demands. I have often wondered whether this failure is not merely linguistic, but cultural. What if English struggles to accommodate such vastness of feeling because it has not been shaped by the same histories of martyrdom, collective grief, endurance, and survival? This is not to claim Arabic as an uncomplicated or universally indigenous language; in many regions it arrived through conquest, replacing or overshadowing older tongues, which is a discussion of its own. Yet, over centuries, it became the vessel through which those communities endured dispossession, articulated loss, and made meaning of survival—often under successive regimes of foreign rule. In Arabic, language is worked relentlessly—pressed, stretched, and exhausted until it approximates the full weight of lived experience. We dig through language until we find something capable of holding the

magnitude of what we feel. English, by contrast, rarely endeavors to do this with the same passion and urgency. Formed within histories of dominance rather than dispossession, it has not been forced to articulate feeling at its furthest edge. Perhaps translation falters, then, not because Arabic exceeds language, but because the depths of its passion are unfamiliar to those who shaped English and the worlds it has long governed. Even in its most intimate register, English fails to carry the affective depth Arabic sustains effortlessly, even in casual speech, even in the smallest units of language themselves.

I could write an entire book series on Arabic linguistic intimacies that refuse to translate into English. Take the word *tqbarni* (تَقْبِرْني): a single utterance that holds an entire philosophy of devotion. Derived from *qabr* (grave) and *-ni* (me), it literally means “bury me,” a plea addressed to the beloved to be the one who survives, sparing the speaker the agony of life without them. Spoken on its own, it functions as a complete sentence. That such affective depth can be contained within a single word feels miraculous.

Tqbarni is not an anomaly; it belongs to a wider linguistic logic in which intimacy is embedded not in declaration but in placement—where feeling is located within the body, ethics, and relation rather than abstracted into sentiment. This is evident in the phrase *min ‘uyūni* (من عيوني), literally “from my eyes,” spoken in response to a request. What English renders as a flat “of course” or “no problem,” Arabic transforms into an offering drawn from the most guarded part of the self—consent expressed through care, honor, and proximity.

The same moral orientation surfaces in *kasart khāṭiri* (كسرت خاطري), which translates as “you broke my inner self.” This phrase is uttered in response to another’s vulnerability or misfortune. The *khāṭir* is not quite the heart and not quite the mind; it is the delicate space where dignity, hope, and emotional balance reside. To say one’s *khāṭir* has been broken is not to claim injury, but to acknowledge being unsettled by another’s pain. The phrase permits sorrow without dramatics, compassion without spectacle. English offers approximations—*my feelings were hurt, it really affected me*—but these miss the outward-facing, empathetic nature of *khāṭir*. In Arabic, feeling is not merely expressed; it is situated, embodied, and shared.

This excess of intimacy is beautiful—but it is not neutral. Language does not merely describe feeling; it trains us in how to belong to one another. When love is consistently articulated through elevation, offering, and self-effacement, closeness begins to blur into obligation. Certain linguistic habits reveal the self is shaped in relation to others before it is allowed to stand alone. In this way, Arabic does not simply preserve intimacy; it quietly reinforces unity as virtue, conflation and co-dependence as ideal. To love well is to collapse distance, to place oneself beneath, to make the self porous. And while this produces extraordinary tenderness, it can also seed a lifelong tension: between devotion and autonomy, between belonging and escape. It is within this tension that one particular intimacy has always unsettled me most: the way I have, since a child, called out to my mother—*mama*—and how she always answers by calling me *mama* back.

This tenderness is not exclusive to mothers–fathers, too, participate in and reproduce these linguistic patterns of care–but it is the maternal articulation of this intimacy that I wish to focus on here. In Arabic, this exchange signifies the closeness and fusion inherent to motherhood and kinship. It recognizes and perpetuates the notion that within this bond, the self bleeds into the other, that love collapses distance and hierarchy. Devotion is articulated through identification, love through likeness. When my mother calls me *mama*, she confesses how inseparable I am from her–how her identity, her body, her life bend around mine. It is an intimacy English cannot quite hold: a reciprocity of naming that gestures toward a love so consuming it resists translation altogether.

I still recall the expressions of near-disgust when the pale-haired, blue-eyed English expats at the British school I attended first heard this exchange. “Why does she call you that?” they would ask, brows furrowed, amused and unsettled in equal measure. I never knew how to explain it then. I lacked the language to articulate that this habit spoke to a philosophy of closeness, one that understands love not as separation but as fusion. Aristotle writes that a friend is “a soul dwelling in two bodies.” The linguistic habit I describe here echoes this same sentiment: *you are part of me; I am a part of you*. This is the affective depth English struggles to hold linguistically; a love so proximate it refuses to distinguish where one person ends and the other begins. Yet as I have grown older, I have come to understand that, despite its revelation of wondrous closeness, this same linguistic intimacy also carries within it the potential for harm.

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Many Arab mothers are women whose identities have been largely subsumed by motherhood. I am careful in making this claim, as I do not wish to reproduce Western narratives that flatten Arab women into a single story of oppression, nor to deny the many exceptions that exist. My maternal grandmother, for instance, came from a family of scholars and diplomats and was enthusiastically encouraged to pursue higher education abroad. The agency this afforded her became a saving grace years later, when she divorced my grandfather and was able to provide for herself independently; their separation was possible precisely because she was economically self-sufficient.

Yet this experience was—and often still is—not the norm. In my observation, selfhood outside marriage and motherhood is generally neither enthusiastically encouraged nor materially supported across many Arab societies. Economic dependence, social expectation, and cultural conditioning narrow the field of possibility, leaving many women with few viable alternatives. For such women, motherhood does not become one facet of life; it becomes its defining feature. Within these constraints, the absence of personal agency is often redirected into the governance of the child's life, narrowing the child's freedom in ways that mirror the mother's own restrictions. When a woman has been encouraged to pour her entire life into motherhood, her child becomes the measure of that devotion's success. The child must turn out a certain way—respectable, legible, restrained—otherwise the mother's one sanctioned pursuit risks being deemed a failure. In this context, calling one's child *mama* can be read simultaneously as

tenderness and erasure. Language does double work here: it carries profound love, but it also collapses boundaries.

For many of us—especially those growing up at a distance from our cultural ecosystems, whether through migration or, as in my case, through years spent in foreign schools that shaped much of my formative life—there is a constant negotiation between selfhood and obligation. Conditioned into this dynamic, one’s becoming is measured as a reflection of someone else’s success. Individuality becomes difficult to inhabit when every action is read through parental expectation, when self-discovery must occur behind closed doors, and the self that emerges cannot be shared because it deviates from what was desired. Again and again, it returns to image. There is none other than language itself that perpetuates this dynamic, revealing a deep trouble in our culture—the way love and surveillance are braided so tightly they are, at times, difficult to tell apart.

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What I have come to learn, over time, is how certain linguistic habits in my mother tongue do not merely reflect cultural expectations; they actively rehearse them. They teach us, early and often, that a child’s becoming must align with parental sacrifice, that deviation risks not just disappointment but social judgment: people will talk, shame will ripple outward, the mother’s devotion will be called into question. In this way, language quietly scripts obligation: it narrows the acceptable contours of a life, ensuring that the child turns out in a way that justifies the

parent's own erasures. What begins as intimacy congeals into expectation, then into a moral demand.

What I am circling, then, is not a simple question of language alone. It is tempting to ask whether words themselves enforce boundaries, or whether the ways we speak are merely symptoms of deeper cultural attitudes—of identities that have never been taught to separate cleanly. Perhaps it is both. Language does not create these dynamics from nothing, but it gives them shape, rhythm, and endurance. It teaches us how to love, and just as much, how—and who—we are permitted to be.

When I sit with these linguistic habits long enough, I begin to see how insistently they rehearse unity—not as harmony, but as replication. The child is imagined as a continuation, a mirror through which the parent's sacrifices, values, and social standing are reflected back to the world. For many women whose lives have been narrowed by economic dependence, cultural expectation, or the absence of sanctioned alternatives, motherhood becomes the sole site of selfhood, and the child its proof. Within this structure, a child's deviation is never merely personal; it is read as betrayal, as failure, as a rupture in the mother's moral narrative. I have felt this pressure in varying degrees throughout my life. I have long experienced my identity as something surveilled, calibrated, and constrained—expected to align with inherited customs and beliefs that do not account for the life I have lived, the worlds I have encountered, or the ways my vision has inevitably diverged. My parents and I are separate universes, shaped by different histories, and yet language insists on our sameness. To want to live fully, expansively—to move

through all tones and shades of life—is often recast as excess, impropriety, even threat. In this way, love becomes conditional, freedom reframed as disobedience, and the self something one must learn to rehearse in private. This has been one of my most enduring battles: to remain tethered to my language, my culture, my mother, while struggling to believe that separation need not mean abandonment.

In searching for an alternative ethic of love, I find myself returning, again and again, to Khalil Gibran. In an ideal world, we would have listened more closely when he spoke of children:

Your children are not your children.

They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.

They come through you but not from you,

And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.

You may give them your love but not your thoughts,

For they have their own thoughts.

You may house their bodies but not their souls,

For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.

You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.

For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.

In these lines, Gibran offers a vision of love untethered from possession, of care without

claim. It is a radical proposition in cultures where devotion has so often been expressed through closeness, mirroring, and collapse. Gibran does not instruct us to love less—only to love without enclosure.

Crucially, Gibran's words do not reject intimacy, closeness, or community— all values so integral and beautiful within Arab culture. He instead insists on a healthy reorientation of it. We are reminded that a child arrives already as a self, and that the passage into adulthood can either allow that self to blossom fully or painfully repress it. Within parent–child relationships, the terms of this unfolding are often set early. Love, at its most generous, affirms the whole of another person without condition. Yet in many such dynamics, love becomes contingent—granted through compliance, likeness, and restraint in accordance with cultural outlines. Linguistic habits within the mother tongue can cement this conditionality, embedding it more deeply with each repetition.

Still, my mother tongue remains sacred to me. There are moments it is lush with mourning and longing, dazzling in its generosity, precious beyond measure. Even when it resists translation—when my peers, shaped by other mother tongues, cannot fully receive what I mean—I know these meanings are not solitary. There exists a community for whom they are already understood.

My mother tongue is an ocean: vast, ancient, and alive with feeling. But like any ocean, it carries depths and undercurrents that are not always visible from the surface.

Within its beauty reside assumptions we inherit—about closeness, sacrifice, and belonging—that can, at times, narrow the lives they mean to hold. The intimacy it offers is powerful, but it is not without cost. When devotion hardens into expectation, when love collapses into likeness, the consequence is not merely linguistic but lived: shaping how we are allowed to love, and who we are permitted to be.

Works Cited

Gibran, Khalil. *The Prophet*. 1923. Alfred A. Knopf, 1974.