

Ghayath Almadhoun

Exile is not a place; it is a space-time

Let's imagine what literature might look like if Hanna Arendt hadn't escaped the Nazis, Joseph Brodsky hadn't fled the Soviet Union, and Edward Said had not been forced to leave Palestine for the USA after the Israeli occupation. Let us imagine the history of literature without exile.

When Edward Said was reading Western literature, he read it with excessive sensitivity and clear literary intelligence. His genius way of criticizing colonialism, which is the background of Western culture, speaks truth to power. When Said was criticizing Western literature, he was criticizing racism, colonialism, colonial history, post-colonialism, stereotypes about the Orient, clichés, superiority, preconceptions about others, demonization of them, digging into the texts' backgrounds, the Centers of Power of that time. In other words, he went through Western literature as a reader, specifically as a Palestinian reader, which was not only unique but also crucial to criticize Western literature of that time.

Being a Palestinian, and a Palestinian reader is a combination of being an outsider, exiled, an immigrant, stateless, vagabond, displaced, nomad, and refugee. Being a Palestinian reader frees you from all the chains that bind the hands of the others, it liberates you, and the compromise that many writers are accustomed to in order to maintain their positions – you have nothing to lose after you've lost your country.

We even knew before Said, that many people saw Western literature as superior to the margins and centered on itself, but he makes us realize that knowledge is not innocent. At that time, he was not only a reader, but he was *the* only reader!

Western centrism

When you are in a room with a lot of light, it becomes difficult for you to see outside your window. You should approach the window and try to stick to it, and maybe then you will see a little of what is happening outside. The problem is that most of the time, you will see your reflection in the window – that's you looking at yourself!

The necessity was obvious, the Outsider comes from the margins, skeptical about what is agreed upon, and shaking what is taken for granted in the center. To be The Outsider, not an outsider!

When there are four people playing cards, each of them can only see their cards, and they can't see the other three people's cards. When a man enters the room and goes around the four men, he can see all of their cards. However, he cannot play with them.

The need for exile

Exile is essential to literature, and Western writers enjoyed exile until the wars and dictatorships in the West ended after the Second World War. Given the importance of exile for literature, Western writers

found themselves in a dilemma.

The solution was to invent literary grants, residencies, scholarships, and cultural exchange programs, so writers can voluntarily be exiled to compensate for the real exile that disappeared after the end of World War II.

No one should be tolerant of anyone because that makes one superior to the other. Everyone should be equal, and the only scale to measure that is by the right to criticize.

The right to criticize

The most critical challenge for an immigrant is the right to criticize – the moment you criticize anything, the white man tells you: Go back to your country. Let us remember who, throughout history, was forbidden to criticize: the natives facing colonizers, slaves facing masters, Palestinians facing Israeli occupation, Jews facing Nazis, women facing patriarchy, and now, immigrants.

Me

I, Palestinian/Syrian/Swedish, as a Palestinian, Berlin is a refuge, as a Syrian, it's an exile, as a Swedish, it's a tourist destination. No, it's not as simple as that. Let us repeat: as a Palestinian, Berlin was a forced refuge after being born as a citizen of a country under occupation, it then turned into exile. As a Syrian, Berlin started as an exile to flee the Syrian dictatorship and after the start of the Syrian revolution, it turned into a refuge. As a Swedish, it started as a tourist destination and turned into a voluntary exile to flee the winter, the darkness, and the reflection of darkness on people!

Born in exile in Damascus to a Palestinian father and a Syrian mother, I inherited exile from my father the moment I was born. Later, I had to flee my exile, running away from the dictatorship in Syria in 2008 and successfully going to Sweden. When the Syrian revolution started in 2011, I stood for it. However physically, I was far away, for the first time, I faced the reality that I was not here, not there, but I was on the parallel.

Poems that express exile, written in exile, will demolish the borders between what is private and what is not, the poems become a mirror. Exile turned out to be my space, and the post-war era became my time. In this space-time, poetry is the only thing I can trust to protect my individual voice in front of this collective pain. Exile is not a place; it is a space-time.

Here is my double exile, a stateless child born in Damascus, inheriting the exile from his Palestinian father, and choosing his exile to escape the totalitarian regime in Syria.

I'm not Palestinian/Syrian like before, but I will never become 100 % Western. I am stuck in the parallel.

In Palestine, they call me the Syrian-Swedish.
In Syria, they call me the Palestinian-Swedish,
In Sweden, they call me the Palestinian-Syrian.