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1. [Arts & Culture](#)
2. [Film](#)

Habibi demonstrates a major new talent in Arab cinema

[Hala Khalaf](#)

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- [play](#)
- [pause](#)
- next
- previous

Susan Youssef's film Habibi is inspired by the 7th-century Sufi parable Majnun Layla, a story of forbidden love. Youssef has updated the poem, it's now a story about two students in the West Bank who are forced to return home to Gaza, and whose love for each other defies tradition.

The full Arabic title is Habibi Rasak Kharban, which translates as "Darling, your head is broken". It's easy to see why the title has been changed to the more catchy Habibi, but the beauty of the full translation is that it captures the essence of the female director, who when we meet to discuss the film, is fun, gregarious and full of laughter.

Youssef has previously made an animation film, a documentary about American Catholics who go to Guantanamo Bay and also two narrative shorts. The jump in genres and change in styles means that it is difficult to put her into a box. The same could be said of her eclectic life story; she was born in Brooklyn, New York, and grew up on Staten Island. "The amazing feeling of growing up Arab American is that there were two sides to life. There was the home life, the community centre, my Lebanese friends on the one side and then there was life at school. I went to a strict Catholic school and that was extremely isolating and strange, and in a 90-girl class, I didn't have a single Arab classmate."

The 34-year-old didn't go to Lebanon until she was 22, when she moved to Beirut to become a schoolteacher as a summer job. In addition to

teaching, she also worked for a local paper: The Daily Star. While she was there, she met a lot of filmmakers and learnt more about Palestinian refugee camps in the south of the country. Her life as a filmmaker had begun.

Originally she wanted to be an actor, but by her own admittance, she was "a horrible actress". She began writing stage plays and was accepted into the Tisch School of Arts in New York. Unfortunately, she couldn't afford the tuition and went to public university instead.

"I made a short film about my grandparents at home," she recalls. "My father was furious that I submitted the film to film schools as it was about his parents and I was showing it to outsiders. I got into the University of Texas in Austin, and decided to go there as it was cheap and a good school." She received a masters in fine art, was a Presidential Scholar and is a Fulbright Fellow.

She was living in Texas when the attacks on the World Trade Centre took place. "I was working as a cocktail waitress at the time in a dive bar and they turned on the TV and it was very weird and my whole family was in New York and I was in Texas. There was a lot of hate crime at the time. And then that summer of 2002 was when I went to Palestine for the first time."

Inspired by the Middle East, she began making films about the region. The short film she made at university won several awards and the decision to become a director was made. Her short film Marjoun and the Flying Headscarf was one of the first fiction films in the US to feature a veiled protagonist. It screened at the Sundance Film Festival in 2006.

Habibi seems to be a culmination of all her interests: a story about the Middle East, rooted in academic history and centring around love. Youssef says: "I'm really interested in research. It's wonderful to be able to go back to an original text and being an Arab American filmmaker I feel very conscious of all the odds that are against us. For this film, I didn't just go to the poetry because it gave credibility to the film; the main reason I used it was because the poetry is so phenomenally beautiful that I felt everyone should read it. The next projects that I plan to work on all refer to texts."

She insists that the film, despite it's setting and a riveting scene in which the protagonists are searched by Israeli guards as they try to flee Palestine, is not a political film and wants people to watch without preconceptions. "It's a film about a couple who have obstacles to their love."

As for her own ever-changing biography, Youssef currently lives in Amsterdam with her south-east Asian husband, whom she met while waiting for a train. Nothing is ordinary in the life of one of the major new talents of Arab cinema.

Habibi is showing at the Mall of the Emirates cinema 12 on Saturday at 6pm; it will show again at the Mall of the Emirates cinema 1 on Monday at 8pm. For more information, visit www.dubaifilmfest.com

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