

On Language, Allegiance and Authenticity

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I must say that when I was asked to be on this panel and was told what the topic was, I registered the two words Palestinian and Struggle and, at first, *la awwal wahle*, I thought the talk was about the violence in the Occupied Territories. This made me think about the word 'struggle'. The word is not entirely positive and can, as a matter of fact, be pejorative in English. Struggling with something may indicate your incapacity to deal with it in a better way. You struggle with a homework or a demon. You can say, it's a struggle, about something, meaning it is not working the way it should. In addition, of course, to the positive connotation of the word inherent in, say, the Palestinian Struggle. And because struggle is, in a way, contaminated by this negative connotation, it doesn't quite reflect the words *Kaafaha* or *Naadala*. This is perhaps a reflection of a particular kind of Anglo-Saxon pragmatism or skepticism, or maybe our own, Arab over-appreciation of militant and revolutionary rhetoric. But enough of this.

Given the variety of writing experiences on this panel, the topic of discussion can be transformed into many different questions. I will steer my own talk towards those questions that I feel remotely capable of answering. What happens when Arabic native speakers write in English? To what extent is it a matter of choice? If it is a matter of choice, how is such a choice made? What is lost and what is gained, if the choice goes either way? What kinds of struggles—in the positive, negative and neutral senses of the word—is the writer engaged in when she chooses (or is chosen) to write in English? These questions are, of course, too broad to be answered in ten minutes. I will therefore concentrate on one particular aspect of writing across cultures, that I see as particularly interesting. It's to do with allegiance, authenticity and language.

I would like you to imagine a village where everyone who is born there stays there for the rest of their lives; no one ever leaves and no one ever visits from elsewhere; a place where all ideas are born on site and none comes from abroad. It would be a dreadful place to live in of course, and I doubt that such a place exists. But let's keep up the illusion for a few moments. I will call this place My-Village. A most suitable role for the writer in My-Village is that of

the critical eye, the self-reflective mind, which helps the readers, that is the writer's co-villagers, understand themselves better. Many writers, in the real world and not just in My-Village, would be comfortable with this definition of their role, I would think. But in My-Village, the writer can go into depths of criticism and questioning without having her loyalty to her village called into question. She could not be accused of having secretly sworn allegiance to another village or to a foreign idea, because there are no such things as other villages and foreign ideas.

Now let's bring in the outside world—another nearby village. Let's call it the Other-Village. The writer now runs the risk, if she goes too far in her self-criticism, of being accused of misrepresentation of Oneself—the My-Village self—to the folks in the Other-Village, who it must be said, have some nasty pre-conceptions about My-Village, and would welcome any criticism of their rivals, especially if it's coming from a rather respected member of My-Village. Suddenly, the characters in the writer's novels acquire a representative, ambassadorial role and are now seen as the symbols of the My-Village self. They are threatened, in other words, with the loss of their particularities and their specific fictional social and psychological setting.

In fact, the moment Other-Village enters into the scene, other roles become available to the writer. One. She can stick to her original role, ignoring the fact that her work can be read by the audience of Other-Village and can be used as a document 'against' her own folks. Although she loves her native land, she might decide that this option is worth the risk. Two. She can go the other way and only write pieces which say how fantastic her own village is, because now, the readership she secretly has in mind is that of Other-Village. One advantage of this option, is that the ministry of tourism in her native land might offer her a job with a five-figure salary which would save her from a financially miserable life. Three. She could describe My Village to the Other Village readership, concentrating on what she sees as exotic in her own native culture. Four. She can become a kind of negative-ambassador to Other-Village, voicing the grievances of her own folks against their neighbors and, while at it, the rest of the world.

Now, if the writer, for reasons that have nothing to do with writing, migrates to Other-Village for good and starts writing in the language of Other-Village, the contrast between the various roles she sees for herself would become more acute and her problematic relationship with her native readership would be complicated even further.

This little, incomplete story leaves much to be desired, of course, as an allegory of the relationship of the migrant writer to the English-speaking world. I have left out too many

important details in order to keep it simple. The point that I am making is that all of these impulses—the three extra options I cited above; the praise impulse, that is the nostalgic or patriotic or eulogic; the exotic impulse and the indignation or resentment impulse—are all present in post-colonial cross-cultural fiction, from Tahar Ben Jalloun and Narayan to Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy. Even V.S. Naipaul's writing sometimes reveals a tension between these impulses. This tension gives extra vigor to cross-cultural fiction but it also marks its limits. You can see those limits when you read for example Pankaj Mishra, an Indian writer who lives in India and has none of the neuroses of the migrant. His writing on India is free of these concerns and that gives it, I would argue, a certain clear-headedness and an extraordinary vitality.

The challenge to the cross-cultural fiction writer is to develop a voice which can accommodate all of these new impulses without succumbing to any of them. The key to such a quest is the writer's ability to free himself of, what I would call, the split-audience syndrome. The writer must be able to imagine a fictional audience which includes the readerships of both My-Village and Other-Village. He must assume that this audience shares some values and some common frames of reference to which he can address his writing, no matter how subconsciously. Bridging the gap between the two worlds, at an imaginary level, is not his mission. It is the *sine qua non* of his writing.

In the not-so-distant past, I used to ask myself the following question when writing a novel or a short story. Would I be writing the same piece if I were writing in Arabic? This is a question that I get asked in writers' forums. I always knew that the answer was negative. But I used to think that the proximity of the English work to its Arabic non-existent counterpart was a legitimate measure of authenticity. Not anymore. I now see authenticity in terms of my ability to keep my fiction writing free from my own potentially-dictatorial impulses—the exotic, the indignant and the nostalgic. I see it in terms of the ability that is to be true to one's changing selves and one's experiences; the ability that is to keep the critical eye critical and self-reflective mind, truly self-reflective. What was interesting, from my point of view, about this re-thinking of authenticity is that it made me realize that the shift from Arabic to English can feed positively into this process in two ways. First, the linguistic shift echoes my own geographical move, from Arabic-speaking to English-speaking countries and in that sense is not alienating but rather reflective of my own experience. More importantly, the shift from one language to another can add to the defamiliarisation tools at the writer's disposal. Seeing the Lebanese civil war, for example, through the lens of the English language helped me learn some new things about my own experience of the war.

Let me make one last qualification as a way of concluding. I do not mean what I said in a formulaic way. Writers talking about writing inevitably attempt to extrapolate from their own experience. I am sure that generalization is sometimes justified, but it must come with many exceptions attached. You generalize at your own risk. This is perhaps where the struggle lies. It is in writing about writing. As for writing itself, writing fiction that is, it is a difficult task that requires skill and commitment, but it is the pleasure that stands out for me, not the struggle.