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# Interview with Maryam Naʿūm

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# INTERVIEW WITH MARYAM NAʿŪM

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**Abstract** | This interview with Egyptian screenwriter Maryam Naʿūm offers insight into her creative approach to scripting crime within Arab television drama. Known for her socially engaged narratives, Naʿūm discusses the narrative role of crime, evolving audience expectations, and the cultural and institutional constraints shaping representations of justice across the Arab region. She reflects on regional variations in crime storytelling, the rise of platform-driven content, and the challenges of adapting international formats. Drawing on her own body of work and her mentorship of emerging writers, Naʿūm articulates a vision of crime drama that prioritizes emotional depth and character complexity over formulaic resolution.

**Keywords** | Arab television drama, Crime narratives, Screenwriting, Cultural adaptation, Streaming platforms, Gender and justice, True crime.

Maryam Naʿūm is a prominent Egyptian screenwriter celebrated for her thought-provoking narratives and commitment to addressing pressing social issues through the lens of television drama. Born and raised in Cairo, Naʿūm graduated from the Higher Institute of Cinema at the Academy of Arts, where she honed her skills in screenwriting and storytelling. Over the past decade, she has emerged as one of the most influential voices in Egyptian and Arab television, crafting narratives that resonate deeply with audiences across the region.[1] This Ramadan, she captivated viewers *min al-Muḥīṭ ilá al-Ḫalīǧ* with *Lām šamsiyya* [2025], a bold series tackling the difficult subject of child abuse.

Her work frequently delves into intricate themes such as gender, class, and societal norms, showcasing a deep understanding of Egypt's social fabric. Naʿūm's talent for crafting nuanced, multidimensional characters has earned her widespread critical acclaim, establishing her as a prominent figure in contemporary Arab television. Two early works that played a significant role in cementing her reputation are *Bint ismahā Ḏāt* [2013], which chronicles decades of Egyptian social and political upheaval through the lens of one woman's life,[2] and *Taḥt al-sayṭara* [2015], a groundbreaking portrayal of drug addiction. Her storytelling is consistently marked by emotional depth and a sharp engagement with socially relevant issues.

This interview delves into Naʿūm's creative process, her inspirations, and her reflections on the role of storytelling in challenging societal norms while scripting crime. It offers an intimate glimpse into the mind of a writer who continues to redefine the boundaries of Arab television drama.

**What is the function of crime in your scenarios? When do you include a crime in your scripts?**

In my scenarios, crime serves as a pivotal element in the character's arc. It's never the ultimate goal but rather a transformative step in their journey. I'm fascinated by what brings a character to the point of committing a crime and the path they take afterward. My scripts follow these characters closely, often delving into the intricate relationship between crime and empathy—how we, as viewers, can connect with someone who crosses moral boundaries.

Interestingly, the crimes I script often don't dominate the narrative or define it as a "crime drama." Instead, they function as crucial moments within broader,

1- Evidence of Maryam Naʿūm's pivotal role in Arab television drama was also reflected in the responses to the call for papers for the conference that inspired this special issue. Two scholars proposed papers analysing *Siǧn al-nisā* [2014], a series scripted by Naʿūm. No other television drama creator attracted similar scholarly interest. Both abstracts were accepted, and the papers were presented at the conference in Beirut in May 2023.

2- Two contribution dedicated to *Bint ismahā Ḏāt* were featured in the special issue on adaptation in Egyptian cinema published in this journal, Volume 25 (2021): RICHARD Thomas, « Une femme d'Égypte du papier à l'écran : adapter Les années de Zeth après la révolution », *Regards*, n° 25, 2021, pp. 73–87 ; AYARI Ramla, « Du roman Dāt au feuilleton Bint ismaha Zeth ou le traitement de l'Histoire dans une adaptation télévisuelle égyptienne », *Regards*, n° 25, 2021, pp. 89–100.

multi-dimensional stories. For instance, I'm currently working on a project that could be considered a spiritual sequel to *Siǧn al-nisā* [2014]. This time, the story centres on a female character who, after serving her sentence for a murder she did commit, sets out to seek revenge. Unlike the protagonist in *al-Barīʾa* [2021], who was innocent as the title suggests, this new character is guilty. She embodies both protagonist and antagonist—a complex antiheroine, almost like a feminine Pablo Escobar.

- *What is the appeal of scripting crime?*

As creators, we recognise that crime has an innate dramatic allure—it captivates audiences with its tension and mystery. When brainstorming new ideas, crime naturally emerges as a compelling theme. For example, during our quarterly meetings at Sard, the writing room I founded in 2016, at least two out of ten ideas on the table often involve crime. Its narrative potential seems inexhaustible.

- *Crime features in your work from early projects like* Bi-l-šamʿ al-aḥmar *[2010] to more recent works such as* Bayn al-suṭūr *[2024] and* Illā al-ṭalāq *[2024]. What has changed in your approach over the years?*

My approach has evolved significantly over time, but in a way it also hasn't. In earlier works, like *Bi-l-šamʿ al-aḥmar*, the influence of the lead actress, Yusrā, played a central role in shaping the scenario. Her character and the persona she wanted to project had a dominant impact on the narrative, which reflected my relative inexperience at the time. Over the years, I've learned to protect the integrity of my stories while still collaborating effectively with performers.
More recently, I've also been increasingly approached to adapt foreign formats for Egyptian and broader Arab audiences. This has opened up new creative challenges and opportunities, allowing me to refine how I incorporate universal themes like crime into culturally specific contexts.

## Once a crime is scripted, must punishment inevitably follow?

Not necessarily. It depends entirely on the message I want to convey. If my aim is to strike the audience or provoke reflection, I may deliberately omit the punishment to highlight societal realities—specifically, that certain crimes often go unpunished. The audience needs to see this, as it reflects the world we live in. For example, in this Ramadan's *Lām šamsiyya* [2025], I chose to tackle the issue of child abuse. From the outset, director Karīm al-Šinnāwī and I agreed that the series should highlight just how difficult it is to secure a conviction in such cases. Due to the high threshold of evidence required, the victims in our story initially struggle to convince the court—mirroring the tragic reality in which justice is often denied in crimes of this nature. We faced some challenges in shaping this narrative, but it felt essential to reflect this uncomfortable truth and raise awareness.

As a writer, if I have the creative freedom, I decide whether to include punishment based on the character arc rather than as a didactic statement that 'bad must be punished.' Punishment, if shown, must feel organic to the story and the character's journey, rather than serving as a moralistic addendum.

• *Isn't punishment a requirement of the authorisation process?*

I haven't encountered this as a consistent requirement. However, there was a recent exception with *Wišš wi-ḍahr* [2022], where we had to add a scene showing a one-year prison sentence for a fraudulent scheme (*naṣb*). While it wasn't initially planned, it became necessary during production.
Interestingly, I didn't see this addition as entirely external to the story. It aligned with the character arc and laid the groundwork for a potential second season, where the characters could continue their scheming. That said, this was a rare instance for me—earlier works never faced similar demands.

• *Does the audience expect crimes to be punished?*

There is indeed an expectation among audiences that crime must be punished, rooted in cultural frameworks of reward and punishment (*ṯawāb wa-ʿiqāb*) and the broader notion of paradise and hell (*ǧanna wi-nār*). These beliefs have a mundane reflection in storytelling, where audiences often expect moral closure. As an author, however, I prioritise the character arc over audience expectations. For instance, in *Siǧn al-nisā* [2014], when Ġāliyya (played by Nillī Karīm) leaves prison and commits murders, it wasn't about punishing her or resolving the narrative neatly. Instead, it was about illustrating her inner turmoil and how she had lost herself.
That said, I do take audience expectations into account, integrating them subtly within the character's journey. At times, the authorisation process seems to reflect these cultural norms, aiming to avoid public backlash for letting crimes go unpunished or concerns about glorifying wrongdoing.
Until *Wišš wi-ḍahr* [2022], I assumed that the push for punishment came primarily from audience expectations. However, in that case, the suggestion to show the sentencing didn't come from viewers but was pre-emptively added because of perceived external pressures. We introduced it last-minute to mitigate potential issues, even though it wasn't part of the original plan.

## Does the investigation of crime play a role in your scenarios? If so, why?

In earlier works such as *Mawǧa ḥārra* [2013] or *Siǧn al-nisā* [2014], there was significant creative freedom not only in depicting crime itself but also in portraying its investigation. This extended to every stage of the process, from police procedures to public prosecution involvement, and even courtroom trials. However, towards the end of the 2010s, stricter requirements were introduced regarding how investigations could be represented, creating more constraints on the creative process.

• *And yet, paradoxically, you've scripted even more crime-centered dramas since the late 2010s?*

Absolutely. The increasing demand for crime dramas has largely been driven by streaming platforms. Unlike traditional local productions—typically commissioned for Ramadan and often skewed towards lighter, more accessible themes—platforms cater to a different demographic.
Streaming audiences tend to include younger generations and members of the upper classes, many of whom are also consuming content from global platforms like Netflix. Crime drama is a staple of such platforms, and to meet the expectations of these viewers, Arabic-language crime dramas have become a major area of interest for streaming platforms. This shift has resulted in an increased number of crime-centred narratives being commissioned year-round, as opposed to the seasonal focus of traditional television productions.

## Are there cultural differences across the region when scripting crime?

When scripting *al-Barīʾa* [2021] for the Lebanese context, we followed the local Lebanese procedures for investigations, while also incorporating elements of a more globalised imaginary of crime investigations due to the show being an adaptation of a foreign format. This dual approach reflects the flexibility needed when navigating regional specificities while aligning with broader audience expectations.
The Egyptian context, however, presents distinct challenges. In Egypt, there are no detectives in the conventional sense. Investigations (*taḥʾīʾ*) are led by the public prosecution, which relies heavily on police work. If the police are not committed or proactive, cases often stagnate. Public prosecutors (*wakīl niyāba*), tasked with overseeing investigations, generally do not conduct field inquiries themselves. If the police don't provide substantial groundwork, the case may simply be dropped. This system lacks the investigative drama that makes for compelling storytelling.
To address this, we often script scenarios where lawyers take on the role of investigators or where police officers, whether corrupt or determined, must overcome significant hurdles to see a case through. Essentially, we have to construct a believable reason for the investigation to proceed because, in reality, many cases don't receive this level of attention unless they are sensational enough to become matters of public interest (*ʾaḍiyyit raʾy ʿāmm*).

• *Which is what happens in Mawǧa ḥārra [2013]?*

Exactly. In *Mawǧa ḥārra*, Iyyād Naṣṣār's character has a personal vendetta driving his pursuit of Ḥamāda Ġazlān (played by Sayyid Raǧab). Without this motive of revenge, it's unlikely the investigation would have advanced. In typical cases, unless a crime captures widespread public attention, it risks being archived without much action.

- *Is a personal, direct interest in investigating the case essential to the narrative?*

Absolutely. To make the story believable, personal stakes often become the catalyst for an investigation. The audience understands that, in reality, investigations tend to focus only on the most heinous crimes—serial killings, child abuse, or other severe offenses. For more routine crimes, such as a domestic murder, the investigation is often minimal, with the suspect jailed and the burden falling on their lawyer to uncover the truth.

- *Data on platform users' interest in crime drama seems to show regional differences, with Saudi Arabia showing above-average interest and Egypt below average. Why do you think this is the case?*

Perhaps it's a reflection of the environment! [Laughs.] Joking aside, I'm not entirely sure. In Egypt, audiences traditionally gravitate towards social dramas and comedies, particularly in mainstream television productions. Crime dramas, especially those with intricate plots, tend to appeal more to viewers of streaming platforms.
Streaming audiences, who are often younger or belong to wealthier segments of society, are exposed to global platforms like Netflix, where crime drama is a dominant genre. This demand has shaped platform commissions in the region, catering to these audiences year-round, as opposed to the seasonal focus of traditional Egyptian television, which targets a broader demographic less inclined toward sophisticated crime narratives.

- *Back to al-Barīʾa [2021], what was your experience scripting for a different regional context and audience?*

For *al-Barīʾa*, we worked closely with a Lebanese team to ensure that the portrayal of local investigative procedures was accurate. However, I have no idea whether this accuracy was always strictly adhered to or slightly adjusted to fit the expectations of the format.
Adapting the foreign format also highlighted similarities across contexts. For instance, we introduced a love story where Ǧād, the investigator, falls in love with Laylá, the lead character and titular 'Innocent.' This personal connection motivated the investigation to progress, a dynamic that feels authentic in both Lebanese and Egyptian contexts and could potentially resonate in Saudi narratives as well.

- *Was personal interest equally prominent in the Saudi scripts you reviewed as a consultant?*

Interestingly, no. In the Saudi scripts I reviewed, the police were depicted as diligently conducting investigations. Whether this reflects reality or represents an aspirational portrayal is unclear.

Another striking observation is the influence of foreign drama. Many Saudi crime scripts seem so heavily inspired by global formats that it's sometimes difficult to identify whether the stories are truly rooted in Saudi culture. Even Saudi writers and directors have pointed this out, which adds another layer of complexity to scripting crime dramas for the region.

**What are the trends for scripting crime for Arab audiences today?**

A trend I've observed among colleagues and within the industry is the increasing focus on scripting crime as a plot-driven genre. In this style, cliffhangers are primarily tied to the twists and turns of the plot rather than the characters. Personally, I use cliffhangers as well, but I would describe them as 'emotional.' The suspense I aim to create revolves around the characters' arcs—viewers are left wondering what will happen to the character on a personal and emotional level, rather than merely speculating about the next plot development.
Working with younger writers in the writing lab I founded, Sard, has revealed how these different approaches to cliffhangers and storytelling can cross-pollinate. It's been fascinating to see how these emerging voices interpret and adapt crime drama for modern audiences.

- *How do younger generations of writers approach scripting crime?*

In my latest writing project, I had the chance to observe how three young writers approached crime narratives. Initially, their scripts leaned heavily on plot-based cliffhangers—moments I would characterise as 'bluffs.' These are the kind of cliffhangers that end an episode with suspense, only to resolve anticlimactically in the next episode. Essentially, the cliffhanger is there for its own sake, without meaningful consequences for the story.
This approach prompted a discussion about what makes a cliffhanger effective. I explained that a plot-based cliffhanger needs to be earned and must have a direct and compelling payoff in the subsequent episode. If there's no real consequence, the cliffhanger risks feeling hollow.
Despite these initial tendencies, I prefer to let young writers choose their own paths. It's crucial for them to explore and develop their own storytelling instincts, even if it means working through stylistic influences. Many of them are inspired by the American approach to crime drama, which is meticulous in its plotting. However, a key difference is the time and care taken in the American industry to develop these narratives, ensuring that cliffhangers are integrated into the broader arc of the story. Here, the industry is often rushed, which leads to underdeveloped setups and resolutions.

- *Is there a noticeable shift in the appreciation of international remakes?*

Absolutely. The trajectory of international remakes in Arab television has evolved significantly since the producer Muḥammad Mašīš initiated this trend with *Grānd*

*Ōtēl* [2016][3] and, earlier, *Ṭarīqī* [2015].[4] Initially, these adaptations were carefully localised, but now remakes are often advertised with their original titles, and in some cases, the local writers are not even credited.

Producers typically choose the formats for adaptation, then approach us writers to localise the script. It's worth noting that many of the adaptations we've worked on have been crime dramas: *Kaʾannah imbāriḥ*,[5] *Zayy al-šams*,[6] *al-Barīʾa*,[7] *Bayn al-suṭūr*,[8] and *Illā al-ṭalāq*.[9] Interestingly, three of these adaptations were spearheaded by Mašīš, regardless of the production company. His rationale is that crime dramas are easier to sell to distributors and require less time to produce compared to writing an original script.

In practice, however, adapting foreign formats is far from straightforward. Contextual differences often demand extensive rewrites, making the process just as labour-intensive as creating an original script. For example, with *Kaʾannah imbāriḥ*, the original show had 60 episodes. We used around 20 from the original narrative and independently developed an additional 10 episodes. Similarly, *Zayy al-šams* diverged significantly from its source material due to cultural and contextual factors.[10]

**True crime has some history and appeal in Egyptian television drama, from *Rayyā wa-Sakīna* all the way to *Suzān Tamīm*'s murder. Do you think that there is an appetite for it in the public these days?**

There is certainly a public appetite for stories being 'consecrated' in television drama, particularly true crime narratives. My current experience with a true crime drama—where scripting is complete and a pilot has been produced—demonstrates this. In this case, the lawyer involved in the original case was the keenest advocate for dramatising the story. He is particularly proud of having reduced his client's sentence from capital punishment to five or six years and approached me himself.

The series is structured around two main plotlines: one following the female criminal and the other focusing on the lawyer. However, the latter storyline is

3- *Grānd Ōtēl* [Grand Hotel, Egypt, 2016, 30 episodes], based on *Gran Hotel* [Grand Hotel, Spain, 2011-2013, 39 episodes].

4- *Ṭarīqī* [My Way, Egypt, 2015, 30 episodes], based on *La ronca de oro* [The Voice of Freedom, Colombia, 2014, 62 episodes].

5- *Kaʾannuh imbāriḥ* [Just Like Yesterday, Egypt, 2018, 45 episodes], based on *El regreso de Lucas* [The Return of Lucas, Peru/Argentina, 2016-2017, 60 episodes].

6- *Zayy al-šams* [Like the Sun, Egypt, 2019, 30 episodes], based on *Sorelle* [Sisters, Italy, 2017, 6 episodes].

7- *al-Barīʾa* [The Innocent, Lebanon, 2021, 8 episodes], based on *Innocente* [Innocent, France, 2016, 6 episodes].

8- *Bayn al-suṭūr* [Between the Lines, Egypt, 2024, 30 episodes], based on *Miseuti* [Misty, South Korea, 2018, 16 episodes].

9- *Illā al-ṭalāq* [All but Divorced, Egypt, 2024, 10 episodes], based on *Tada rikon-shitenai dake* [All but Divorced, Japan, 2021, 60 episodes].

10- A detailed discussion of the adaptation of *Sorelle* can be found in: PAROLIN Gianluca, « Quests for Justice Across the Mediterranean: Sorelle (2017) and Zayy Ish-Shams (2019) », *Journal of Italian Cinema and Media Studies*, vol. 12, n° 1, 2024, pp. 41–56.

entirely fictionalised. For this reason, I would categorise the series as 'inspired by' a true story rather than a strict retelling. Paradoxically, the lawyer, who serves as a consultant, grounds our depiction while acknowledging the fictional liberties taken.

- *Are there any specific challenges in depicting true crime in Egypt, in particular by those involved and claiming rights over the story?*

In this case, there were no significant legal challenges. The lawyer approached us with his client's consent, but we avoided direct contact with her to prevent premature leaks about the project. Since the case is already in the public domain (*ʾaḍiyyit raʾy ʿāmm*), she has no legal grounds to prevent the production. While she could potentially voice objections through media or social platforms, the production is legally protected.
For such projects, the central challenge often lies in balancing respect for the individuals involved with the dramatic liberties necessary for storytelling. Given the high-profile nature of public-domain cases, legal risks are mitigated, but sensitivity remains paramount.

- *Do courtroom scenes play a major role?*

No, courtroom scenes are rare in my work, and this project will follow suit. While the series may include a few such scenes—early on and in the finale—they serve more as a reflection of societal controversies than as a narrative focal point. For me, courtroom scenes are compelling when they highlight larger social dynamics, rather than the mechanics of legal proceedings. This approach ensures that these scenes resonate with the broader themes of the series.

## Which crime series would you recommend?

I would recommend *Bayn al-suṭūr* [2024], an adaptation of a Korean crime drama format. The series stands out for its depiction of a diligent policeman, whose commitment to his work emerges naturally from the story rather than external pressures. It is also noteworthy for its narrative structure, which employs flashbacks to great effect—a testament to the director's expertise as an editor. The result is a tightly woven and engaging crime drama.

Interview conducted by Gianluca Parolin[11]

11- A first conversation between Maryam and Gianluca took place in a café in Zamalek in late January 2023, as they prepared for the upcoming conference in Beirut. This text is the product of their second conversation, which occurred at the Sard headquarters in Doqqi in mid-November 2024.

**Maryam Naʿūm** is an acclaimed Egyptian screenwriter known for her socially conscious storytelling and compelling female characters. A graduate of the Cairo Higher Institute of Cinema, she gained recognition with *Wāḥid-ṣifr* (2009) and solidified her reputation through collaborations with director Kāmla Abū Ḏikrī on works like *Bin ismahā Ḏāt* (2013) and *Siǧn al-nisā* (2014). Naʿūm's scripts often tackle issues like gender inequality, class struggles, and personal freedom. Her nuanced writing and focus on marginalised voices have made her a key figure in contemporary Arab cinema, contributing to a new wave of realist and feminist storytelling in the region. Naʿūm is also the founder of Sard, a screenwriting workshop that mentors emerging talents.

**Gianluca Parolin** is a comparative lawyer working on constitutional design, State-Islam relations, citizenship, shifting semiotics of law, and images of law in popular culture. He holds a PhD in Public Law from the University of Turin, and is Professor of Law at the Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations of the Aga Khan University in London, where he also leads the Governance Programme. He previously taught at the American University in Cairo and Cairo University (2008-2015). He is currently finalising a new book on the visual jurisprudence of citizenship in the Egyptian crime drama of the turbulent 2010s.