
INTERVIEW WITH *ARABLIT*: THE LINKS BETWEEN POETRY, POLITICS, AND REVOLUTION IN TUNISIA

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ArabLit: Do you think Mohamed Sgaier Awlad Ahmed helped to hold open a cultural space in Tunisia in the way that Mattawa talks about Libyan poets "maintained a clean slate for themselves"? Or do you see his poetry functioning differently from that in the last 30 years?

I think one should talk, as I do in this essay, about the survival of a parallel culture during the last 30 years or more, a culture which stood against its commercialized and instrumentalized counterparts. Within this parallel culture, one can distinguish between what might be called "independent" culture and a culture of protest. The first focussed on the integrity and "quality" of the cultural work, without necessarily engaging the politics in a direct way. The second kept the oppositional stance going in various ways in poetry, in theatre, in film and even in fiction. Awlad Ahmed belongs to the latter category, but has occasionally veered towards interest in poetry as such and in the poetic art. Both of these tendencies created a field within which art survived and even thrived under dictatorship. The cost was high for these writers and artists but their impact has been nothing short of salutary for Tunisian culture as a whole.

From your interview with him last summer, did Awlad Ahmed see his poetry/essays/commentary shifting at all in the new landscape? I am going to imagine that he would not agree with Mattawa that the role of poetry now is to express things "beyond the



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political moment".

Awlad Ahmed said at some point that he was looking forward to working on his craft, writing more about other preoccupations of the self, but also to actually publish what he has been distributing informally and piece meal. The political developments of the revolution in

Tunisia have been such that poets of his kind still cannot afford the long view as citizens and as artists. They are aware of the dangers to make artistic sense of a moment of such magnitude and often talk about it (playwrights Jaibi and Jbali have both mentioned that no goof theatre about the evolution can be produced this early). But the need for articulation of continuing and developing demands, for taking positions, and even making contribution to debates call for cultural production. Writers and artists have responded to this situation. Their work may not be along the lines Jaibi or Mattawa want but it has a role to play.

Did you do all the translations (that weren't otherwise credited)? How would you describe the challenge of trying to re-create Awlad Ahmad's poetry in English in a way that transmits some of its power? Is it possible to do as text only? As music/recitation in Arabic (with translation as subtitles)? How would you collect his work & translate it? Could it somehow inform global poetry/poetic movements?

I have done all the translation myself. This is a wider problem for those working on Tunisian literature, and indeed Maghreb writng more widely because very little of it has been translated over the last 50 years. Practically, there is only one translated poem into English by Awlad Ahmed (see Banipal's special issue on Tunisia). Most of my translation work went into recreating rhythm and conveying the local reference embedded in the texts. The outcome has not always been successful. Ideally of course, these poems should be heard with translation provided, as you suggest. But Awlad Ahmed's poetry does transfer in text. This is perhaps why it has global relevance despite its local focus – or may be because of it. Such globalism, however, can only be alternative, and therefore minoritarian.

I have been collecting Awlad Ahmed's work for some time from printed sources and online. But he also gave me copies of unpublished

work he has circulated in newspapers and other venues. The work of other poets, particularly oral ones, is even more difficult to find.

Why do you liken Awlad Ahmad to Darwish vs. (for instance) Ahmed Fouad Negm, Abdel Rahman el-Abnudi?

Good question. Despite the orality I discuss in Awlad Ahmed, I don't think he is of the same type as Ahmed Fouad Negm or Abdel Rahman el-Abnudi. There is a continuum between the two spheres – oral poetry and standard Arabic poetry of the type under discussion her – which needs to be explored further. Here, I was trying to understand what is in this poetry, written in fusha, which allows it to be circulated along the same lines as Nigm and local Tunisian oral protest poetry. The link I establish between Awlad Ahmed and Darwish is a way of thinking, at least in tentative terms, which strand of modern Arabic poetry – written in fusha - managed to express or articulate poetically the protest culture in the Arab world and speak for moments of popular revolts, uprisings or resistance. This led me to look into how both poets define poetry and describe their craft. This investigation needs to be expanded and thought through, I think. The on-going revolts and the role of poetry in them seem to me an opportunity to do just that.

Iraqi poet Faris Adnon writes about how poetry has been used/abused in politics. Do you see a danger of this on the Tunisian scene?

I believe poetry and politics have maintained a love-hate relationship. Politics has indeed used and abused poetry. But poetry has benefitted from politics. No one can deny that we owe politics some of the best and most lasting examples of modern Arabic poetry. The challenge, taken up successfully by Darwish, Awlad Ahmed and many others, has been to submit the political to poetry's grip, not to shun the political or turn away from it. This has made poetry both relevant and salutary. It

remained in a strong sense diwan al-Arab but also saved it from a reincarnation into poetry of occasion in a new garb.

Do you see any danger in over-emphasizing a certain sort of political poetry creating a self-censorship of its own?

It is really hard to tell where things are heading in places like Tunisia, Egypt, Syria... But one thing is sure; we live in primarily political and revolutionary times. This gives political poetry primacy of place and the temptation of a free licence to dominate and exclude. But I think the opening up of venues of expression and areas of intervention, together with the relaxation of mediation between reader and writer, will serve as a balancing mechanism. By this I mean that, like all forms of censorship, self-censorship of the type you are talking about is no longer possible at the moment.

Do you think that poetry is in a better position than prose (fiction, memoir) to grapple with the current situation? A number of novelists have complained about the "hasty literature" being produced in Tunisia (and in Egypt). Or perhaps fiction must engage with

revolution/change in a different way?

I would like to think of this issue along two lines. The first is the novel vs. poetry debate, while the second involves literature and the information-age context. It is almost boring to say that the novel is the medium of *longue purée*, to borrow Fernand Braudel's apt phrase; which means that the novel does not cope well with revolutions, which are based on sudden change and uncertainty. So let us look forwards to good novels in due course the way we should anticipate good histories to emerge. Poetry, on the other hand, can handle sudden change, uncertainty and even thrives on them. With regard to the second line, I think we have yet to realize the effect of new media, and heavily mediated events as these uprisings have been, on literature. For all sorts of reasons poetry travels better than fiction. And now it has been travelling faster than fiction. It has been tagging along other fast travellers: cartoons, comments, images, news, etc. Is there a lesson in this for the novel? Should it learn new ways of marking its presence in time and across media? I hope novelists will be provoked to respond to these questions. ❀

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