

Interview with Hanan Kassab Hassan

Abstract: It seems as though she has many lives condensed into one: evenings, she is riveted to the computer; days, she jumps from one meeting to another, her face ever smiling and gracious. Hanan Kassab Hassan has taught for a long time at the University of Damascus. We are indebted to this unparalleled translator for numerous screenplays and theatrical adaptations. For the last few months, she has been the director of the High Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus and secretary general of the festival *Damascus: Cultural Capital of the Arab World* in 2008. The Syrian government seems to be counting on this juggler of fantasies, this tightrope walker between Arab and European cultures, to promote one of the most ancient cities in the world in a modern context.

When you were very young, your relationship with Europe was through culture and literature. Why did you turn so early towards Europe?

When I was little, I was a library fanatic. I devoured everything that fell into my hands. I read the Arab classics and moderns, but also Cervantes, Lorca, Stephan Zweig, and of course the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. I was so enchanted by an Arabic translation of Rimbaud that I decided to run away at 17, just like him. I remember my mother's mellifluous voice reading us the books of the Comtesse de Ségur, and my father's reading us the Quran to introduce us to the music of the verses, but also translating for us the text that accompanies Jean Effel's cartoons, like *La création du monde*, and passages from *Les Carnets du major Thompson*! This somewhat bizarre mix gave rise to a humanist culture that emphasized diversity, love of one's neighbour, and a respect for the well-made work whatever its origin or leaning. My parents, who were both Communists, belonged to that generation of Syrians which was steeped in tradition but open to modernism, and with the desire to plumb any depths in order to succeed and to create a place for themselves in the world. It's because of this that I grew up with the feeling of belonging to what is good in the world. My identities were multiplying without conflicting with one another. I felt like a citizen of the world. . . .

Later, as I was about to start my university studies, my father suggested that I study French literature to broaden my horizons. I had been a public school student, whereas all the students in the French Literature Department came from French schools and spoke the language very well. I had to work day and night to surpass them and get better grades, armed with this literary sensibility that inspired me to read translations and that instilled in me an ardent desire to find the keys to knowledge by reading authors in their original languages. This inspired me to learn not just French, but also English, German and Spanish. It must be said that during this time, Europe had a very positive image. It was a model for the evolution and shaping of a nation.

You were married and had two young children, yet you pursued all your studies in France. How did people perceive your situation in Syria and in France?

I never felt like a Syrian in Paris. I felt as at home in Damascus as in the rue Mouffetard in Paris. When I left for France, it didn't feel like a rupture, but like a chance I couldn't miss, and I traveled back and forth between the two countries without any difficulty. I missed my children, but I knew they were well taken care of, my husband too. Absence made the heart grow fonder and lifted the weight of domestic life and daily routine. Moreover, the situation then was very different to the situation today. It was the seventies. The phenomenon of exclusion wasn't conceivable and the question of a clash between two worlds or two civilizations hadn't yet been asked. On the contrary—when I told people I was Syrian, they were curious rather than hostile.

You have translated numerous texts, including the first translation of Jean Genet into Arabic. Is it really possible to translate from one language to another? Can we really gain access to the imagination of the other?

It isn't always easy. Translation is betrayal, but if you can manage to absorb the other's way of thinking it can become a fascinating exercise. There is a very good Syrian writer who translated Dostoevsky into Arabic. He said that he had thought about what Dostoevsky would have said if he had been an Arab, and it was by doing this that he succeeded beautifully in translating Russian literature. In my opinion, one must never translate mechanically. One must love and know what one is translating, get right under its skin, to bring out a work that doesn't feel like a translation. Genet was a special case. I translated *Les Paravents* after having spent five years working on a thesis about it. I knew the piece practically by heart, but the text itself was very difficult. The alienation of the colonized Arabs came out in their delicate language, in the weird terms they used (they speak French in the text but are supposed to be speaking Arabic), and strange, heavy structure of the colonialists' French betrayed the influence of the local language. On top of this it was a parody of the whole literary heritage of Péguy, Mallarmé . . . and colonialism. When he wrote *Les Paravents*, Genet was translating a confrontation between two fantasies and he used words like "travestissement" [disguise, misrepresentation], and it was up to me to comprehend it all and to communicate it to the Arab reader. It was a real challenge.

You have been working for years on Euro-Mediterranean projects. How would you describe these projects? What are their virtues, and what are their limits?

I think that all these projects initially strive to promote a Mediterranean feeling of belonging to replace the very strong Arab nationalism that has characterized the Middle East since the end of colonialism. This belonging could have brought the people of the two coasts closer together, because we really do share a common culture. But then September 11 happened and fed a Manichaean vision of the world. People now curl in more and more on their respective identities and it is becoming more and more difficult to draw them out of their isolationism. Only intellectuals and artists have managed to escape this clash of civilizations because they are armed in advance with an open spirit and a desire for dialogue. Networks and cultural projects encouraged the creation of a microcosm where artists know one another and often work together, but the rest of the world? Outside this very small circle, our world is being made increasingly fragile by political conflicts and the religious fanaticism that rages on all sides.

But it must be said too that the projects supported by Europe spend a great deal of money on isolated events and on events that leave few traces once they've taken place. It would have been more relevant to create structures that last, and to devote more money to the mobility of artists. Our youth are isolated. They have no chance to travel, and it's next to impossible to obtain a visa. Their visual repertoire is becoming

impoverished, their curiosity is dying out, their horizons are shrinking. It's normal to see this frustration be funneled towards religion.

Concretely, what are the problems that arise when one wishes to undertake cultural projects with Europe?

First of all there are very big files to fill out and strict conditions to be met that prevent artists from submitting calls for proposals. You have to be an association to organize a project, and in some countries, like Syria, this status just didn't exist. It's only recently that we have begun to create associative structures, but the process is very slow and we miss many opportunities as a result.

How is Europe perceived by Syrian intellectuals and artists, and more generally by the Syrian public?

Europe was a model for our parents' generation, which was enthusiastic about modernism. This positive image receded in the face of a reevaluation of cultural heritage, which, since the eighties, has been leading the artistic and philosophical movements. Add to this a very complicated political situation and Europe's ambiguous position on real conflicts. But despite everything, the man on the street still believes that Europe is the last line of defense against American hegemony, and in this sense it still retains a positive aura.

It must also be pointed out that the decline in learning languages also played a role. One must understand French or English to follow what's going on outside, and most artists and intellectuals of the new generation don't. At the same time, the culture of the Gulf has played a role, and the petrodollar that financed satellite channels, fast-food restaurants and malls has carried the day.

What does the word 'culture' mean for Europeans? What does the word 'culture' mean for Syrians?

For us, the word culture means artistic and intellectual production, art and thinking, and it is, in this sense, the exclusive property of intellectuals. Despite all the efforts, to promote a popular culture, it's an area that holds no interest at all for people who are essentially preoccupied with the problems of daily life. I think that for a European, the word culture is understood in its broader sense, meaning a way of life, religious practices, gastronomy, styles of dress, etc.

Yours is one of the most independent and open voices in Syria. Is that why the Syrian government chose you to be secretary general of *Damascus: Cultural Capital of the Arab World* in 2008? And doesn't it appear contradictory when you think of the difficulties that Syrian artists sometimes encounter in their own country?

This choice is part of the reform project that deals, among other things, with the mechanisms of cultural activities. We live in a transitional era, with all the contradictions, difficulties and perspectives that implies. Contributing something positive to change seems to me a duty and a political action that leads in the direction I have always chosen. The authority I have as secretary general of this event allows me finally to realize a project I have been planning for many years: that of helping youth to express themselves, to produce, and to know what is happening in the world. I said yes with no hesitation, and I'm very glad I did.

You decided to use this festival to show Europeans, who are often influenced by negative stereotypes of Damascus, another side of the city. What image and what message do you most want to convey about your city?

It's the image of a country that has always been a meeting place and a locus for creativity. A country open to all cultures, where religions, communities, ethnicities and people live together without conflict. A country where the culture is a happy mix of Arab poetry, Syriac song, Kurdish music, Circassian dance, Turkish cuisine, Armenian photography. . . . It's also the image of a country where you can walk alone until three o'clock in the morning without the slightest concern, and where you can knock on any door and be invited in for a cup of coffee.

What is the outline of the cultural program of *Damascus: Cultural Capital of the Arab World*, and what motivates it?

Apart from the traditional axes of culture (theatre, poetry, music, film, fine arts, symposiums and publications), we will try to create cultural events that will unfold in the spaces of daily life. We will bring cultural events to the people in their neighbourhoods and their suburbs to inspire those who aren't interested in art to admire creativity. The general atmosphere will be a party, with music in the gardens, poetry in the streets, theatre in the cafés and the public squares. Art's urban tendency isn't part of the city's habits, which is why we are organizing events to reach a larger audience. There will also be artists invited from around the world and events that reflect the innovating experiences of modern art. We're currently negotiating the possibility of holding an archaeological exhibition at the Louvre and an exhibit of icons and manuscripts at the Musée Cluny.

There will also be artists in residence, workshops for children and young people, grants for theatre and film. . . . This year will create opportunities for all the young artists who wish to express themselves, if the quality of their work is good.

What do you expect from this festival year?

To create new cultural habits, to inspire reflection, to rehabilitate alternative spaces, to create work teams, and especially to promote cultural tourism: Tourists often come to visit the souks and the old city. They don't know that Damascus has a very good opera house, institutes of music, theatre, and dance. . . .

Nathalie Galesne, April 2007

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