

Dancing with Hyphens

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1

In 1929, the famous Spanish filmmaker, Luis Bunuel, filled his pockets with stones before walking into the first projection of his first movie, *Le Chien Andalou*. If the spectators disliked his work, he had decided, he was going to pelt them with the rocks. The movie itself was quite violent and unsettling, although it proved to be a big success and Bunuel did not have to use the stones. Writers, on the other hand, do not get the cathartic luxury of throwing stones at their disapproving readers, unless they are prepared to seek them one by one.

Lebanese and Arab writers abroad, like other hyphenated writers (British-Indian, Cuban-American, Algerian-French etc.) have to grapple, consciously or unconsciously, with fundamental questions about audience, readership and subject matter, which they cannot hope to resolve as simply as Luis Bunuel sought to do. If we are writing in English, as I do, who do we write for—the average Australian or British or American; the Lebanese and Arab diaspora in these countries; the well educated Lebanese in Beirut; or the well travelled, English-speaking professional regardless of nationality? The publishing systems within which each one of us operates provide of course their own, *de facto* answers and we have little control over the matter once we have signed a publishing contract. We get different readerships depending on who the publisher is.

But my question is about the imaginary reader that writers have in mind at the point of writing, rather than the actual reader, further down the track, when the book has been published. It is this imaginary reader that matters most for the creative process. Who do we write for when we sit down at our desk and type away at our keyboard? What do we write about? By what aesthetic are we bound and, as hyphenated writers, whose prejudice do we choose to write against, our societies of origin or of destination; the past or the present? What kind of future do we project ourselves into? Which social cosmos do we choose to depict in our fiction? Which aspects of our existence do we analyse in our essays?

For example, what parallels can and should we draw between racism targeting Arabs and Muslims in parts of the West and the denigration of Kurds,

blacks or Sri Lankans in parts of the Arab world including Lebanon? When we rightly condemn Israeli aggression and numerous massacres in Lebanon, should we also point out that the Lebanese perpetrators of many massacres between 1975 and 1990 would become respected ministers in successive Lebanese governments with hardly anyone complaining about it or ever pointing out the hypocrisy of it? In trying to address both, are we bound to fail and become trapped in shallow political categories of belonging (pro-Western, fundamentalist, reformist, democrat, progressive, conservative etc.)?

I have come to realise over the years that I have to pull off this double act, to write for a multiple readership that is consistent with my own identity. I found interesting the contrast with what my colleague Huda Barakat said last week in an interview in Assafir that she writes first and foremost for an Arabic-speaking audience.

I do not have at the back of my mind a single coherent profile for my imaginary reader, some hybrid, cross-cultural monster of some kind: it would be sad if I did because I would wake up one day and realise that that monster is none other than myself! However, I need this multiplicity of cross-cultural, cross-geographical imaginary readerships—both in what unites such readers and what keeps them apart. Addressing multiple readerships is a form of insistence on a more stringent act of communication that speaks more precisely because it speaks to different sensibilities at once, an act of communication that takes less for granted. Writing after all is a radical form of empathy, an exercise in placing oneself in other people's shoes, and multiple readership, I like to believe, is a mental test that yields a better outcome.

2

My mother, like many women of her generation, used to refer to cancer as *'that illness'* because of a widely-believed notion that to say the word was to bring the malignancy upon herself and her loved ones. I used to look down on this mode of expression. I used to find it naïve and superstitious. But it grew on me over the years. ("Grew on me" is an unfortunate turn of phrase in the circumstances but think of it as benign growth!). *'That illness'* was both indirect and specific,

allowing you to say what you wanted to say without violating your beliefs about the world. Now, I would like to emulate my mother and talk about “Those Horrible Stories”, in reference to the explosion of stereotypes in the West about Arabs and Muslims well before, but especially since, September 11, 2001. How do “Those Horrible Stories” affect us as writers?

Authors of Middle-Eastern origins in the West are writing against the background of powerful narratives displayed every day on TV screens, in books and in newspapers, around the world. In some sense, all serious writers, no matter where they come from, have to write *against* dominant narratives, but they do not usually encounter the intensity of images that Arab and Muslim writers have to grapple with nowadays. “Those Horrible Stories” change the space within which we do our writing, whether we like it or not, whether we choose to ignore them or not, whether we call them by their name or refer to them obliquely. To insist on doing what writers do best—telling our own truths to ourselves and to our readers no matter how ugly or difficult they are, re-imagining the world and so on—becomes more difficult. For example, how do we keep on writing critically about the Arab world, without becoming agents for larger, hostile forces and without feeding, even if inadvertently, into “Those Horrible Stories”?

I do not know what success looks like in this respect but I do know how we might fall short. No matter how we choose to deal with it, we know that we have failed the moment we let “Those Horrible Stories” dictate the way we write, either by allowing ourselves to believe that they define who we are, or by doing the opposite, writing nostalgically, with the intention of showing how wonderful and exotic we are to the rest of the world. When we do this, we become guilty of choosing the prejudiced Westerner as our exclusive imaginary reader, and a rather narrowminded one at that. When we succumb to such narcissistic urges, we allow “Those Horrible Stories” to dictate to us. We become clerics in the Ministry of Tourism of a non-existent country of our own making. This is not what writers are supposed to do.

3

But if we are writing in a language other than Arabic, and if we are not writing exclusively for a Lebanese or Arabic audience and if, on top of all that, we are not interested in “representing” Lebanon in the West, in foregrounding the exotic in our cultures of origin, can we still claim to belong to Lebanon and/or the Arab world? And if we can, in what way? I would like to bring three answers to this question. They are related to what we write about, how we write and the nature of belonging itself.

Many if not most of us, hyphenated Lebanese authors, write about the migration experience, about displacement and war and identity. These, I like to believe, are essential ingredients of the Lebanese experience, like that of the Irish and the Italians, countries that have been shaped over the centuries as much by outmigration as anything else. I cannot think of a single Lebanese family that I know which has not been affected by migration and displacement one way or another. Even those who never leave the country will have had to deal with the consequences of the departure of others, or they will have struggled against the temptation to go and, inevitably, their sense of place, of how they belong, will have changed as a result. In other words, most of us write about a quintessential Lebanese experience that cuts across social class and sectarian affiliations (without abolishing them of course). We certainly belong in this way, whether we are writing in Arabic, French, English, Sinhalese or Urdu, even if the language in which we are writing, and the languages to which we may have been translated, will determine the scope of our readership.

Second, we probably belong less over the years, in the sense that our writing interests might start off focused almost exclusively on Lebanon, but move away to some extent. Geographical distance is bound to become, with time, a form of mental distance. And yet, if culture is what’s left after we have forgotten everything, then surely we do take something of our countries and cultures of origin wherever we go. When I was writing my memoir, *Leave to Remain*, published last year, I remember reading classical Arabic autobiographies in Arabic and English and finding the concept of “*tarjama nafsu*”—the word for

writing an autobiography in classical Arabic—quite fertile: it helped me see memoir writing as an exercise in self interpretation, *tarjamatu nafs*, but also an exercise in interpreting the world, a wonderful angle that fed into my writing and allowed me to attempt, in the same book, something that is both a memoir of self interpretation and a set of autobiographical essays which seek to interpret the world.

Can I therefore claim some connection to the Arabic autobiographical tradition? Possibly. Does that mean that I belong? Perhaps. Does it matter? Probably not.

This brings me to my third, and perhaps most important, point. Belonging is not a binary state of either or, yes or no. It is not a membership card stamped with an expiry date. It is partly a state of mind and writers live in their minds for most of the day. (Sometimes, if they are lucky, they make a living out of living in their minds). Belonging is a form of association with a place and its people, real and fictional. Nor is it always geographical. Nostalgia is a form of belonging sometimes practised by exiles, that is at some level far more intense than the kind of belonging that arise from the grind of day-to-day life in Beirut, Saida or Tripoli. Not so hard to imagine a Lebanese resident in the US longing to come back, while her brother waits in line to apply for a US visa in Beirut because he cannot wait to get out. Out of these two individuals, it is easy to see who is in a state of more intense belonging.

In Lebanon, ‘belonging’ has a violent, less than honourable history. Who doesn’t remember the ID cards during the civil war in which our sectarian affiliation, one in which we had no say, could kill us or give us an excuse to kill others. Paradoxically, “belong” (*intama*) and “grow” (*nama*) are related words in Arabic. And there is a real sense in which we cannot survive and grow without belonging, since humans are social beings who need to belong to bigger groups.

In English, there is something possessive, dictatorial about ‘belonging’. The same word is used for *namtalek* (we possess, as in “this belongs to me”) and *nantami* (we belong) and when we belong to someone or something, they own us, we become their object and they can do whatever they like with us. Even in Arabic, although the word *nantami* does not have the same possessive intensity,

it carries a connotation of exclusiveness, of a point of no return. We never belong totally, completely.

The truth is—sad, a little bitter, but not so bad in the larger scheme of things—our country of origin is one ingredient amongst a few that make up our identity. It is one of the balls that we juggle in living and writing and it is not the only one. We belong to ourselves, to those we love, to our friends, to those we hate if we hate them intensely enough, to our memories, to our home culture, to our destination culture, to our ideals, our ambitions, our cravings, to our children, to our parents—there is no time left in the day to belong any more than that. And because we belong to all of those components of our experience, we never belong exclusively. Our lives are all the richer for not belonging.

4

Having mentioned my mother, and lest I am accused of personal bias, I have to mention my father too. When I was a kid, my father often used the word *inshalla* as a way of saying No to some request I had made, without rebuffing me, or to convey that he can't promise, although he would think about it. It was usually clear from the context, which of the two he had in mind. Ambiguous on the face of it, yet so specific and concise. The *inshalla* of my father did not carry the slightest connotation of fatalism it was supposed to have according to classical scholarship of the Arab world that I read much later. It could be cynical, stoic or simply down-to-earth but it was rarely if ever passive. His *inshalla* was far less about the will of Allah than the whims of mankind. And yet there was no dishonesty in this cultural practice—my father and those who use *inshalla* in this way are true believers in the will of Allah. There was no dishonesty, only a wonderful inventiveness in using the language. It was as if there was a place in language where the will of the Creator coincided with that of his subjects, a gift from God to mankind that could only be celebrated.

Belonging is perhaps an *inshalla* moment, a coincidence of minds rather than wills, one in which the humble writer and the readership, that bigger, impersonal force in the writer's life, see eye to eye, when they secretly nod to each

other in mutual understanding. One lucky morning, I might belong a thousand times in the minds of a thousand readers, at others a student of mine might tell me that my latest book is disappointing and that I have failed to “belong” to that particular reader. Belonging is also an *inshalla* moment because it is never quite real or tangible—we can never know for certain, we can never talk to all of the thousand readers. It is never actual, entirely achieved. There is always a question mark hanging over it.

5

I said earlier that belonging is partly a state of mind. “Partly” is very important here because belonging is never just a state of mind. Whether we belong or not, and what form our belonging takes, does not depend only on how *we* see it. It also depends on how “that to which we are supposed to belong” sees it, whether it is our country of origin or country of destination. This is perhaps the hardest belonging question of all. Whether I belong or not depends for example on whether people in this audience—or at least those who have no doubt about their own status of belonging—believe that some writers in a language other than Arabic have something valuable and relevant to say. This is not about the imaginary reader in the mind of the writer. It is about the imaginary writer, hiding behind the text, in the mind of the reader. What does the reader make of us? Whether we belong or not depends on whether our legitimacy and authenticity are in question or not.

However, the authenticity by which I would like to be judged is perhaps a different kind of authenticity. The authenticity I have in mind is not measured by the depth of our connection to heritage. It is gauged instead by the extent to which, in our writing, we engage uncompromisingly with our experience of the world, as brutal as this may be—read my friend Rawi Hage and you’ll know what I mean—the extent to which we do not run away from difficult truths and recognise that, whether we like it or not, we are half wonders, half monsters, who give to the poor that we know, and rob from the poor that we don’t, lie to others, are indignant about injustices but are prepared to live with those that suit us,

care for our loved ones, hurt them and cherish them. Authenticity, by this norm, is an attempt—imperfect, flawed—at a drastically honest representation of today’s reality and our experience of it, whether we do this through realism, magic realism, spare, lyrical or florid writing, fiction or non-fiction, in English, Spanish, French or Arabic.

This authenticity—call it the brutal authenticity of the present as opposed to the authenticity of heritage—is a much more difficult one to live with. It is the kind of authenticity that would probably make our lives impossible to live. This is perhaps why we can only practice it in reading and writing. This is why we *must* practice it in writing. And this is where, I like to think, our legitimacy derives from as writers (all writers and not just hyphenated ones). This authenticity makes our belonging problematic because it puts us, sometimes, on a collision course with our world. We earn our “belonging” the hard way—the conflicted, unsettled and unsettling, “belonging” of the prodigal child, not the happy “belonging” of the infant in its cot. And, in belonging only a little, we can belong far more radically.