



BRILL

On the Significance of Secrecy in the Medieval Arabic Romances

Author(s): Ruqayya Yasmine Khan

Source: *Journal of Arabic Literature*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (2000), pp. 238-253

Published by: [BRILL](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4183417>

Accessed: 23/08/2011 10:51

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



BRILL is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of Arabic Literature*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SECRECY IN THE MEDIEVAL ARABIC ROMANCES

In this essay,¹ I analyze the keeping and divulging of secrets as they relate to aspects of love and sexuality portrayed mainly in a selection of medieval Arabic romances known as the 'Udhri love stories. The Arabic word 'Udhri means "virginal" and these Arabic love stories, which are considered to be chaste romances by many scholarly critics of Arabic literature, contain what I term a dialectic of secrecy and revelation in their constructions of intimacy and sexuality.² It should be noted that although these stories purport to be from the earliest Islamic times, they appeared in their canonical form in tenth-century C.E. compilations. I therefore treat them as the literary products of that particular century, especially since their historicity is so problematic. A few words about the phenomenon of secrecy are in order before I discuss the dialectic of secrecy and revelation and its relation to love and sexuality in these Arabic works.³

The Content and the Form of the Secret

There are two key works on secrets and secrecy that have influenced my approach in this article. One is a locus classicus on secrecy entitled "The Secret and the Secret Society" by Georg Simmel, a German sociologist born

¹ I would like to thank the Group for Medieval and Renaissance Studies at the University of Pennsylvania for invaluable comments on drafts of this essay as well as for providing me with a sense of intellectual fellowship without which it could not have been prepared. Earlier versions of the paper were presented at the Middle East Center at the University of Pennsylvania and at the Gest Lecture Series at Haverford College, and I am grateful for the academic feedback that these forums provided. Michael Sells, at Haverford College, also read a draft of this essay and offered helpful comments, and I thank him for that. Finally, I express my gratitude to Salmān Akhtar for imparting to me a greater appreciation for the possibilities and power of language.

² This is so because the lovers in these stories never physically consummate their love.

³ An analysis of secrecy sheds light on the very composition of these stories. These romances show a sophisticated awareness of how, in Frank Kermode's words, "narrativity always entails a measure of opacity." Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979) 25. "Hide and seek" or secrecy and revelation is not just child's play. In romance, a genre about another form of play, i.e., courtship, this imagination of "hide and seek" seems to be especially prominent. A study of the narrative aspects in the 'Udhri stories indicates that secrecy and revelation does not just

in 1858.⁴ The other is an important book entitled *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* by Sissela Bok.⁵ By way of comparing the two works, it could be said that whereas Simmel is interested in what he describes as the "the form of the secret," Bok is more concerned with its content. Bok, in her work, offers a kind of typology of secrets. She suggests that a defining trait of secrecy is intentional concealment, or hiding.⁶ She then goes on to observe that "several other strands have joined with this defining trait to form our concept of secrecy. Although they are not always present in every secret or every practice of secrecy, the concepts of sacredness, intimacy, privacy, silence, prohibition, furtiveness, and deception influence the way we think about secrecy."⁷ These concepts—which may overlap, intertwine and even conflict—offer a range of the kinds of *content* a secret may hold. Simmel's approach, as mentioned, differs from that of Bok. Simmel maintains that it is the *form* of the secret that is crucial, and not its contents. He observes that "the secret is a form which constantly receives and releases contents: what was originally manifest becomes secret, and what once was hidden later sheds its concealment."⁸ According to him, "the secret is a general sociological form which stands in neutrality above the value functions of its contents."⁹

Without here becoming enmeshed in the question of the relative merits of these approaches, I propose to examine briefly both how the content and form of the secret are dealt with in a selection of the medieval Arabic 'Udhri romances. As regards the content of the secret, I choose to focus on the two concepts of deception and intimacy (from Bok's array of concepts that define the significance of the contents of a secret: e.g., sacredness, intimacy, privacy, silence, prohibition, furtiveness, and deception), since these are most salient in the Arabic sources I consider in this article. Mention of the word "secret" often invites associations of secrecy with deception, for example, with that which is undertaken covertly because it violates an

unfold thematically in them. It is present in their verbal texture (e.g., tropes, metaphors employed), syntactic features (e.g., the sequence of actions and episodes delineated in them, arrangement of anecdotal narratives as well as suppressions, displacements and omissions in their narrativity) and in their semantic aspects (e.g., import of the story motifs, speech-acts, plot incidents and stratagems of deception that occur in them).

⁴ Georg Simmel, "The Secret and Secret Society," *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. Kurt H. Wolff (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1950) 307-44.

⁵ Sissela Bok, *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982).

⁶ Such concealment "presupposes separation, a setting apart of the secret from the non-secret, and of keepers of a secret from those excluded." *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Simmel, "The Secret," 335.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 331.

existing law. However, secrecy and deception are two different phenomena, and while, as Bok notes "to confuse secrecy and deception is easy, since all deception does involve keeping something secret—namely, that about which one wishes to deceive others, *all secrecy is not meant to deceive*."¹⁰ Bok asks us to "consider the many forms of secrecy in which there need be no aim to mislead: that which may accompany human intimacy, for instance. . . ."¹¹ Intimacy, a most important concept in this article, represents a distinct aspect of secrecy. Bok elaborates on this point through a consideration of the German word *heimlich*: "At first, *heimlich* meant that which pertains to the home, the hearth, and the intimate; later, it took on the added meaning of something kept from the view of strangers and finally also of all that is secret."¹²

Interestingly, an etymological analysis of an oft-used Arabic word for "secret" (*sirr*) reveals that only in a few instances is secrecy linked with something negative, e.g., deception. By and large, this word has a positive connotation in the early Arabic lexica—a number of its meanings are expressive of concepts concerned with intimacy and sexuality. And in the medieval Arabic romances under consideration in this essay, it is precisely this cluster of concepts—intimacy, love and/or sexuality—that is almost always intertwined with secrecy. What is significant is that both licit *and* illicit/improper forms of intimacy are linked with secrecy.

Indeed, these Arabic romances suggest that there is something specific to the experience of love and intimacy that involves secrecy and revelation. I would go so far as to claim that connections between love relations and secrecy exist universally, and psychosocial studies—such as those by Simmel and Bok—suggest that secrecy is intertwined with affective and/or love experiences across the life cycle, beginning with infancy through adolescence and into adulthood and old age. Hence, the associations between intimacy and secrecy may be foundational, that is, the "originary content" of the secret may be love and intimacy. The other concepts that Bok identifies (i.e., sacredness, silence/prohibition and deception) may have logically and chronologically later links with secrecy in the human life cycle. I am mainly interested in the psychic factors rather than the sociological or historical reasons for why secrecy is associated with love relations in my literary material. My examination of psychodynamically-oriented concepts and

¹⁰ Bok, *The Secret*, 7 (italics mine). Simmel, too, points out something similar in his comments on the connections between evil and secrecy. He observes that "although the secret has no immediate connection with evil, evil has an immediate connection with secrecy: the immoral hides itself for obvious reasons." Simmel, "The Secret," 331.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

theories indicates that before we can weigh important issues such as secrecy's connections with social practices (e.g., with institutional or legal forms of authority), it is instructive to consider the psychological significance of secrecy as it characterizes literary representations of love relations.

As I mentioned earlier, I propose to examine both the content and form of the secret in these romance narratives. An important and recurring theme that concerns the form of the secret is the inextricable linkage between secrecy and revelation (i.e., what I earlier termed the dialectic of secrecy and revelation). Whether the two occur simultaneously or alternately, in Arabic love literature of various genres secrecy accompanies revelation. In my earlier examination of this idea, I wondered whether this was a genre-specific or more broadly, a culturally-specific understanding of secrecy or whether again, perhaps literature was addressing an essential trait of secrecy that concerned human psychic behaviour. Evidence from scholarly studies of the phenomenon of secrecy—among them Georg Simmel's locus classicus on secrecy—supports the latter: that literature addresses a central trait of secrecy as it exists in human interactions and behaviour and as Simmel has maintained in his definition of the form of the secret, paradoxically a defining trait of secrecy is that it is always accompanied by revelation.

Etymology of Sirr

Both these elements—the content associations of secrecy with intimacy/deception and how secrecy involves both disclosure and concealment (as delineated by Georg Simmel in his chapter titled the “Form of the Secret”)—are nowhere more apparent than in the very definition of the Arabic word for secret—*sirr*. *Sirr* is a highly multivalent term. Initially, it should be pointed out that according to the early dictionaries (including *Kitāb al-ʿAyn*, *Tāj al-ʿArūs* and *Lisān al-ʿArab*), it has contrary meanings: it means “a secret; a thing that is concealed, or suppressed” as well as “a thing that is revealed, or is made manifest.” Both the Form I of the verb, *sarra*, and especially Form IV of the verb, *asarra*, have these two opposing significations: *he kept it secret* and *he revealed it*. The encapsulation of these contrary meanings in the word *sirr* suggests a kind of logic or dialectic of the secret: a secret is not a secret until it is revealed to someone, so secrecy invites revelation, and this revelation, in turn, may entail another concealment. Certainly, the telling or revelation of a secret to one person implies the concealment of it from a third party or another. Furthermore, it was incumbent upon the receiver of a secret to conceal it in part because—and here we discern the positive links between secrecy and love—a secret told or revealed to one was considered an expression of intimacy, and therefore disclosure of another's secret was betrayal of the worst kind.

The multivalency of the word *sirr* is also evident in its linking of the internal world of thoughts and emotions with the sexualized body. *Sirr* means *the heart* or *the mind* as well as "the penis of a man . . . and the vulva of a woman." This is an extremely important link and it can be interpreted in several different ways. First, it suggests that the sexual organs are the manifest bodily signs of internal feelings, thoughts and desires. Second, the choice of the sexual organs as the manifest signs with which the inner is linked is suggestive of the degree to which secrecy is fundamentally concerned with intimacy, love and sexuality. Third, the link itself between the inner bodily organs (i.e., the heart and mind) and the outer organs implies the dialectic of secrecy and revelation: what the heart conceals, the outer body reveals, and what the body reveals must be kept covered, that is, the external signs of the body must be concealed. Again, we see how secrecy invites revelation and this revelation implies concealment.

Sirr also means "marriage" as well as "adultery and fornication." Marriage is the secret revealed and then concealed. The ritual of marriage in part consists of rendering public an intended union and partnership; in Islam, as Abdelwahab Bouhdiba has pointed out, it is this publicity, this revelation, that confers legitimacy upon the legal union.¹³ Once consummated, however, the conjugal union becomes something concealed, or secret from the public. Adultery, from inception, is the secret concealed, since it is a violation of the marital contract of fidelity and exclusivity. Adultery is the sexual union concealed or hidden because it partakes in the deception and transgression of the marital bond and undermines a socially and legally sanctioned union. The clandestine, secret nature of the relation, in turn, accentuates its illegitimacy.

The semantic range of *sirr* also includes meanings such as "a hidden or secret pleasure" and "to take delight in." Gender associations in the etymology of *sirr* are also telling in this respect. A *sirriyyah* is "a free woman with whom one has sexual intercourse secretly" or a prostitute—such a relation would be deemed illicit and hence, it has to be kept a secret. Another word *surriyyah* which means a "female concubine-slave" concerns a licit relation. The fifth and tenth forms of the verb form *sarra* mean "to take to oneself a concubine-slave." Hence, a "secret" is also defined as a female paramour who is to be hidden, especially if the sexual relation with her is illicit.

¹³ Bouhdiba states that "The aim of the ritual of marriage was precisely to surround the sexual relationship with the maximum publicity. The function of *nikāh* [marriage] is not to remove taboos, but to make them known." Abdelwahab Bouhdiba, *Sexuality in Islam*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985) 15.

I. "Positive Secrets": Secrecy in Love and Courtship

In the tenth-century courtly culture in which Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī compiled the *Book of Songs* (*Kitāb al-Aghānī*, the multivolume work in which the romances under consideration are recorded), there was a strong connection between the ideals of "true" love and secrecy. For example, the litterateur Muḥammad ibn Dāwūd al-Iṣfahānī (d. 910), who authored the love treatise entitled *Book of the Flower* (*Kitāb al-Zahrah*), insisted on true love being a secret love.¹⁴ He partly defined love as the manifestation of certain signs and symptoms and yet paradoxically maintained that true love entailed the concealment and suppression of these very symptoms. In this very definition of love presented by Ibn Dāwūd, one also can discern the form of the secret. Later love theorists also drew on this theme of secrecy and revelation in love. The Andalusian Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064) in his famous eleventh-century love tract *Ring of the Dove* (*Tawq al-Ḥamāmah*) included several chapters on the art of concealing and revealing in matters of love. Furthermore, Ibn Ḥazm enumerated the varieties of love in his introductory chapter, and among the noble kinds of love he mentioned was one that is defined as "the love that is based upon a shared secret which both [lovers] must conceal."¹⁵ Secrecy, here, may have positive associations; it is not necessarily connected with deception or transgression.

The 'Udhri love stories, compiled and recorded in this tenth-century courtly culture, also contain a positive connotation of secrecy. The thematics of an inner feeling of youthful love and desire that cries out to be heard and yet remains a secret is present in many of the romances of the Umayyad and 'Abbāsīd periods. Jamīl, an 'Udhri poet like Majnūn, offers eloquent testimony of this when he recites:

*I spend my day bewildered by love,
and at night my soul embraces her soul during sleep.*

¹⁴ Secrecy was an integral element in the ethics of love as articulated by Ibn Dāwūd in his love treatise. The importance of discretion and chastity in love permeates the whole work, which includes chapters with titles such as, "The path of patience is remote, and the concealment of love is difficult," (*ṭarīqu al-ṣabri ba'īdun wa-kitmānu al-ḥubbi shadīdun*) and "One whose patience is overtaken, manifest is his secret," (*man għuliba ṣabruhu, ṣahara sirruhu*). Muḥammad ibn Dāwūd al-Zāhiri, *Kitāb al-Zahrah*, ed. Ibrāhīm al-Sāmmarrā'i, 2 vols. (Amman: Maktab al-Minār, 1985) 42-44.

¹⁵ First chapter on "signs of love" has relevant material. Ibn Ḥazm, *Tawq al-Ḥamāmah*, ed. al-Tahīr Aḥmad Makki, (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1975) 22.

Only if this type of love is considered to be similar to adulterous love, as is evinced in *Le Roman de Tristan*, in which Tristan and Isolde are enmeshed in an illicit love affair that generates a never-ending cycle of secrecy and subterfuge—only then is its secrecy of a deceptive and transgressive sort.

*Is there a respite for me in the concealment of love or would
revelation be an antidote for me were I to reveal it?*¹⁶

In this couplet, the poet wonders whether concealment or revelation of his love secret would afford him some relief. Evidently, the lover's task of keeping the secret is experienced as taxing and burdensome. This keeping of the secret—a secret which consists of young love and infatuation—is characterized by an intrapsychic conflict between suppression and expression that is reminiscent of Simmel's form of the secret.

The tenth-century version of the *Majnūn Laylā* romance, as found in the *Book of Songs*, also offers an illustration of this thematics of an inner feeling of love that yearns to be heard and yet remains a secret—as we see from the very frame of the story transmitted by al-İşfahānī in his introduction:

I was told that the story of Majnūn and his poetry were forged by a young man from the Banū Umayyah who was in love with his paternal cousin. He loathed revealing what was between him and her and so, he fashioned the account of Majnūn and recited the poetry which people relate as being of Majnūn, and he attributed it to him.¹⁷

Here we confront the peculiar case of a youth concerned about discretion or concealment in his love affair, producing a poetic persona whose undoing is precisely love's indiscretion or love's disclosure. In other words, we have in *Majnūn Laylā* a remarkable example of a tale of revealed love, spun by a poet whose ostensible concern was *not* to reveal his love. We also notice that the need for secrecy in his love necessitates its dissemination through a device of concealment, that is, the pseudonym. Importantly, the reasons for concealing a nascent love relation (such as this one and the other referred to earlier) may not be solely rooted in social factors (e.g., norms of social structure, societal discretion)—rather, there may be psychological factors involved (e.g., the need for an “incubating period” for a budding love affair or the need for protection of a vulnerable love relation).

A dynamics of hide-and-seek, secrecy and revelation is often intertwined with the courtship, flirtation and coquetry as portrayed in these romances. The links between secrecy and courtship are especially evident in an anecdote (variants of which are repeated three times in the story) describing an initial meeting between Majnūn and Laylā. In this narrative, Laylā is depicted as openly flirting with other men by conversing with them while

¹⁶ Jamil b. 'Abd Allāh al-'Udhri, *Sharḥ Diwān Jamil*, commentary by Ibrāhīm Jazīnī (Beirut: Dār al-Kātib al-'Arabi, 1968) 22-23.

¹⁷ Abū al-Faraj al-İşfahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, 24 vols. (Cairo: Al-Hay'ah al-Miṣriyyah al-'Āmmah li al-Kitāb, 1992) 2:4.

ignoring Majnūn. As we learn from one variant, she does this deliberately because she wants to gauge his feelings for her. To know his secret feelings, she has to pretend to conceal a secret from him—so she is shown whispering a long secret to a rival male (*wa sārṛathu sirāran ṭawīlan*).¹⁸ Her display of concealing a secret from Majnūn by disclosing it to a rival is an aspect of the sexual play and coquetry of courtship as it is constructed in these romances.

We see here the mechanism of revelation and concealment in motion because her act of keeping a secret from Majnūn leads to the betrayal of his feelings. He registers shock and jealousy on his countenance. After having elicited Majnūn's jealousy, she recites poetry to him. The romance presents two versions of her recitation. The first couplet is:

*Both of us appear in front of people to
hate each other,
and yet each is steadfast with his friend.
Our eyes tell us what we desire
and in our hearts beats a latent love.*¹⁹

The other version of this couplet is:

*Both of us appear in front of people
to hate each other
and yet each is steadfast with his friend.
The secrets of the glancer are not hidden
when the eyes disclose what the secrets conceal.*²⁰

Having made him reveal his secret feelings, of his desire for her, Laylā now discloses secrets to him. The secrets that she tells Majnūn are her verses because she recites them to him when they are alone. But the verses also are about love secrets. Each couplet is concerned with what is shown and hidden by the young lovers, what is revealed and concealed by them. The bodily organs, namely, the eyes and the heart, play a role in this dialectic. Just as the heart is a secret that conceals, the eyes are a means of disclosure. Both couplets are lexically replete with the verbs of secrecy and revelation: *zahara* (appear), *ballagha* (inform), *akhfā* (conceal), *naṭaqa* (speak). It should be noted that the tendency toward concealment of love expressed in these couplets is not associated with anything illicit or socially transgressive. Again, the reasons for concealing a new love relation may stem from psychological (e.g., protection of new-found love) rather than social factors.

¹⁸ Ibid., 2:14.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 2:16.

But the enterprise of concealing love's secrets is futile (i.e., we discern Simmel's form of the secret): Laylā's secret recitation to Majnūn provokes a most public display from him. In one narrative, it is related that "when he heard these verses, he moaned violently and fell into a swoon. He remained thus for a while, and they splashed water on his face until he regained consciousness."²¹ In a variant, it is written that: "he fainted, and then he arose having lost his mind. [And] he began to walk about naked, not wearing any clothes except rags."²² Majnūn's rapturous loss of control (that is, moaning, fainting, losing his mind) is rather climactic; fainting is a *petite mort*, primarily in the sexual sense. Hence, it is not surprising to find the symbolism of his nudity. Majnūn, here, is depicted revealing his secrets both as emotions and as sexual body.

Another fine illustration of the link between inner desire and the outer sexualized body (as evinced in the earlier etymological analysis of the word *sirr*) is found in the following anecdote also from the medieval romance of *Majnūn Laylā*.²³ Here, too, the lover or suitor, Majnūn, is depicted revealing his secrets both as romantic emotions and as nude body:

[Majnūn] said: I arrived at [Laylā's father's home] a second night seeking fire while wrapped in a cloak of mine. She [Laylā] brought out fire in a rag for me and gave it to me and we stood there conversing. When the rag burned out, I tore a piece from my cloak and lit it instead. When this burned out, I tore another [from my cloak] and kindled the fire with it [and this continued] until there did not remain [anything] of the cloak on me save what concealed my genitals. I had no sense of what I was doing.²⁴

Through secret conversation with his beloved Laylā, through words and confidences shared with her, Majnūn's body betrays its own secrets. The piece-by-piece burning of the poet's cloak or his outer covering and the simultaneous exposure of his nude body act as metaphors for the revelation of his suppressed love and desire.²⁵ Eventually he is left naked, save what covers his sexual organs. The fact that only the latter remain concealed just underscores or further draws attention to the affective/sexual nature of his

²¹ Ibid., 2:14.

²² Ibid., 2:16.

²³ Ibid., 2:31-32.

²⁴ See the account of the burning cloak of Jamil's beloved, Buthaynah, in that romance (Ibid., 8:114).

²⁵ The classical Urdu poet Sauda has a verse that is relevant to this anecdote: *Adam kā jisam jab ke anāsir say mil banā, kuch āgh bachī rahī thī so āshiq kā dil banā*. ("When the body of Adam was created from the elements, some fire was left over; thus the heart of the lover was made!") Muḥammad 'Abd al-Raḥmān Barker, Shāh Abdus Salām, et al., *Naqsh-i-Dilpazīr*, 3 vols. (New York: Spoken Language Services, Inc., 1977) 1:111:68.

revelation and to the dialectic. Night and light, made very prominent in this scene, also act as metaphors for secrecy and revelation: Majnūn is amid darkness, his folk have no light and what he seeks from Laylā at night is both fire (passion) and light (revelation). She is the spark or flame, in the night, that ignites his love and passion as well as unveils his latent fantasies. Once this passion is aroused, once his latent desire is expressed, the process of arousal and revelation continues to unfold through the secret conversation with his beloved, Laylā, until he is left nearly fully exposed.

II. "Positive and Negative Secrets": Secrecy, Exclusivity and Transgression in Sacred Sources

The association of secrecy with intimacy/love and how secrecy involves both disclosure and concealment (i.e., Georg Simmel in his the "form of the secret") are reflected to one degree or another in the portrayal of love and sexuality in medieval Arabic literature as a whole. Connections between secrecy and both licit and illicit forms of love are found. Hence, secrecy is not always assimilable with deception. But when secrecy is connected with deception (e.g., situations/scenes of illicit or even improper intimacy), then it acquires a double significance. In addition to its constituent role in the love experience itself, secrecy also becomes strategically linked with modes of deception of and transgression against a given authority figure (social, institutional, familial, religious, etc.). All modes of deception, as Sissela Bok has pointed out, involve keeping something secret—namely, that about which one wishes to deceive others.²⁶

Indeed, even some Qur'ānic and prophetic *ḥadīth* material concerned with courtship, marriage and/or adultery contains a thematics of links between secrecy on the one hand and licit and illicit/improper kinds of love on the other.²⁷ But before I discuss secrecy's connections with illicit/improper bonds of intimacy, I want to briefly provide an example of the positive role of secrecy in marital love and sexuality as presented in a *ḥadīth* cited below and its accompanying commentary.

²⁶ Bok, *The Secret*, 7.

²⁷ Qur'ānic examples include: (4:21) "And how can you take it when one of you may have consorted with the other [*wa qad afdā ba'dukum ilā ba'din*], and they have taken from you a firm covenant?" Here *afdā* is employed by the prophet to mean an emotional and/or sexual intimacy associated with marriage, but the word also means "to communicate (a secret)." (5:5) "And chaste believing women and chaste women from among those who were given the Book before you, when you give them their dowries, contracting marriage and not committing fornication [*muḥṣinin ḡhayr musāfiḥin*], nor taking secret paramours [*lā muttakhidhi akhdān*]." Also see the narration of the attempted seduction of Joseph in *Sūrat Yūsuf*.

Among the worst of people in the eyes of God on Judgment Day is the man who communicates a secret to his wife and she communicates a secret to him, and [then] he divulges and publicizes her secret.²⁸

Marriage consists of the husband's secret communication with his wife and the wife's secret communication with her husband. The accompanying commentary defines this secret communication between husband and wife as "what occurs between him and his wife in the way of matters of enjoyment and the description of details of that and what happens on the wife[']s side] . . . in the way of an utterance or action and the likes of it."²⁹ In other words, secrecy is positively linked with the love and sexual intimacy of the marital bond. Both the *ḥadīth* and its commentary stipulate that this communication between husband and wife is an exchange that is to be concealed from those outside the marital bond. The *ḥadīth* specifically draws attention to a husband's revelation of his wife's secret, and according to the commentary—while the sharing of secrets between the spouses is legitimate, the husband's disclosure of secrets concerned with his conjugal intimacy to parties outside the marital bond is reprehensible (*makrūh*) for a number of reasons. Certainly, the maintenance of secrets specific to the marital relation helps preserve the integrity of the social order in general. Moreover, the husband's disclosure of conjugal secrets, in particular, is against an Islamicized model of masculinity as exemplified by a set of meanings associated with the term *murū'ah*.³⁰

Qur'ānic material concerned with courtship, marriage and/or adultery tends, I believe, to underscore the negative meanings of secrecy, i.e., the connections between secrecy and illicit/improper forms of intimacy. For example, in the Qur'ān (2:235) we find the phrase: "God knows that you will make them an offer of marriage, but do not make secret promises to them." What is being discouraged in this Qur'ānic clause is the secret broaching of marriage proposals with widowed women before the end of a

²⁸ Abū al-Ḥusayn Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj al-Qushayrī al-Naysābūrī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, commentary by al-Imām al-Nawawī, 18 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1990) 10:14-15.

²⁹ In the commentary on this tradition, the husband's disclosure is described as "what occurs between him and his wife in the way of matters of enjoyment and the description of details of that and what happens on the wife[']s side] . . . in the way of an utterance or action and the likes of it. As for the mere mention of intercourse, there is no benefit in it and no need of it, indeed it is reprehensible because it is against manliness [*al-murū'ah*]." Ibid., 10:8.

³⁰ *Murū'ah* "describes the sum of the physical qualities of man (*mar'*)." The term reveals "A conjunction of two contrary elements: One concrete (e.g. wealth and management of property), the other abstract and predominating. In the latter case, *murū'a* would be identical with good manners; in the former it would take into consideration the material conditions of life." The "first meaning originates in the Djahiliyya, whilst the second is Islamic." *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New Edition, s.v. "Murū'a."

prescribed waiting period after the first husband's death. Al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) and other commentators in their interpretation of this verse equate the word *sirr* in it with *zinā* or adultery—thereby underscoring the illicit nature of a verbal exchange between an unmarried man and woman that is secret or covert. What renders the verbal exchange illicit is both that it is done with widowed women before the end of a waiting period prescribed by religious law and consequently, that it is done in secret.

The Qur'ānic *Sūrat al-Taḥrīm* (66:3) also illustrates the negative valences of secrecy, i.e., the connections between secrecy and illicit/improper forms of intimacy. It also portrays a dialectic of secrecy and revelation, that is, how secrecy involves both disclosure and concealment. The third verse in this chapter refers to the disclosure by one of the prophet's wives of a secret with which he had entrusted her:

And when the prophet secretly told a saying to one of his wives and she informed [others] of it, and God revealed it [i.e., her act of revelation] to him, he made known part of it and avoided part; so when he informed her of it, she said: Who informed you of this? He said: the Knowing, the One Aware, informed me.

Qur'ānic exegesis identifies the character of the wife mentioned in this verse as Ḥaḥṣah, daughter of 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb.³¹ Several of the exegetical reports associated with this verse suggest that the secret that the prophet asked Ḥaḥṣah to conceal was an impropriety involving Māryah, his Coptic concubine. According to al-Ṭabarī, Ḥaḥṣah found the prophet with Māryah in her (Ḥaḥṣah's) own chamber on her designated "day" (*fī yaumihā wa fī ḥujratihā*). The impropriety arose from the blatantly substitutive nature of Māryah's presence: she was discovered by Ḥaḥṣah herself in Ḥaḥṣah's chamber on Ḥaḥṣah's "day" with Ḥaḥṣah's husband. To assuage his wife's feelings, Muḥammad pledged an oath that rendered Māryah sexually forbidden to him and then asked Ḥaḥṣah to keep the incident a secret. Here, the negative aspects of secrecy are foregrounded. In part, secrecy is linked with the improper nature of the sexual intimacy between the prophet and his concubine (improper because, as just mentioned, Māryah's presence was of a blatantly substitutive nature). This intimacy is divulged when they are discovered together in Ḥaḥṣah's quarters by Ḥaḥṣah herself. But the secret also consists of the personal communication between Muḥammad, the husband, and Ḥaḥṣah, his wife—a communication in which he asks her to keep secret or conceal this private information from others (presumably and especially from other wives).

³¹ Abū Ja'far Muḥammad Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, ed. Bashshār 'Awaḍ Ma'rūf, vols. (Beirut: Mu'assasah al-Risālah, 1994) 7:327. See also Barbara Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'ān: Tradition, and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) 95-97.

The presence of a dialectic of concealment and revelation is visible in the verbal register of the verse. A series of verbal oppositions are condensed in the verse: to confide to (*asarra ilā*), to inform (*nabba'at bi*), to tell a secret (*aẓhara 'alā*), to make known (*'arrafa*), to avoid [making known] (*'araḍa 'an*), to inform (*nabba'a bi*), and so forth. It could be said that, paradoxically, the prophet's secret is not a secret until it is revealed to his wife, Ḥafṣah, and once revealed, it necessitates concealment. Despite the prophet's request that she conceal the secret, Ḥafṣah informed another co-wife (ʿĀ'ishah) of it. Then in a fascinating twist, the Qur'ānic verse indicates that upon her disclosure of the prophet's secret, God communicated a secret to the prophet (the verb used is the fourth form of *ẓahara*, which means "to manifest a thing or to divulge a secret"). The secret that God confided to the prophet was that Ḥafṣah has revealed his secret. Of course, implicit in the drama enacted by the Qur'ānic verse is the role of God as the Arch-Knower of all secrets.³² In effect, God tells the prophet a secret that is about the leaking of another secret. The prophet, in turn, re-engages in the dialectic when he informs his wife of this discovery. The verse states that "he made known part of it and avoided part" (*'arrafa ba'dahu wa 'araḍa 'an ba'din*), and the tenth-century Qur'ānic commentator al-Ṭabarī again identifies the recipient of this partial disclosure as Ḥafṣah. Muḥammad discloses to his wife that he has been secretly informed of her betrayal, but does not mention the source of this information until prompted by her question.

In this Qur'ānic verse, the prophet is shown concealing and the women are shown revealing secrets. While the prophet is depicted as being desirous of the incident's concealment, Ḥafṣah is portrayed as revealing the secret to a co-wife, namely ʿĀ'ishah.³³ This contrasts with much of the textual material from the ʿUdhri romances, in which it is the women who are portrayed as hiding and being secretive.

III. *Secret as Negative: Secrecy and Transgression—the Conflict between Illicit and Licit Bonds in the Romances*

We now return to secular Arabic literature, that is, to the ʿUdhri romances specifically. Just how does secrecy in them acquire a double significance, as

³² This is a persistent theme in the Qur'ān, e.g., 3:29 Say: "whether you hide what is in your breasts or reveal it, God knows it; and He knows whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth."

³³ I am thankful to an anonymous reader for pointing out the fact that familial politics are as relevant to this domestic drama as sexual politics. ʿĀ'ishah and Ḥafṣah were the daughters of the first and second caliphs respectively. Historically, it is also the case that Abū Bakr, the first caliph to succeed the Prophet, was a good friend of the subsequent second caliph, ʿUmar. As a consequence of this, the two women were often allied with each other in numerous domestic disputes in the Prophet's family.

I have maintained previously, when it is connected with deception (e.g., with situations/scenes of illicit or even improper intimacy)? How does secrecy's role in the love experience itself accompany its strategic importance for modes of transgressing against and deceiving a given authority figure (social, institutional, familial, religious, etc.)? This double significance is evident in the conflict between illicit and licit bonds, between extra-marital and marital relations that is present in the 'Udhri romances.

In several 'Udhri romances, as soon as a female beloved is serenaded by the poetic rhapsodies of a lover, at the tantalizing juncture at which her desirability is advertised in verse, she is immediately cloistered (*hujibat*) by her kin. In other words, as soon as a beloved is "revealed" to the public, she is then concealed by her family. But the dialectic of secrecy and revelation does not end there. The stories show that the poet-lover, undaunted by this cloistering of his beloved, persists in his indiscretions in yet another aspect of courtship: visitation. Once the beloved is hidden, the lover begins to strategically engage in a game of hide-and-seek. He pays clandestine visits to the beloved, attempting to escape the guard of her male kin. The kin, upon discovering that such secret visitation is occurring, are compelled in turn to marry her off summarily to another man. The lover, however, persists in secret visitation of his beloved even after she has become another man's wife. Hence, the covert conduct of the 'Udhri lover devolves into deception and transgression, and as Bok has declared, all deception requires secrecy. It could even be said that the male lover's strategic use of concealment partakes in a form of stealing and theft: he "steals" another man's wife through his periodic covert visits to her.

The strategic importance of secrecy for modes of deceiving and transgressing against authority figures, as well as the dovetailing of this with the conflict between licit and illicit relations, is clearly delineated in the following passage from the *Book of Songs* rendition of the romance of *Jamil Buthaynah*. According to the narrators, Jamil fell in love with Buthaynah when he was a youth, and upon reaching manhood, he proposed to her but was refused because of the infamy of his poetry about her.

[Jamil used] to come to her secretly and then she was married. Thereafter, he used to visit her in her husband's house clandestinely until Dajājah ibn Rib'ī was appointed governor over the Wādī al-Qurā. They complained about [Jamil] to him and he ordered him to not visit her at her home and empowered them to shed his blood with impunity if he resumed visiting her.³⁴

Even after the beloved is made another man's secret (i.e., she is married to another man), the poet-lover does not refrain from visiting her. The marital

³⁴ Al-Isfahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, 8:108.

bond between the beloved and her husband is repeatedly transgressed by the resumption of the lover's secret trysts with her. The resumption of the clandestine visits repeats the earlier dialectic of secrecy and revelation. Moreover, even after the woman's family is forced to induce the provincial authority to take legal action against him by depriving his kin of the right to blood-venegence should he be slain, he is not completely deterred from visiting her.

This importance of secrecy's strategic quality and its links with the theme of conflict between extra-marital and marital relations are also present in an anecdote from the *Majnūn Laylā* romance that describes a series of nocturnal trysts occurring between the lovers after Laylā's marriage.

Laylā's husband and her father departed due to a matter that took the tribe away to Mecca during the night. Then Laylā sent a slave-girl of hers to Majnūn to extend an invitation to him. So he stayed at her place for a night and she made him leave at daybreak, saying to him: Come to me each night as long as the tribe is away. He [regularly] came to her place until they [father and husband] returned. On the last night of their tryst, when she bade him farewell, he recited about her:

Enjoy Laylā, indeed you are an owl . . .
 whose death draws nearer each day.
 Enjoy until the riders return, [for] when they return,
 Forbidden to you is her speech.³⁵

In these verses, the lover surrenders to a desire to enjoy covertly his experiences with Laylā while he can, while her husband and father are away. It is only through the covert or secret nature of the visits that the lover is able to transgress the marital bond. Like the anecdotes previously discussed, this one sets up a polarity between two male authority figures (e.g., father and husband/governor and husband), on the one hand, and the lover, on the other hand, but unlike them it depicts the beloved/wife as actively seeking the secret trysts with her lover.

Conclusion

By focussing on how a selection of the 'Udhri Arabic romances handle what theorists of secrecy have identified as the content and form of the secret, I have sought to draw attention to some of the psychical and psychosocial factors that characterize the keeping and divulging of secrets as they pertain to love and sexuality portrayed in these sources.³⁶ Clearly, the medieval

³⁵ Ibid., 2:72.

³⁶ In exploring how concepts of intimacy and deception inform the content value of secrecy

'Udhri romances are hardly, as many scholars of early Arabic literature are fond of claiming, a corpus of chaste Arabic love stories. I have tried to demonstrate how secrecy and revelation—both in their verbal and spatial dimensions—are pivotal to the way in which sexuality and love are constructed in these romances. What repeatedly returns in these romances is a dialectic of secrecy and revelation, the unfolding of which is closely linked with a variety of desires (erotic, sexual, filial, familial). Could it be that secrecy is deployed in the 'Udhri romances not because it confers a value upon what it encases (positive connotation), nor because it conceals a sexual transgression (negative connotation), but rather precisely because it invites or generates revelation?

Lastly, a scrutiny of the connections between intimacy/sexuality and secrecy in these romances is suggestive of significant parallels between them and the medieval European tradition of romance and love poetry, especially medieval French love literature. If, as André Miquel has shown, there exist commonalities between the 'Udhri romance of *Majnūn Laylā* and the *Le Roman de Tristan*, an examination of the links between intimacy/sexuality and secrecy in the 'Udhri corpus as a whole yields new frameworks for its cross-cultural comparison with a wider selection of European romances.³⁷

University of Pennsylvania

RUQAYYA YASMINE KHAN

in these sources, I have come to the realization that secrecy's links with deception are more easily addressed than its integral psychosocial connections with sexual intimacy and love. I am dealing with this and other challenges regarding the significance of secrecy in early Arabic love literature in a current book-length project.

³⁷ See André Miquel's book *Deux histoires d'amour de Majnūn à Tristan* (Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob, 1996).