



BRIDGES
OF VIRTUE



(443) 884-5137
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Bridges of Virtue

*How Islam, the Abrahamic Faiths, and
Philosophy Illuminate Love*

Classroom Discussion Guide

An educational project inspired by Islam's Greatest Stories of Love



A documentary film created by Unity Productions Foundation
and broadcast nationally on PBS stations in August 2025.

Educator Guide for Screening Islam's Greatest Stories of Love



Dear Educator,

Islam's Greatest Stories of Love is created by Unity Productions Foundation (UPF) and aired on PBS stations nationwide on August 22nd, 2025. UPF has created this classroom discussion guide in collaboration with Dr. Susan Douglass at Georgetown University to help high school history and social sciences, religion, psychology, sociology, civics, and related courses to screen and discuss key chapters from the film. Our classroom guides aim to meet and exceed nationwide teaching standards in skills and content, following First Amendment guidelines for teaching about religions.

- We are pleased to offer you this discussion guide as a free service for you to use in your classroom. You may review and discuss any of these five stories of love in the wider Islamic tradition.
- After you have watched and discussed one or more of these clips with your class, we request that you please distribute (print out) student and teacher evaluation forms (**see below, to print**).
- Once you submit your evaluations by print or photocopy and sent to us via email to nausheen@upf.tv, you will be made eligible for an Amazon gift card.

We hope that you find this film and discussion experience to be enriching for your students! Please do not hesitate to reach out to us with any questions. We can be reached at nausheen@upf.tv.

Sincerely,
The UPF Team



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Introduction:



The stories of love in the Islamic tradition as told in Islam's Greatest Stories of Love are framed by the story of an individual and her deep relationship with her father, who was taken by illness while she was absent from him. Ariella Gayotto Hohl is a student at Harvard University who left her home country to study, with the blessing and encouragement of her family. Her father, with whom she has been extremely close since childhood, became ill, and not wanting to interrupt her studies, did not let her know the gravity of his illness, and so she was not prepared for sudden news of his death.

Though raised as a Catholic whose parents converted to Judaism at some point and exposed her to that tradition as well, she found and accepted Islam while in college. She found solace in her grief among a circle of Muslim Harvard Seminary students. To help her find meaning since feeling that her father's death "nothing makes sense anymore," these friends suggested that she embark on a quest to learn about the meanings of love in Islam. During that quest, which is documented in this film, she reads and speaks to various scholars, artists and spiritual seekers, exploring stories of love in the Islamic tradition, and their personal, social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions.



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Discussion Questions

(by chapter):

The Tragic Tale of Layla and Majnun (15:36)

password: lovestories

1. Keeping in mind that the story has roots in pre-Islamic societies, describe the cultural context of gender relations in the story of Layla and Majnun. What do the setting in which they meet, and the subsequent events in the story tell us about family and gender relations in this pre-modern society.
2. Despite its cultural distance from our time, what elements of the story still resonate today?
3. In the cultural context of the story, marriage is viewed not only as a choice between two individuals, but as a relationship with social dimensions. Why and how do societies justify such interventions between lovers?
4. Are there parallels in the story with today's gender relations and patterns of seeking a marriage partner? Compare and contrast the process and possible outcomes.
5. The story of Layla and Majnun has appeared in painting, poetry cross time and place indicates that it contains more hidden and symbolic meaning than a simple story of star-crossed lovers. What universal meanings do you find in the story?
6. Do you think the story of Majnun and Layla points toward self-destructive behavior or expresses the virtues of fidelity and loyalty?



7. Dr. Omid Safi, a scholar of Sufism and the poetry of Rumi, tells the story of a ruler who was compelled by hearing of Layla's beauty. He commanded all the women in the realm to appear at his court, only to discover that Layla is not remarkable in his eyes. The wisdom of the tale is that beauty is not only in the eye of the beholder, but comes from deep within the lover's spirit.
8. Is the story of Majnun and Layla an example of enduring love, or an example of social interference in free choice among individuals?
9. What does the story of Majnun and Layla say about the meaning of love as pain and longing? What makes love destructive versus transformative?

Exploring Islamic primary sources: Curriculum about Islam seldom goes much beyond beliefs and practices of worship to delve into emotions. These stories offer the opportunity for students to explore the topic from what Arielle learns from the scholars and the understandings she reaches from an Islamic perspective. Discuss the following passages about love from the two main Islamic sources—Qur'an and Hadith—and discuss how these passages relate to the story in this segment:

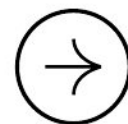
Qur'an 4:1

"O Mankind! Be conscious of your Sustainer, who has created you out of one living entity, and out of it created its mate, and out of the two spread abroad a multitude of men and women. And remain conscious of God, in whose name you demand [your rights] from one another, and of these ties of kinship. Verily, God is ever watchful over you!"

Hadith: It is narrated on the authority of 'Umar ibn al-Khattab (may Allah be pleased with him), who said: I heard the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him), say "Actions are according to intentions, and everyone will get what was intended. Whoever migrates with an intention for Allah and His messenger, the migration will be for the sake of Allah and his Messenger. And whoever migrates for worldly gain or to marry a woman, then his migration will be for the sake of whatever he migrated for." Hadith in the authentic collections of Bukhari & Muslim.



The Language of the Taj Mahal (22:12) password: lovestories



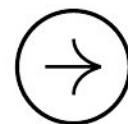
1. The Taj Mahal is a monument to the loss of a Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan's beloved wife Mumtaz Mahal. This famous mausoleum, however, is not just a monument to loss and grief, but also to the tendency of human beings to explain loss in terms of regret for sinfulness, and the effort to repent and ask forgiveness.
2. What are the visual and emotional messages that the Taj Mahal conveys, and what characteristics account for its impact as the most beautiful building in the world?
3. Is the Taj Mahal an attempt to recreate an image of earthly paradise, or is intended to inspire visitors to strive for a higher state of being through its beauty?
4. How does learning the story of the Taj Mahal support Ariella's quest to overcome the loss of her father, who was the "love of her life"?
5. Do you see the monument as a vain effort of self-indulgence, or did Shah Jahan succeed in transforming his grief and regret into a lasting inspiration for humanity? What elements of narratives of his later life support either alternative?

Exploring Islamic primary sources: Discuss the following passages about love from the two main Islamic sources–Qur'an and Hadith–and discuss how these passages relate to the story in this segment:

6. According to Michael Calabria's reading of the Taj Mahal, its text reads as a promise of redemption for those who believe and seek redemption. Among Islamic teachings about repentance and forgiveness are the following: Qur'an, 85:14 وَهُوَ الْغَفُورُ الْودُودُ "And He alone is truly-forgiving, all-embracing in His love"
7. Qur'an, 3:31 "Say [O Prophet]: 'If you love God, follow me, [and] God will love you and forgive your sins; for God is much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace.
قُلْ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ تُحِبُّونَ اللَّهَ فَاتَّبِعُونِي يُحْبِبْكُمُ اللَّهُ وَيَغْفِرْ لَكُمْ ذُنُوبَكُمْ وَاللَّهُ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ
8. Narrated Jarir bin `Abdullah: Narrated Jarir bin 'Abdullah: The Prophet ﷺ said, "He who is not merciful to others, will not be treated mercifully.
حَدَّثَنَا عُمَرُ بْنُ حَفْصٍ، حَدَّثَنَا أَبِي، حَدَّثَنَا الْأَعْمَشُ، قَالَ حَدَّثَنِي زَيْدُ بْنُ وَهَبٍ، قَالَ سَمِعْتُ جَرِيرَ بْنَ عَبْدِ اللَّهِ، عَنِ النَّبِيِّ ﷺ قَالَ " مَنْ لَا يَرْحَمَ لَا يَرْحَمَ



The First Muslim (27:29) password: lovestories



1. Compare and contrast the social context of Muhammad and Khadijah's marriage with the Layla and Majnun story.
2. Identify ways in which Khadijah and Muhammad's relationship was unusual for their time and culture and even for our own time?
3. During Khadijah's lifetime, Muhammad did not marry another wife, but he did so after the migration (hijra) to Madinah. What did you learn from the scholars in this segment about Muhammad's marriages, and about the character traits and values he exhibited as a husband?
4. How did Khadijah's strength and loyalty contribute to the success of Muhammad's mission as a prophet and leader?
5. In the social context of Makkah in the 6th-7th century CE, what is the significance of the fact that Khadijah was the first to accept his prophethood? (Extension: the second woman to accept Islam was an Abyssinian woman named Barakah, who had been enslaved as a child and later freed, continued to serve in Muhammad and Khadijah's household. She attended his mother at his birth, and comforted him upon the death of his mother and took care of him as a child. She was the only person among the companions of the Prophet who knew him from the moment of his birth to his death. Explore her story further [here](#).)
6. Make a list of severe tests of faith and loyalty that Khadijah and Muhammad experienced during their lives together, both private and public, and recall how they dealt with each loss and difficulty they encountered together.

Exploring Islamic primary sources: Discuss the following passages about love from the two main Islamic sources–Qur'an and Hadith–and discuss how these passages relate to the story in this segment:

Qur'an 30:21

And among His wonders is this: He creates for you mates out of your own kind, so that you might incline towards them, and He engenders love and tenderness between you: in this, behold, there are messages indeed for people who think! (Qur'an, 30:21)

وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ أَنْ خَلَقَ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا لِتَسْكُنُوا إِلَيْهَا وَجَعَلَ بَيْنَكُمْ
مَوَدَّةً وَرَحْمَةً إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ

Hadith: Narrated Ali: I heard the Prophet SAW saying, “Mary, the daughter of Imran, was the best among the women (of the world of her time) and Khadijah is the best amongst the women (of this nation).”
(Sahih Al-Bukhari – Book 58 Hadith 164)



Malcolm X: A Story of Radical Love (25:56)

password: lovestories

1. Discuss aspects of Ella Collins' character based on her responses to Malcolm's situations at various stages of his life. List ways in which her strength was influential and beyond both her relationship with her brother and beyond membership in any organization.
2. Trace events in the trajectory of Malcolm Little's life and its points of transformation to his identity as Malcolm X.
3. Do you find similarities between the path of Malcolm X's life and action in his community and the Muslim community in Muhammad's time? Explain.
4. What evidence does this film provide that Malcolm X's journey toward Islam opened many Black Americans in the mid-twentieth century to Islam? (For more stories on early pioneers of Islamic teaching, see [Muslim Pathways](#), under the theme [American Muslim Revival](#))
5. Describe how this segment of the film flips the concept of hate to reveal the love at the center of the story? Include both the explanations given by Fatima Fanousie and A. Peter Bailey.

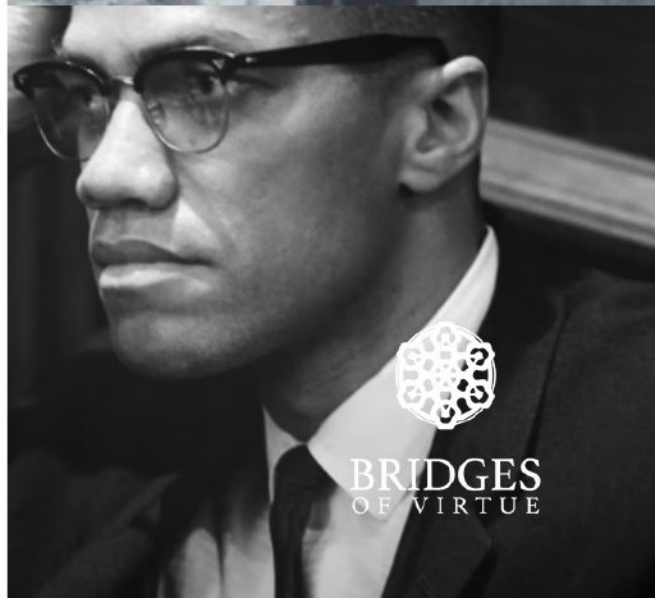
Exploring Islamic primary sources: Discuss the following passages about love from the two main Islamic sources–Qur'an and Hadith–and discuss how these passages relate to the story in this segment:

Qur'an 9:7

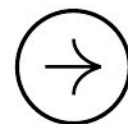
“And the believers, men and women, are protecting friends one of another; they enjoin the right and forbid the wrong, and they establish worship and they pay the poor-due, and they obey Allah and His messenger. As for these, Allah will have mercy on them. Lo! Allah is Mighty, Wise.”

Qur'an 42:23

... God gives the glad tiding to such of His servants as attain to faith and do righteous deeds. Say [O Prophet]: “No reward do I ask of you for this [message] other than [that you should] love your fellow men.” For, if anyone gains [the merit of] a good deed, We shall grant him through it an increase of good: and, verily, God is much-forgiving, ever responsive to gratitude.



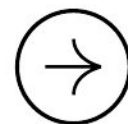
Hadith: Abu Huraira reported: The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said, “Verily, Allah will say on the Day of Resurrection: Where are those who love each other for the sake of My majesty? Today, I will shelter them in My shade on a day when there is no shade but Mine.”
(Source: Sahih Muslim 2566)



Rumi's Path of Love (22:09) password: lovestories

1. Describe Rumi's situation before he encountered Shams. What do you think Rumi experienced with Shams that transformed his point of view and life purpose?
2. What is the value of love for a mentor like Shams? Explain how does the first Rumi poem below (#6) speaks to that relationship and its often unexpected appearance?
3. Rumi's poetry explores themes of transformation through separation and loss. Like the discovery of love, Rumi views separation as a necessary experience for the self to discover truth. The reed was comfortable in its natural home in the reed bed, but the single reed was taken away and lost its attachment to its roots. In becoming transformed into a flute, however, the reed finds a lasting home that gives voice to glorify God with its sound, and helps others to appreciate divine beauty. Losing ourselves in this passing world, we are able to locate a more lasting home.
4. How does Rumi's story relate to the quest of Ariella to understand and gather meaning from her father's death; how does it—and the other stories in this film—relate to the transformative power of pain?
5. This episode of the film brings Ariella's quest to understand the transformative power of love. Discuss the last few minutes of the episode with Dr. Fatima Fanousi, and the conclusions they reach about the nature of love.
6. There is no better way to engage with Rumi's ideas than to ponder the meanings in his poetry. see next page for three selections:





The minute I heard my first love story,
I started looking for you, not knowing
how blind that was.
Lovers don't finally meet somewhere.
They're in each other all along.

–

If you are seeking, seek us with joy
For we live in the kingdom of joy.
Do not give your heart to anything else
But to the love of those who are clear joy,
Do not stray into the neighborhood of despair.
For there are hopes: they are real, they exist –
Do not go in the direction of darkness –
I tell you: suns exist.

–

Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek
and find all the barriers within yourself that you
have built against it.

Selected poems from translations by Coleman Barks in *The Essential Rumi*, *The Book of Love*, and *The Big Red Book* (<https://mo-issa.medium.com/13-rumi-poems-to-awaken-the-love-within-us-2fcba19ca1c6>)

Exploring Islamic primary sources: Rumi's poetry is often celebrated in contemporary culture without understanding his role as a Muslim scholar, and his poetry's connection to Islamic teachings in the Qur'an (believed by Muslims to consist of the revelations from God transmitted through the Angel Gabriel) and the Hadith (narrations of Prophet Muhammad during his 23 years interacting with the early Muslim community at Makkah and Madinah). Discuss the following passages from the two main Islamic sources—Qur'an and Hadith—and discuss how these passages relate to the story in this segment.



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“Say [O Prophet]: ‘If you love God, follow me, [and] God will love you and forgive you your sins; for God is much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace.’” قُلْ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ تُحِبُّونَ اللَّهَ فَاتَّبِعُونِي يُحْبِبْكُمُ اللَّهُ وَيَغْفِرْ لَكُمْ ذُنُوبَكُمْ وَاللَّهُ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ

“...whose hearts He has brought together:
[for,] if thou hadst expended all that is on
earth, thou couldst not have brought their
hearts together [by thyself]: but God did bring
them together. Verily, He is Almighty, Wise.”

وَأَلَفَ بَيْنَ قُلُوبِهِمْ لَوْ أَنفَقْتَ مَا فِي الْأَرْضِ جَمِيعًا مَّا
أَلَفْتَ بَيْنَ قُلُوبِهِمْ وَلَكِنَّ اللَّهَ أَلَفَ بَيْنَهُمْ إِنَّهُ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ

The following **Hadith** is from a group referred to as Hadith Qudsi, or "sacred narrations." This one is much quoted among Sufi Muslims and scholars of sufism, but it is not considered authentic by all Muslim scholars. "I was a hidden treasure but I was not known, so I loved to be known; I created the creation and made myself known to them, so they came to know me." (Cited in Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-Arabi's Cosmology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), p. 21.

For more stories about Rumi and his poetry, see the UPF animated film *Lamya's Poem*)



Attn: Classroom Discussion,
Islam's Greatest Stories of Love



Re: Feedback/Gift Card Drawing

Dear Organizer,

Thanks for registering to screen and discuss Islam's Greatest Stories of Love. Below are two feedback forms, one that is required to be completed by you and one by each student in your event. Please copy and distribute the student forms. Your feedback is critical toward our goal of constant improvement.

Therefore, when you and your students send in the completed forms, you become eligible in a drawing for Amazon gift cards. 20 gift cards of \$25 each will be given away after random selection. A completed evaluation form with your email address is required to enter. Please note that viewers under 18 should complete the feedback form but not provide their last name or email address. They are not eligible for the drawing.

When complete, please mail all forms to:

UPF, P.O. Box 650458, Potomac Falls, VA 20165-0458

or scan and send to: nausheen@upf.tv as a PDF document.

Sincerely,
The UPF Team



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Teacher Feedback Form for Islam's Greatest Stories of Love

Film(s) Reviewed

___Islam's Greatest Stories of Love

Name_____ Org _____

City _____ State _____

Email_____ makes you eligible for
Amazon Gift Card Drawing, 20 gift cards worth \$25 each will be given away

Number of participants: _____

Location of the event (e.g. First Baptist, Johson H.S.) _____

Appx %: ___men ___women

Religions of most attendees (if known) _____

Did a dialogue take place or just a film showing?

Did you download and use any resources from the upf.tv web page?

Did any particular questions/points stand out during the dialogue?

What was the general reaction to the clip/film from participants?

What was the most important thing participants gained from the experience?

Other comments:



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Student Feedback Form for Islam's Greatest Stories of Love (one per participant, please)

Film Viewed and Discussed

___Islam's Greatest Stories of Love

If you are under 18 years old, please do not provide your last name or email.

You will not be eligible for the drawing.

Name_____ Org/School _____

City _____ State _____

Email_____ makes you eligible for
Amazon Gift Card Drawing, 20 gift cards worth \$25 each will be given away
(18 and over only).

How did the themes of sacrifice and compassion stand out in the film and discussion? Can you cite an example.

Did these stories enrich your own understanding of the meaning of love?

What did you learn about the meaning of virtue in this film and discussion?

Were there any beliefs and aspirations of the Muslims in the film have that were similar to your own? If so, what?





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