

AHMED FAGIH A WRITER AT NIGHT

Libyan author and playwright Ahmed Fagih was on one of his frequent visits to London, and it was a good occasion to meet him. Ahmed Fagih has now published 28 books in Arabic and a growing number in other languages. They include essays, novels, plays and six collections of short stories, all completed while writing scripts for television programmes, and holding positions as columnist, diplomat, journalist, and director of an institute of music and drama.

Before we started the interview, Ahmed was very encouraging about Banipal, giving helpful advice. Then we talked about him, his life and careers in Libya, Britain and Egypt.

Margaret Obank

How did you manage to combine the life of a writer with working in different professional capacities all your life?

Well, our societies are not like these advanced societies. In the Arab world, people would laugh at you if you didn't have a job as well as being a writer, it's not like in Europe where a writer can just type away. As an Arab writer you have to do both. Once when Khalid ibn Walid was starting to read the Qu'ran, he made a mistake, which someone brought to his attention with a loud 'kh khm'; later he made another mistake which was followed by another 'kh khm'. He said: "Well, we were busy implementing the Qu'ran, carrying it out, we had no time for learning it by heart." Likewise, as writers, we do the thinking, the arguing and the implementing. I had so many jobs myself. Even though writing was my main task, in my jobs no one recognized that while I was engaged in them. I produced all my work in addition to my daily jobs.

There is almost a tradition in the Arab world that writers write at night. However, this is not because they love the night but because they have to do something else during the day. That day work might not be done well, but it is work and has to be done.

Naguib Mahfouz, for instance, was never a full-time writer until he retired. He was a government employee from the '30s until he retired. Working at a job such as his is not a matter of choice for a writer. To have a job completely separate from writing, such as working in a bank, allows all your energy to be reserved, saved from being released into, say, an academic post or journalism, jobs where you lose out, because so much of your literary spirit is drained away, your literary energy is

dissipated, and when it has been consumed, there is very little left to give to your writing.

In the former jobs, there is, on the contrary, pressure on the writer to release his energy into poetry, etc. Some writers are completely estranged from their jobs, some do it on purpose. T S Eliot, for instance, worked as a clerk, and could have chosen other work, although at one time he did do editing work for a big publisher.

A good deal of your work has now been translated into English and some of your plays have also been performed here.

I have a contract now with Kegan Paul International for five books in English. I don't know exactly how they will look as the work on them was done some time ago - so many of my short stories have already been translated over a span of about 30 years. Some were translated and published in a local newspaper in Libya, some published in anthologies; together they will make two volumes of short stories. I also have plays, some which were put on here in London, like *Gazelles* in 1982, and before that *Evening Visitor*. Other plays were performed in drama schools - all these are now collected into one volume. There is also a novel, *The Valley of Ashes*, which was published in Arabic, and then translated into Chinese. It had good reviews in China and a conference on it was held in Wuhan University to which I was invited and people presented papers. These new volumes will be coming out this year.

Gazelles is about the encounter between East and West, but not from East to West, but about men going to the East, to the Grand Sahara and meeting a Bedouin of that area, it's about a trip into the Sahara, a trip into life, the hard life of chasing and hunting gazelles, an adventure into whatever hopes and dreams you have for yourselves, a voyage into what your heart cries for - and it is mostly the chasing after illusions, wasting life away.

The main characters are two Europeans, a man and a woman, and the Bedouin, plus a jeep and the gazelles and the desert. The play explores the idea, of a journey between East and West, whether it is possible or not. I want wholeheartedly along with the idea that it was possible providing everybody contributed something - gives a concession, is unselfish; for instance, there should be no ego trips.

But it is not just playing on a metaphor. The three travelers go on a picnic out of hell, running out of water, losing their way in hostile areas of the desert and their jeep comes to a stop. You can watch the interaction between two middle-aged men and a young woman, who

have been left *to* their instincts and desires. It is also trying *to* bring out the question of how the Bedouin and the two Europeans face danger, havoc and difficult moments together, moments when the end is near and all masks *are' tom* away and their true selves are revealed, bringing out the good elements as well as the bad.

In *Gardens of the Night*, your trilogy published in English three years ago and for which you were awarded the premier literary award in Lebanon in 1992 after its publication in Arabic, you weave your own stories like Scheherazade recounting the tales of *One ThOUSand* and *One Nights*, combining a dream world of fantasy with a problematic reality.

This is a characteristic of most of my work, the combination of illusion, imaginative work and reality. There is no place you can really draw a line between the two, they sort of fuse together - illusion becomes an extension of reality and reality becomes an extension of illusion. That comes out in so many of my short stories, it is a style that I have developed over the years since I realized there is more to reality than what we see, hear and touch - there is far more to it than that. So, .the question for me is how to explore these hidden parts of realities, intuition, all of those things.

In this trilogy, the first person narrator constantly imagines how other people will react or what they are thinking, he philosophizes, dreams about the other characters.

I do this especially in my short stories, building up to very high dramatic levels, from somebody sitting quietly alone at that cafe table, for instance, to the danger of grave conflict. But, talking about that trilogy, I was very unhappy with the translation. Translation is tricky, particularly literary translation, where the author's style in the original has to be shown in the language of translation. If this is not done, then I feel strongly that the English reader cannot really grasp my way of writing.

How did you start writing? Were you writing as a child?

Yes, with me it was very early. I never thought of anything else or entertained any thoughts, as children do, of doing other things. Since the beginning, since I learnt to read and write, I was attracted to the world of fiction, of stories, and I wanted to be part of this world. If I couldn't actually live in it, at least I could become a companion of Sinbad, or with Ali Baba; since I couldn't become part of that life, I started to create this other world and live in it in an imaginative way.

Since my early school days, primary school, I was writing. I made newspapers. Since the age of 10 or 11, I was making newspapers, and I started writing and publishing in journals at an early age. When I was 17 I had a daily column in a local Libyan newspaper. I was also writing for the radio and a daily journal, where I published my first short story. I wrote my first book later, when I was 22. It won me a Prize. for Short Story Writer - that was in 1965. It brought me good critical reviews all over the Arab world, particularly in Egypt and Syria- Part of it was translated *into* other languages, so that was a very good start. That put me on-line, so-to-speak. So there I was. It didn't leave me much choice, but really there was no way, I saw no other path to follow, I had no other field of interest other than writing.

The second book of *Gardens of the Night* fleetingly recalls *Gulliver's Travels*: the narrator arrives at the city gates in a strange country in a different age, is made its prince and leader and learns an entirely humanitarian and unselfish, open way of living, quite foreign to his own memories and life. There is something of a mission in the way he describes his new experiences, don't you think?

Well, it is true that I was brought up in a certain way, with a sense of mission, a message. We were living in a very backward country, so much hardship, with people really struggling, just coming out of colonial domination, poverty, illiteracy, destitution. There was nothing going for the people. That filled us with the sense of mission, of responsibility, we wanted to do something for these people, to change this situation.

So, instead of just writing fiction, I engaged in these every-day matters, by writing daily columns and articles, social critiques, protesting, crying for justice, for a better situation for these starving people, writing against the injustices inflicted on them. and about the women's situation. Although this took up much of my time, energy and resources, all of which should have been directed towards creative writing, it in fact put me in line with and in contact with the facts and realities of life. It was an engagement with life. And it gave my stories, novels and plays that sharp edge which makes them full of life. I believe in entertaining the reader, keeping a grip on him. spinning a good 'yarn', even though writing is a very lonely job. You close the door and there you are. I can withdraw, that's part of my nature, but I can't stay there,. I must come out, so I find a good balance. I go out for shopping, so to speak. You cannot isolate yourself completely, unless you are very elderly.

How was life in Libya during those early school days?

Put it this way: I was born and brought up in a village south of Tripoli called Mizda, it's an oasis in the middle of nowhere, a cross-roads. It has its own characteristics which are different from the traditional village in Arabic literature. From the beginning I was made aware of these differences. There was no way I could imitate what was already' written. How I described and depicted this was completely down to me.

In fact, I was upset that there, in that village, I couldn't find any struggle between peasant and landlord, mukhtar, or sheikh, but what could I do - I wanted to write. I was upset, I was angry, what could I do, how could I write? So, being left alone, with no help whatsoever, I had to create my own situations, which of course confronted me with a great challenge and put on my shoulders the responsibility to write something different.

Apart from that, the village was a village, with a primitive way of teaching, lessons beneath a tree with someone reciting the Qu'ran, getting us boys to learn it by heart. That's how I started, just like every other person of my age and generation, and those before us. Of course, I was born when the ways and means of production, the way of life, were as they were thousands of years before - with none of the now familiar instruments and machines. People used to plough and sow the land with primitive tools. There was no electricity, no television, no radio. Of course, not having electricity affected so many things.

But I had the chance to see the transformation: I was witness to the coming of radio, of television, camera, 'that entertaining Japanese toy' the video recorder, electric cookers, refrigerators, all these things. I have been fortunate enough to live in the age without these tools of modern life as well as in the age with them, and it is elements of this good fortune that entered later into my writings.

So I grew up, then, on the edge of the desert. My father, like any other person in the village, had to do so many other jobs to make ends meet, he had, for example, to run a small shop. When it was time for ploughing, he would go and do that in the valleys. Then they would wait till rain came - and that was very seldom. When it came, they would go to the valleys and sow wheat or barley. In the harvest season, they would go and harvest.

In the spring, when there was a little grass, they would graze their sheep and we would benefit from the milk. So we lived with the Seasons.

It was a very difficult life. We survived on the minimum - the minimum of the minimum. A meal could be a loaf of bread made of barley and a small cup of tea. Yes, that would be a meal, swallowing bread down with a gulp of tea. Another meal would be some tomatoes with onions and bread, or a handful of dates and a glass of sheep's milk.

You worked in Libya as a journalist and dramatist. Later you became a diplomat in London and then gained a doctorate from Edinburgh University. You have kept up a strong relation with Britain. How did you start your professional career?

I was about 14 when I finished my schooling and went to Tripoli, which was a larger community, a place where I could find the books I wanted to read, there was theatre, music, shows, films. There I was meeting people - a little older than me - who had already started writing and I took part in that literary world. Some people in the school also had the same interests as me. After almost three years in Tripoli, I started writing and a year after that was publishing and writing in newspapers. When I was nearly 19, I finished my schooling and went to Egypt on a scholarship. That put me in contact with so many Arab writers and the literary society. There I really set out on my literary career. It started to establish itself. These basic stages in my life contributed to establishing me as a writer.

Later on, I was busy in radio and newspapers and always working towards the chance to come to Britain, which I finally did in 1968. That timing was not early or late, but OK for me. It was another new stage in my life and a chance to acquire the language of English for communicating with the outside world. It was a very good experience for me. I studied drama at the New Era Academy of Drama and Music and since then, I have never been long away from this country. Always coming and going. I came back in the mid-seventies to do a PhD, and then I was appointed head of the Press Department at the libyan Embassy in London, but I found it impossible to study and work at the same time, so I had to forget about my PhD for the four years I was a diplomat.

It was only after that that I was able to go to Edinburgh University, studying full-time for three years for a doctorate in Modern Arabic literature and I still keep in touch- with whatever is going on here. A group of us formed what we called the Arab Cultural Trust. We put on a cultural season, produced a magazine called *Azure* similar to *Banipal*. So many writers contributed to it, for example, Peter Masfield, Louis Eakes, the critic art publisher Timothy O'Keefe. And there was Anthony Thwaite, the poet, and some Arab writers, among them Sabri

Hafez and myself. We tried to bridge the gap, yes, bridge that gap. Between 1977 and 1983 we managed to bring out 13 issues. And all the time I was writing as well - short stories, novels and plays.

In Libya I was running journals and magazines. I was responsible for *Al-Ispou' a al-Thaqafi* [Cultural Week]; also for a monthly magazine we issued in Lebanon called *alThaqafa al-Arabiya* [Arabic Culture].

In the mid-sixties I was on the staff of the magazine *Al-Ruwaad* [Pioneers] as managing editor. On top of that, I was a working journalist, not just writing columns, but checking, proof-reading, writing headlines, taking copy to printers, attending press conferences, whatever was needed.

At one time, on account of my great interest and work in drama, I became director of Libya's National Institute of Music and Drama. I wrote a musical, *Hind and Mansur*, while I was there so that the students, male and female, could work and perform together. I also worked in Morocco for four years with the Arab cultural organisation. And, then, I used to write a daily column for *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* called 'Kul Youm' ['Every Day], and even now I still write weekly for three Arab journals, for the Cairo *Al-Ahram* every Thursday, for *Al-Arabi* journal, *Al-Raya* in Qatar, and, my cooperation with *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* is still there. I used to write long articles every week, not just a column, and did that as well as writing literature. So I am quite busy, I keep myself busy.

I also wrote some programmes for television. For one of them, I created interviews with historical figures: I took Hannibal and questioned him, I took Harun al-Rashid, Ibn Rushd, al-Mutanabbi, , Antar, Khalid Ibn Walid, Abu Ziad, philosophers like Ibn Khaldoun. I took more than 20 poets and leaders and made 'interviews' with them. I devised questions which would let them answer their critics, so that the programmes were not sycophantic or saccherine. I included interviews with ladies like Laila Al-Ameyria herself, Cleopatra, Queen Sheshera Do, although I found it difficult interviewing these ladies!

I have just published, in Arabic, a new volume of plays entitled *The Singing of the Stars*, and will soon be publishing my second trilogy, *Field of Ashes*. Another novel, *Rats with No Holes to Run to*, which came out of an experience I lived through myself in those starvation years, has been serialized in journals.

Can you tell me about the literary scene in Libya now?

In Libya, now, there is a very active literary scene. Writers are mainly concerned with short stories and there are many excellent short-

story writers. Some have dedicated a lifetime to this genre, about bring to it great finesse and sophistication. It is as if there is something in Libyan society that is conducive to short story writing. I looked at this in my thesis, 'Country of Oases', where I show how the short story is very expressive of this kind of society. As society developed and there is more integration of people, the monopoly of the short story has given way to emergence of the novel form, which can express the complex situations and multiple problems reflected in this transformation of society. Ibrahim al-Kuru, for example, is a most popular novelist and very successful - he has been writing novels for less than ten years, before that he wrote short stories.

I would like to finish with a short excerpt from the last part of *Gardens in the Night*, where there is a description of Tripoli which aptly expresses elements of both the old and the new and also the rueful sense of loss which you express for your 'lost gardens of childhood'.

We went out for a drive around the streets of Tripoli in search of a moment when we could be at one with it . . . but in spite of the fact that we had Tripoli in our very blood, the city still appeared grim and devoid of happiness. It was stuck in a time-warp, no longer a village but not yet a city. It was neither Eastern nor Western. It did not belong to the past nor the present. It was suspended between the sea and the desert, between an age which had passed, and another which had not yet begun - a historical oddity. . . Gone were the old times with their Bedouin parties and popular markets where the saints' feasts, the circumcisions and wedding celebrations were held" . . The city had been taken by surprise by a new time. . . From the modern world it had taken an asphalt road system, which the sun scorched, and windswept highrise buildings, surrounded by piles of dust and inhabited by people who, having left the security of their tribes, could deal with their neighbors from other tribes only by giving them the sort of look that one would find on the face of a hanged man.

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