

## ***Poisonous Roses: Interpreting Sibling Love in Contemporary Cairo***

### Abstract

Throughout the screenwriting of *Poisonous Roses*, the first feature-length film by young screenwriter and director Ahmad Fawzi Saleh, the relationship between the two protagonists, Taheya and Saqr, was a central object of discussion. In different versions of the scenario, the manual worker Saqr wanted to escape from Taheya's grasp, either by becoming attached to his middle-class lover Nahed or by trying to immigrate to Italy, while Taheya tried to keep him by her side using all means possible, including witchcraft and the threat of suicide. Their love for one another was unquestionable in Fawzi's eyes: in some versions, Saqr would eventually leave Nahed to stay by Taheya's side; in others, Saqr killed himself by sheer desperation, while Taheya endlessly lamented his death. To Fawzi and his collaborators, the intensity of the relationship was made all the more ambiguous and intriguing by a crucial fact: Saqr and Taheya are siblings.

Since I started collaborating on Fawzi's project in 2013, the theme of sibling love has been central to our engagement with his story as well as his discussions with various collaborators, including myself. These discussions were often centered on Taheya's character, which was widely seen to sustain an incestuous romance with her brother Saqr. Fawzi would indeed get frequent comments to the effect that his female character was 'sick', because no sister could ever love her brother in this way. Fawzi vociferously rejected this criticism: at times, he argued that Taheya's jealous possessiveness is understandable to a working-class sister who has raised her brother almost like a mother; at other times, he argued that their love is 'pure' by invoking Sufi conceptions of unity in the divine. No matter his justification, Fawzi's defense of Taheya's love for Saqr is interesting insofar as it highlights different expectations about the extent to which siblings can 'love' one another in contemporary Cairo. To different collaborators and commentators on Fawzi's scenario, the interactions between Taheya and Saqr were interpreted as signs of at times 'excessive', at times 'appropriate' love.

What I endeavor to do in this paper, and in line with the workshop's theme, is to 'find' the sibling relation between Taheya and Saqr throughout the screenwriting of *Poisonous Roses*. In so doing, I will trace the theme of sibling love across different conversations and comments in screenwriting centering on both characters' relation, and I will thereby make a broader point about the way in which sibling love is interpreted in contemporary Cairo. Moreover, I would stake this paper as an illustration of the way in which media narratives, in Egypt as elsewhere, can be vital sites for the creation, circulation, and contestation of ideas about kinship and, as the case may be, siblinghood.