



# HABIBI

A film by  
Susan Youssef



# HABIBI

A film by  
**Susan Youssef**

[www.habibithefilm.com](http://www.habibithefilm.com)

## VENICE DAYS – 2011 VENICE INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

### **Press / Industry Screening**

August, 31 – 10.00 p.m., Sala Perla

### **Official Screening**

September, 4 – 10.00 p.m., Sala Volpi

### **Additional Screening**

September, 10 – 9.00 a.m., Sala Volpi

## INTERNATIONAL SALES

### **eOne Films International**

Charlotte Mickie  
[cmickie@entonegroup.com](mailto:cmickie@entonegroup.com)  
+1 416 931 8463

## NORTH AMERICAN SALES

### **Paradigm Talent Agency**

Ben Weiss  
[bweiss@paradigmagency.com](mailto:bweiss@paradigmagency.com)  
+1 310 288 8000

## PRODUCER CONTACT

### **S.Y. Films**

Susan Youssef  
[info@habibithefilm.com](mailto:info@habibithefilm.com)  
+31 6 17 39 54 48

## PRESS

Stephen Lan  
[Lan.Stephen@sympatico.ca](mailto:Lan.Stephen@sympatico.ca)  
+49 172 200 6686

## TECHNICAL INFORMATION

### Original title

Habibi Rasak Kharban

### English title

Habibi

### Year of Release

2011

### Genre

Narrative Feature

### Format

HD, 16:9, color, 80 minutes, Stereo

### Language

Arabic

### Subtitles

English

### Countries of Production

Palestine, U.S.A., the Netherlands, and United Arab Emirates

## SUPPORT

*Habibi* is made 100% through grants and donations including Enjaaz Grant (Dubai Film Market), Fonds BKVB Basisstipendium (the Netherlands), Jerome Foundation Grant, Paul Robeson Fund, Texas Filmmakers' Production Fund, New York State Council on the Arts Grant, Rooftop Filmmakers' Fund, Cinereach Grant, Princess Grace Award Special Project Grant, Women in Film Foundation Film Finishing Fund (supported by Netflix), Grand Prize at Independent Film Week (Emerging Narrative), IFP Lab Fellowship, Fulbright Research Fellowship, and a donation from Zain Mobile.

## ONE LINER

*Habibi*, a story of forbidden love, is the first fiction feature set in Gaza in over 15 years.

## SHORT SYNOPSIS

Two students in the West Bank are forced to return home to Gaza, where their love defies tradition. Set in Gaza in 2001, *Habibi* is a modern retelling of the romance Majnun Layla. In seventh century Arabia, a poet fell in love with Layla. Because of the intensity of his passion, he was called 'Majnun Layla,' which translates as 'Madman for Layla.' The film features Majnun Layla's original poems as the graffiti that Qays writes across town. "Habibi" is Arabic for "darling" and is the film title for non-Arabic speaking audiences. The full Arabic title is *Habibi Rasak Kharban*, which translates as "darling, something's wrong with your head."

## STORY SYNOPSIS

When Gaza comes under full closure in 2001, two young lovers studying at a university in the West Bank are forced to return home. The lovers Qays and Layla live in Khan Younis—one of the most conservative areas of Gaza. There, a woman's parents play a major role in the choice of her husband. Dating isn't custom as it goes beyond the reach of the family. Qays faces the challenge of preparing a marriage proposal to Layla's family. She lives in the town of Khan Younis; he lives in the refugee camp. The town dwellers are of higher social class than the camp residents. Qays must provide Layla's family with a dowry, a house for him and his bride to live in, and a wedding. As a college student from the camp, Qays has none of these things.

Surrounding the lovers is an atmosphere in which Palestinian resistance and Israeli reaction escalates. A key subplot follows Layla's brother as he joins Hamas. While he and others focus on the resistance movement, Qays focuses on reaching Layla. He graffiti's love poetry to her all over the walls of their town. While graffiti is popular in Gaza, the writing mainly honors the dead and political causes. The love poetry causes scandal; Layla's name is on everyone's lips. Her parents seek to marry her and rescue her reputation. Layla's brother and his friends seek to cast the poet out of Khan Younis. Layla takes action to find Qays. Can she rescue their fate as lovers?

## THE GOALS OF THE FILM

*Habibi* is a film that challenges prejudice and works towards universal human rights. First, *Habibi* challenges the stereotype of the oppressed Arab woman both on and off screen. Susan Youssef, the writer, director, and producer of the film, is a woman of Arab descent. Layla, the main character in *Habibi*, is an educated woman whose parents permitted her to leave Gaza in order that she may study and live on her own in the West Bank. Back in Gaza, Layla takes assertive action to fight for her love affair. The men in her life defer to her actions.

Secondly, *Habibi* provides a depiction of an evolving Palestinian society by depicting a love affair and a poetic tradition while situating the story in the reality of Palestinian resistance. In 2001 Palestinian resistance and Israeli reaction was escalating, taking Hamas to its position today. One of the subplots regards the protagonist's brother joining Hamas. Simultaneously, the film incorporates the poetic parable, illustrating that at the basis of Arab society is a desire for an expression of love, not violence. Thus, *Habibi* is both a reinterpretation of the parable and an exploration of the relationship between politics and Islam at a particular historical moment: the Second Intifada.

In addition *Habibi* provides insight and stimulates dialogue that leads to positive change. During the years of making the film, Gaza could only be entered by journalists who have special permission from the Israeli Defense Forces, or members of human rights organizations that are registered in Israel. Because of the world's limited access to Gaza, it is important for this film to have as wide impact as possible. The visual and structural plans for the project joins with giving the audience the experience of being Gazan via a love story in a contemporary, yet traditional, Muslim society. The film's protagonists struggle with the longing for romantic love. It is this longing that makes their experience one that both Western and Islamic audiences can mutually understand.

Finally, via bringing to the screen poetry and the parable, the film shows that at the basis of Palestinian society is a desire for an expression of love, not violence. *Habibi* transcends violence as the definition of the Arab world to include the cultural beauty, history, and diversity of the Arabic language and Palestinian people.

## DIRECTOR BIOGRAPHY / FILMOGRAPHY

**Susan Youssef (Director, Writer, Producer, Editor)**  
*Habibi*, Susan's first feature, is an official selection for the 2011 Venice Film Festival and Toronto International Film Festival. For her work on *Habibi*, *Filmmaker* magazine named her one of the "25 New Faces" to watch for in 2010. Prior to *Habibi*, Susan made five short films. Susan animated and directed the short *West Fingerboard Road*, which screened at the 2010 International Short Film Festival – Oberhausen. Her documentary on American Catholics marching to Guantanamo to visit the prisoners, *For the Least*, screened at Sundance Film Festival and New Museum in 2007. Her narrative short, *Marjoun and the Flying Headscarf*, was one of the first pieces of fiction in the U.S. to feature a hijabi (veiled) protagonist and also screened at the Sundance Film Festival in 2006. *Forbidden to Wander*, a documentary about her romance in the Gaza Strip, screened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2005 despite protests. Her first narrative short, *Las Amigas Bonitas*, screened at Outfest and Slamdance Film Festival. Prior to filmmaking, she was a schoolteacher and journalist in Beirut. She has a Master in Fine Arts from the University of Texas, where she was a Presidential Scholar, and is a Fulbright Fellow. She graduated with a Bachelor of Arts with Distinction from the University of Virginia. Susan was born in Brooklyn, New York.

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I first visited Gaza in 2002 when I was shooting my documentary *Forbidden to Wander*. It was then I saw children acting out the romance Majnun Layla. It tells the story of Qays, who is driven mad by his love for Layla.

There, in a gymnasium in Khan Younis, I witnessed a teenage Qays wade through imaginary desert sands, looking for Layla. Gaza is flat, over-crowded, and on the Mediterranean Sea. Horses and people in full dress wade into the water. A cacophony of calls to prayer by mosques reverberates in the air. There are groves of palm trees in some parts, dirt-paved refugee camps in others, and hotels and restaurants on the beach in Gaza City luxurious enough to impress even me, a native New Yorker.

In 2002, the Israeli army destroyed fields of homes and staged aerial bombings. The heat was overwhelming. But even in this atmosphere, everywhere I filmed kids stopped by to give me their “hellos.” It was also at this time that Mohammed, a local theater director, joined me to help shoot my documentary; he took complete care of me while respecting my space as a woman. I didn't pay him, give him a place to stay or even provide him with food. Unexpectedly, I fell in love with his kindness, his heroic commitment to art in a situation where most people are just trying to survive—that is to say, I fell in love with Mohammed. The experience of seeing the children's performance of Majnun Layla, and of finding love in Gaza, compelled me to retell the legend in the setting of modern-day Gaza.

As the film is set in the tense atmosphere of occupation, I sought the hard lines and intimacy of

a handheld digital video camera for a look closer to reality and to avoid romanticizing life under occupation. Set in modern-day Khan Younis, *Habibi* fuses poetry and graffiti to retell the famous Sufi parable Majnun Layla. There is a body of poetry, dated back to the seventh century and attributed to the Qays Mulawwah (a.k.a. Majnun Layla) who originally and famously fell in love with Layla. In order to bring this story to screen, I incorporate graffiti art into the film, having Qays write the poetry rather than recite it. The poetry penetrates Layla and her family's daily lives as they read it on the walls surrounding the town. An example of Qays' poetry is: “Layla slips from me like someone who holds water in his hand. The openings between his clutched fingers always betray him.”

I borrow elements of Middle Eastern cinema, specifically that of Iran. *Habibi* is influenced by Abbas Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry*: it experiments in the use of slower paced scenes, relies on visuals rather than dialogue, and presents the character of Layla as a woman on the verge of a change. Characteristics of *Habibi* also include symmetrical framing, a soundtrack relying mainly on diegetic sound, and natural cinematography that doesn't distract from the story, elements drawn from Jafar Panahi's *The White Balloon*. My focus on a strong female protagonist on a journey alone, in a story mixing reality with events that seem supernatural, and a variation between wide shots and close-ups mirrors Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Kandahar*.

On the nine-year-long journey to make *Habibi*, there were so many times I wanted to quit. When I was no longer allowed back into the Gaza Strip; when my love affair with Mohammed ended; when

I couldn't find producers and backers for the film. But I didn't, for reasons that changed over the years. At first I couldn't quit because I thought of *Habibi* as an expressive conduit for myself and for Mohammed and other artists in Gaza. Then, I held steadfast to the film as an elegy to my love affair and as homage to the greatness of Arabic literature. By 2008, the war that raged on against Gaza made it even more pressing that I present my version of Gaza on the big screen in hopes of humanizing Palestinian victims of Israeli violence in Gaza.

But the real reason I didn't quit is as simple as this: every time I was close to dropping the project, someone else popped up to help me with it. When I could no longer enter Gaza, friends in the West Bank stepped in for production. When I couldn't get a producer for the project, grantors and donors supported me as the producer. When Mohammed left my side, so many others committed to the project. It was no longer my film to stop working on. It was, and is, a film I share with the people who have entrusted me to work on it.

وإني لمن ليلى الغداة كقابض على الماء  
خائته فروج الأصابع

Layla slips from me like someone who holds water in his hand,  
the openings between his clutched fingers always betray him.



# SUSAN YOUSSEF ON HABIBI

**BASED ON THE ANCIENT ARABIC ROMANCE OF MAJNUN LAYLA, HABIBI TELLS THE STORY OF YOUNG GAZAN LOVERS WHO ARE PREVENTED FROM SEEING EACH OTHER BY FAMILY, SOCIAL TRADITION, AND POLITICS. THE IDEA CAME TO WRITER-DIRECTOR SUSAN YOUSSEF WHILE SHOOTING FORBIDDEN TO WANDER IN 2002, A DOCUMENTARY THAT RECOUNTS HER OWN ROMANCE WITH A THEATER DIRECTOR IN GAZA. HABIBI IS SET TO SEDUCE AUDIENCES WORLDWIDE, STARTING WITH ITS PREMIERE AT THE VENICE FILM FESTIVAL. YOUSSEF, A NEW YORKER, TALKED ABOUT THE FILM BY PHONE FROM AMSTERDAM, WHERE SHE LIVES PART OF THE YEAR.**

**Why use Majnun Layla as your source material? You could've written the script from scratch.**

Susan Youssef: There were two advantages. One, it gave me a structure that had been working for centuries. Two, I was completely enchanted by this idea of a poet who existed in the seventh century and whose name other writers for centuries have used to author their own love poetry. There's an argument that the Majnun Layla poems aren't by the original poet Qays ibn-al Mulawwah. I felt I could connect to that tradition of hiding behind his poetry.

**But why choose a romance to tell a story about Gaza?**

SY: It was easy to make it a romance because my only link to the Gaza Strip was my own personal romance. And Gaza is an incredibly romantic place. The landscape is beautiful: there's the beach, the tropical climate, fruit, palm trees. Then there's the heroism of everyone that lives there. The landscape and the nature of the people living there and surviving seemed very romantic.

**This is your second film set in Gaza. You're Arab-American, but your father's Lebanese and your mother's Syrian. What draws you specifically to Gaza?**

SY: My first screenplays were almost identically linked to me: one was an Arab-American screenplay that I wrote as my thesis when I was an undergraduate, and one was set in Lebanon when I was a journalist in Beirut. I felt like I didn't have the distance in order to give my characters the truth of their existence; I ended up telling the stories too much as myself, which does not make for very good narrative. I'm much more honest when I'm telling the story through another setting. Gaza, Palestine—it's still the Levant, we're still Semitic people. It's almost what I know, but there's a little bit more distance.

**What was the process of making Habibi?**

SY: I fell in love in Gaza and the idea was just handed to me: I saw children acting out Majnun Layla in a gymnasium in Khan Younis. I found the poems at the New York Public Library. I went to Gaza in 2005 to shoot sample scenes. People were very willing to support the production. Across political positions they were really excited.

**But you didn't end up shooting the film in Gaza. Why?**

**SY:** In 2007, I wasn't allowed back into Gaza. I waited in the West Bank not knowing what I was going to do. But Palestinians are very innovative people, and very hospitable and helpful. I met people from Gaza who were living in the West Bank—they suggested I try to fake Gaza there. But I delayed. Part of the reason it took me until 2009 to shoot was my belief that I'd get back into Gaza. When we filmed in the West Bank it was so painful, because there was a limitation on what we could film. How could I fake Gaza while shooting the West Bank landscape, with mountains in the distance? We couldn't have wide shots—but that worked to create the suffocating feeling of Gaza. We had many other obstacles—I'm deeply grateful that I was able to find a way to tell the story.

**What was the shoot itself like?**

**SY:** Because I'd been so adamant about shooting in Gaza for so long, I closed a lot of doors financially, in terms of being able to find producers, investment... The film had an extremely limited budget. That limited the number of people we could have on the crew. But

I believe the camaraderie and intimate nature of the film set resulted in a film made out of love. I'm very superstitious: I believe the kind of energy that goes into a film goes a long way.

**What's your ultimate objective with Habibi?**

**SY:** I love the idea of bringing this poetry back to the mainstream. So that's one goal, to share how amazing I find my heritage to be. And I believe in the hope of collective consciousness: that greater understanding of the situation in Gaza will somehow improve things there. This film is part of a continuum. I look to the u.s. civil rights and gay rights movements—much of their success has to do with collective consciousness coming through media, culture.

**You were born and raised in New York City. How did you end up in Amsterdam?**

**SY:** Well, Mohammed in Gaza, with whom I had the relationship, advised me to go to the Netherlands—it was one of the countries he knew was funding theater in Gaza. It was ironic because in 2002, on the way to Gaza, I was detained at Schipol by Israeli security for interrogation. I applied for a Fulbright fellowship to the Netherlands and it worked out. I found a mentor

my first week, Dr. Ihab Saloul, a scholar of comparative literature. He knew the Majnun Layla poetry, was from the Gaza Strip, but he also lived in the Netherlands and understood what was needed to culturally translate the story.

**And what about Mohammed?**

**SY:** Things with Mohammed ended up not working out. Instead, in my last month of my Fulbright fellowship, I met my husband, Man Kit Lam, who edited the film with me. So I came to Holland out of love and I stayed in Holland out of love. [Laughs]. I have to thank this film and I have to thank the Gaza Strip because it's completely defined my life through love.

أمرٌ على الديار ديار ليلى  
أقبلُ ذا الجدارَ وذا الجدار  
وما حبُّ الديار شَعَفَنَ قلبي  
ولكن حبًّا من سكن الديارا

I move from house to house in Layla's town,

and kiss this wall and that wall.

It's not the love for stone that grabbed my heart;

but it's the love of the beloved inside.



## PRODUCERS

### **Susan Youssef**

(See Director Biography / Filmography)

### **Man Kit Lam (Executive Producer, Editor, Art Director)**

Man Kit is a graphic designer by profession whose work extends across many platforms. His films include an animation commissioned by Museum of National History (the Netherlands). In 2011, he won a European Design Award for his work on Humanity House, a Red Cross Museum project that he worked on in collaboration with Lava Design Studio. For more information about his work go to [www.mankitlam.nl](http://www.mankitlam.nl).

### **Dubai Entertainment and Media Organization a.k.a. DEMO (Co-Producer)**

DEMO supports Habibi through its Enjaaz post-production support program, which is a Dubai Film Market initiative. DEMO has supported films including Amreeka (Cannes Film Festival FIPRESCI prize) and Paradise Now (Golden Globe, Best Foreign Language Film).

## CAST BIOGRAPHIES

### **Kais Nashif (Qays)**

Kais is the lead role in Golden Globe winning, Academy Award nominated *Paradise Now*. He has appeared in numerous Israeli television shows including four seasons of *Parashat Ha-Shavua*.

### **Maisa Abd Elhadi (Layla)**

Maisa premieres on the big screen in *Habibi*. She has an upcoming role in *World War Z*, starring Brad Pitt. Maisa is fluent in Arabic, Hebrew, and English and is a trained hydrotherapist.

### **Yussef Abu-Warda (Al-Mahdi)**

Yussef's credits include lead roles in *Amreeka* (Cannes Fipresci Prize). In 2002 he was nominated by the Israeli Film Academy for the Best Supporting Actor in the film *Kedma*, about immigrants from across Europe arriving in Palestine in 1948 shortly before the creation of the state of Israel. Yussef also had a supporting role in *Wedding in Galilee* (Cannes Palmes D'or).

### **Amer Khalil (Qays' Father)**

Amer is a director of Theatre Day Productions, which provides actor-training workshops and theater in the Gaza Strip. He has starred in numerous theater productions throughout Palestine and Israel.

## FILM CREDITS

### **Producer**

S.Y. Films

### **Executive Producer**

Man Kit Lam, Derek Yip

### **Development Producer**

Mohammed Hamdan,  
Ihab Saloul

### **Line Producer**

Misbah Deeb

### **Co-Producer**

Dubai Entertainment and  
Media Organization in  
association with Enjaaz

### **In Association With**

Idioms Film

### **Associate Producers**

Laura Howard, Megan Gilbride

### **Producer of Distribution and Marketing**

Pablo Godoy

### **Consulting Producers**

Sami Said, Mohanad Yaqubi,  
Marc Bechar, Charlie Dibe,  
Pieter Wybenga, Julia Morgan

### **CAST (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)**

#### **Layla**

Maisa Abdelhadi

#### **Qays**

Kais Nashef

#### **Layla's Mother**

Najwa Mubarki

#### **Ladies Surrounding Layla**

Majd Hajjaj, Mays Hajjaj

#### **Al Mahdi**

Yussef Abu-Warda

#### **Walid**

Jihad Al-Khattib

#### **Rabie**

Adham Nu'man

#### **Salem**

Ward Shwekh

#### **Qays' Father**

Amer Khalil

#### **Qays' Sister**

Nidaa Abu Shamaa

#### **Ward**

Rajaie Khatib

#### **Hitham**

Basel Husseini

#### **Izz Edine**

Sami Said

#### **Qays' Boss**

Khaled Shaheen

#### **Visiting Family**

Kader Family

#### **Fisherman 1**

Suhell Nafar

#### **Fisherman 2**

Tamer Nafar

#### **Palestinian Soldier**

Ramzi Hazboun

#### **Interrogator 1**

Fadi Zmorrod

#### **Interrogator 2**

Bisan Hussam Abu-Eisheh

#### **Interrogator 3**

Shadi Zmorrod

#### **Rafah Boy**

Ibrahim Khaled Shaheen

### **Written & Directed by**

Susan Youssef

### **Poetry by**

Majnun Layla

### **Translation**

Misbah Deeb, Ihab Saloul,  
Assaad Khairallah

### **Title Design**

Reza Abedini

### **Original Music**

Menno Cruijssen

### **Director of Photography**

P.J. Raval

### **Sound Engineer**

Louis Storme

### **Assistant Director**

Megan Gilbride

### **Stunt Coordinators**

Fadi and Shadi Zmorrod

### **Editors**

Susan Youssef, Man Kit Lam

### **Art Director**

Man Kit Lam

**Production Designer**

Bashar Hassounch

**Casting Director**

Najwa Mubarki

**Costume Designer**

Hamada Atallah

**Costumer**

Rami Arda

**Production Coordinator**

Ziad Shehade

**Extras Coordinator**

Ataf Salem

**Production Assistant**

Mohammed Bayari

**Driver**

Bilal Zaro

**Producer's Assistants**

Ramzi Hazboun, M.C. Abbott

**Director's Assistant**

Katherine Doogan

**Post-Production Supervisor**

Ted Griffis

**Consulting Editors**

Nancy Frazen, Lee Percy

**Post Production Services**

Final Frame

**D.I. Colorist**

Stewart Griffin

**Sound Design**

Ryan Price, Cory Melious

**Audio Post Facility**

Sound Lounge

**Fundraiser**

Sandra Youssef

**Media Consultant**

Sean Kennedy

**Additional Graphic Design**

Delia Avila, Maziyar Pahlevan

**Source Music**

Checkpoint 303

“Teoda,” “Streets O Ramallah,”

“Hawiya Dhay3a”

Courtesy of Checkpoint 303

[www.checkpoint303.com](http://www.checkpoint303.com)

**This film has been made with support from**

Cinereach Ltd.

Fonds BKVB

Zain Mobile Telecommunications

Princess Grace Special Project Grant

Paul Robeson Fund for Independent Media

Women In Film Foundation Film Finishing Fund

Jerome Foundation's New York City Film and Video Program

Austin Film Society through the Texas Filmmakers' Production Fund

New York State Council on the Arts Electronic Media & Film Program

Fulbright Program grant sponsored by the u.s. Department of State

وإني لأستغشي وما بي نعمة  
لعلّ خيالاً منك يلقي خيالاً

I'm not sleepy but I'm trying to sleep,  
so I can meet Layla's shadow in a dream.

