

# Petal by Petal:



Laïla Mestari, *Chanson pour Amina*, 2020, video still

# Feminine Desire as a Conduit for Home

“As long as you were here  
your hands smelled of Red Roses

Now that you are gone  
Red Roses smell of your hands”

— Ziba Maleki, 2022<sup>1</sup>

From a young age, my mom taught me that her name in Arabic means “morning dew on a rose.” Later in life, she took me out for my first rose tea at a Chinese cafe and told me everything about taking care of yourself using roses and rose water, explaining how she’d make tea from her hedges every morning growing up in Beqaa Valley. When I asked my mom if we should buy rose tea so she could make it at home, she said that Earl Grey was her favourite now. She had lost the ritual because it was connected to a place no longer accessible to her. In diaspora, her relationship with rose water carried on, becoming a stand-in for the plant that was once tethered to the ground.

“When you say ‘rose,’ I think of elegance,” my mom told me. “When you say ‘Lebanon,’ all I see are painful memories of war, sadness, and grief. Therefore, Lebanon is not home for me.” My mom, sister, and I promised we would get rose tattoos for each other. I had a three-stem rose tattooed on my leg that mimics the design on a plastic tablecloth roll I got from a Middle Eastern grocery store. My new short film *The Landmarks of Memory* (2023) includes this tattoo performance ritual, as well as archival footage<sup>2</sup> of a pre-war flower shop bearing the name “Lebanon’s Rose دارة لبنان.” My window exhibition of the same name commemorates my mother’s parents who were killed in the Lebanese Civil War.

There is an abundance of collective love for roses in Southwest Asian/Middle Eastern and North African (SWANA) cultures. They are revered as a transcultural plant, symbol, and medicine used in cuisine, health, wellness, art, and politics. Across the SWANA region, roses are indigenous to the land and also grown commercially. Damask rose (named after the capital of Syria, where it was first cultivated) is the most popular variety, known for its rose water, oil, and perfume distillation. Morocco, Oman, Iran, Armenia, Saudi Arabia, and other countries celebrate rose festivals annually, and even more places, including Lebanon, celebrate rose season through collaborative harvesting, rose water processing, hikes, and workshops. Iran produces 90 percent of the world’s rose water, which is enjoyed in drinks and desserts, as well as for skincare, therapeutic, and religious purposes.

“Roses are my companions for everything,” Lebanese American Layla Feghali writes in her co-edited herbal and healing guidebook *Li Beirut*.<sup>3</sup> “I especially love to drink them with sage. They soften my ancestral wounds and longing, mend my deepest heartache and betrayal, and help me find connection. [...] They feel like the love of all my Tetas across the ages, holding me in protection and prayer.” In Feghali’s forthcoming book *The Land in Our Bones*, she asks how we find our way home amid displacement: “What does it mean to be of a place, when extraction and empire destroy its geographies? [...] What do we rediscover when we look beyond what’s been lost and tend to what remains?”<sup>4</sup>

Fostering a sense of home can look like forming more intentional relationships with ancestral plants while incorporating them into the everyday. Beyond personal consumption, roses are used by artists and activists to express feminine desire through remembrance,





Both: Ziba Maleki with assistance from Shirin Fahimi and translation by Khashayar Mohammadi, from the series *phullo, phallo, phirse* (grow, flower and feast again), 2022  
COURTESY OF ZIBA MALEKI



Ziba Maleki with assistance from Shirin Fahimi and translation by Khashayar Mohammadi, from the series *phullo, phallo, phirse* (grow, flower and feast again), 2022  
COURTESY OF ZIBA MALEKI

unrest, and intergenerational connection. It is no wonder that many SWANA artists reference roses and grandmothers together.

*phullo, phallo, phirse* (grow, flower and feast again) (2022)—an Instagram storytelling project by the South Asian Visual Arts Centre (SAVAC), Toronto, in partnership with Waard Ward collective’s community rose garden—featured four diasporic women sharing the ways in which they “tend to their beloved rose bushes and how roses tint their way of seeing the world.”<sup>5</sup> Kurdish/Turkish Canadian Ziba Maleki<sup>6</sup> shared an audio and archival photo series that tells the story of how her grandmother, at nine years old, sat in a room of courters before being taken away to her new husband’s house. Maleki remembers how her grandmother picked roses from the neighbour’s garden and used them for food or tea. Now that she is gone, “every Red Rose conjures her memory in our minds.”<sup>7</sup>

Maleki’s grandmother used to recite from a poem: “The Red Roses are plucked and put on a cloth to dry / I hope each girl is married to a person who she loves.” In the project, Maleki’s sister and cousin each sing their version of this from memory. The protectiveness and

resilience conveyed in the words underscore the nuances of traditional women’s labour: their duty to the home, their lack of agency in love, and their guidance of girls in the family. Here, roses accompany the incantation for safety and sexual liberation, becoming a matriarchal symbol invoked through Maleki’s project of remembrance.

Gesture, or embodied response, is an important way SWANA artists work with roses to address nostalgia for home and landscape. Based in Montreal, artist Lâïla Mestari of the North African diaspora was on a residency in Trois-Pistoles, QC, when she noticed wild roses growing by a creek and felt called to create a performance with the land. Her three-minute short film *Chanson pour Amina* (Song for Amina) (2020) opens with a landscape photograph floating on the surface of the water, with rose petals scattered across the image.<sup>8</sup> The photograph appears to be a spread torn from what could have been a tourism or photo book. Mestari’s hands enter the frame as she proceeds to push the ripped papers into the water with a stick and smother the images with seaweed-covered rocks to “put it back in the land.” When the scene becomes activated by Mestari’s intervention, the rose petals begin to dance and flow.

This performance is dedicated to her maternal grandmother, Amina. Rose petals connect Mestari to all of her grandmothers and to Moroccan rituals of care, including roses used in food, medicine, and tea. For her, roses, and especially their smell, are connected to matrilineal memories, Moroccan culture, and the feminine body.

As symbols tied to loss, love, and desire, I also think of the power that roses embody in women's resistances, queer resistances, and grief rituals. For example, the death of 22-year-old Kurdish Iranian Jina (Mahsa) Amini in September 2022 at the hands of the morality police sparked an unprecedented dissent in Iran and a global movement under the slogan "Women, Life, Freedom." Demonstrations included posters of Amini placed on the ground and covered in roses in vigil. The online dissemination of these images fostered a sense of collective mourning and conviction toward the cause. On Amini's gravestone, the handwritten Kurdish message translates to "Jina dear, you won't die. Your name will become a code." Here, roses signal to grief and injustice—a proclamation of care and action.

Roses have appeared in several other movements, including the Syrian revolution as part of the wider Arab Spring. In poet-scholar Banah Ghadbian's PhD dissertation "Ululating from the Underground: Syrian Women's Protests, Performances, and Pedagogies under Siege," she explains how Syrian women and youth took to the streets at the onset of the Syrian Revolution in 2011 with roses, olive branches, and water bottles in hand. Described as a woman-led civil disobedience movement, Ghadbian writes about how these objects "became imprinted in Syrian cultural memory as peaceful, creative symbols of the Syrian Revolution."<sup>9</sup>

Activated through protesting bodies, the objects of resistance become icons in their own right—a symbol imbued with collective rage and vitality, a reminder that the work continues. "This image of roses and water stood in sharp contrast to regime police gunning protestors down in cold blood," Ghadbian writes. "The art of the Syrian Revolution becomes a living world imprinted into our collective cultural memories when reality has 'died' in Syria. Art is an affirmation of subjectivity, a creative truth that exists for itself. It also aesthetically embodies what Jose Muñoz calls a methodology of hope, a futurism, a form of queer utopia which takes the form of everyday aesthetic and performative practices."<sup>10</sup>

Art in the everyday is an essential part of my own queer praxis—and roses are there, in their bountiful velvet and delicate strength, reminding me of freedom, desire, and the pursuit of pleasure. Roses remind us of the inherent love and wisdom of generations of women that paved the way for us to live. They are a remnant of home—a difficult word for many of us whose lives and families have been impacted by violence, war, colonization, occupation, and forced displacement. Roses will follow us everywhere as medicine, offering comfort, beauty, and healing. They will nourish our every yearning so that we might embrace wholeness and quench our hearts with the passion and softness needed each day.

**Christina Hajjar** is a Lebanese artist, writer, and cultural worker based in Winnipeg on Treaty 1 territory. Her practice considers intergenerational inheritance, domesticity, and place through diaspora, body archives, and cultural iconography. Her writing has appeared in *BlackFlash Magazine*, *C Magazine*, *The Uniter*, *CV2*, *Prairie Fire*, and *PaperWait*. [christinahajjar.com](http://christinahajjar.com)

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 South Asian Visual Arts Centre (@savac\_), Instagram, August 17, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/ChXfumSlqf->
- 2 *Beirut, Never Again*, directed by Jocelyne Saab (Lebanon, 1976).
- 3 SWANA Ancestral Hub, *Li Beirut*, accessed June 19, 2023, 33, [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/53682deae4b03a1661ad89a9/t/6419593c164e1e2eadacc64/1679382860987/li+beirut+bilingual+%5Bcom+pressed+for+web%5D\\_com+pressed.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/53682deae4b03a1661ad89a9/t/6419593c164e1e2eadacc64/1679382860987/li+beirut+bilingual+%5Bcom+pressed+for+web%5D_com+pressed.pdf)
- 4 Feghali, *The Land in Our Bones* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2024), <https://www.kobo.com/gb/en/ebook/the-land-in-our-bones>.
- 5 "Ishtar's International Network of Feral Gardens," SAVAC, Toronto, April–October 2022, <https://savac.net/ishtar-2022>
- 6 South Asian Visual Arts Centre (@savac\_), Instagram, August 15, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/ChSTTQILSj>
- 7 South Asian Visual Arts Centre (@savac\_), August 17, 2022.
- 8 *Chanson pour Amina*, written and directed by Laila Mestari (2020), <https://vimeo.com/447916560>
- 9 Banah Ghadbian, "Ululating from the Underground: Syrian Women's Protests, Performances, and Pedagogies under Siege" (PhD dissertation, University of California San Diego, 2021), 221, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6j07n7j1>
- 10 Ibid.