

Free Mind! Why Not?

By Muhamed Abdelnbi (Egypt)

I don't trust abstract words, I don't use them very much in talking and writing. Maybe because they are difficult to imagine, and maybe because you can't drink Democracy or eat Equality, though I can go to Freedom (Alhoria, in the Arabic language) to meet my friends and drink, yes, it is a café-bar in downtown Cairo that I like very much.

Every great piece of art adds space and freedom to its genre. So you can't fight the battle of your art outside its own borders. Yes, you can join the crowd, you can walk in the great human march, but as a regular human being, just one of them. Forget yourself, forget your crown and your throne, here you are just another number adding to the total sum. All respect to all the great human battles towards liberty and independence, etc., etc...--But take care--In the same instant you join the crowd you are alienated from yourself, your voice melting in the loud roar of the mass. You can't wait to go back to your room, that small space that you fill every day with voices, shapes, colors and words. Here is your throne, here you are a king once more. Get ready for the real battle, your own personal battle, which is to shape and form your freedom.

Many Arab writers know well what it means to sing in a cage, to write one thing when you mean another, to use symbols and metaphors for purposes other than aesthetic. We have many amusing stories about censorship and exiling or jailing or even killing by the hands of some group who just doesn't like your writing. But this is not the kind of freedom that I want to talk about, there are stories about that everywhere. I'm trying to liberate myself from the past, from the old forms, from the rules and traditions of the respected official Arabic language, trying to forget what people may say if they read my work, religious people, for example. Trying to forget almost everything. At the same time I'm trying to remember myself, my little things, my sense of the world, my own language, my obsessions and passions, trying to remember almost everything. I dream of being a part of the Great Human March, but through practicing my own little freedom. I draw my lines, my limits, by myself, I will never let any person or institution draw these limits for me. This is my battle, and like the sensitive writer Alice Walker said: "For in the end, freedom is a personal and lonely battle."

In "Walls" one of the most unforgettable poems of the Greek-Alexandrian poet Constantine P. Cavafy, he wonders how he didn't notice the others were building the wall around him? How did they separate him from the outer world without him feeling it? How can we read this poem without looking around, asking the same questions? So, I need to be alert all the time, to win my little battle, to do all the beautiful things I dream of, because there are traps everywhere. You find someone trying to sell you the ultimate truth on every street corner. It is as if everyone but you discovered the secret of our being: religious traps, ideological traps, philosophical traps, the list is endless. I can believe in anything but I don't have to give my soul away to any party or philosophy or great thinker. A free mind? Yes. But does it mean an empty one? No, of course not.

For me, what is the point of being free to do whatever I want, to travel anywhere, to say whatever I want, if my mind is a prisoner in some cage? I will be just another fool on board the ship of fools, someone we can read about or watch on TV and just laugh. Most of us, and I am no exception, are prisoners in the old frames of thinking, repeating the same old mistakes (just look at the political or ecological issues). For me, the free world is not a democratic nor a communist one, for me the free world is the creator world, it will create everything from scratch, recreate itself almost every day, far away from past ruins. That is my impossible dream of a free mind, to shape and reshape my own freedom every moment, to whisper in the ear of my readers saying: you also can do it, you can be new and fresh like a new born baby, you can break the false frame and the imaginary walls.