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**A foreign language, a foreign land: the creative chemistry may work**

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*'Ils nous regardent comme des insectes'*, said Osmane Sembène<sup>1</sup>, a well-known Senegalese movie-maker back in early 1960s. He reacted to the way Africans were portrayed in Europe, mainly in France, the former colonial power. He was outraged that Africans, even though brilliant artists, writers and essayists, had been ill-treated. No respect whatsoever.

On the opposite, a hilarious same old story cliché praised narrative on societies that are on so-called move to erase their past as to keep pace with modernity. Yet, when segments of these societies question the way the ingredients are concocted, they are suspected of being adamant to change and for sticking to their moribund roots while faking to adjust.

Decades later, though some progress has been made, it seems that things are still globally at the same spot. Without exaggerating the facts, it is legitimate to question the Western mind-set status with respect to the idea it shapes about the developing societies. Not that no effort has been made by the citizen of these societies to be part of positive changes that people of the industrial North are being performing.

On the contrary, they request insistently for a chance to prove how capable they could be if they had a chance to express themselves or stay the course.

Certainly, sometimes as to make amends, some writers may be lucky to win a prize or be quoted for some sort of purposes that only God knows.

However, this doesn't prevent from the double-edged sword rule as it had happened to Yambo Ouloguem, a Malian novelist back in 1968. A dramatic story that has been translated in a fictional majestic work by Mohamed Mbougar Sarr<sup>2</sup> who won le Goncourt prize in 2021. Yambo has been accused of plagiarism while he was just proving he could do better than some French writers by improving culture and mutual understanding through quotes that appeared like hidden in his original text.

However, regardless of their race, gender or skin, this doesn't seem enough to recognize these writers' contribution as a professional writers. In this respect, it is worth distinguishing between two kinds of professional writers. The first one involves writers who make it their first concern to write about their own societies. They write in foreign languages while endeavoring to balance between their inner beliefs and the beliefs they have acquired in the foreign lands.

The stories they choose to tell about are mainly those that describe the dark side of their own culture, the hazy mazy relationships between their fellow citizens, and so on. They are sanguine about meeting the foreign readers' expectation that is best shown in the latter compassion and empathy. Those kind of writers are damned in their homelands and applauded in the West.

Nevertheless, as long as these writers have the vibe, they don't care. Because they are some sort of creative people *à la carte* or *writers with benefit*. They are generally very good at mastering the foreign language that increases their assets. However, when they happen to toss the coin as to sort out the impact of their products on the evolution witnessed in their societies of origin, they find out that it is as insignificant as void.

One among the main reason that explains the status of this category of writers is the lack of lucidity, vision and visibility they show over and over again as soon as they are challenged. Spending most of their life abroad, they lose touch with reality in their homelands. So, when their job is done (or so they might think), they are pushed by their mentors to leave the stage. They don't accept it and, unless being wise, become vindictive at the end.

Are we entitled to despise them or underestimate their achievements and the path they followed to show their creative things? Of course, not. We are entitled only to challenge them on what we think they have missed in dealing with problems suffered by their countrymen and countrywomen back home. And even though doing so, it would be unfair to frame them or –worse- to profile them. Because our judgment, as theirs, are biased and wrong to the point that we just Hoover in empty spaces unable to sort out what would be right and what would be wrong in the whole process.

This brings me to the following questions: why should I feel angry, diminished or useless if a foreign regard was brought in to squeeze my dormant mood? Why this would hurt me more because a fellow citizen did it in a way that I deemed wrong? I may smile and conclude that behavior describes some sort of schizophrenia specific to societies in a hectic -if not an uncontrolled- process of multidimensional transition. Still, this explanation falls short.

I think that the main reason is that we, in North Africa and Middle East, don't appreciate to look in the mirror and see who really we are. Rooted in a culture of '*hshouma*' (*a shame*), we don't accept being portrayed as we are, because this might cause loss of confidence in ourselves. Yet, at the same time, we deny to the native writers, using foreign idioms, the right to stage us half-naked from artistic and esthetic perspective. Another stage of '*hshouma*' that we think unacceptable and outrageous no matter what.

The issue of language, as a tool of creativity, jumps in on this subject. It is a very serious matter indeed. It is generally accepted that the language is a precious auxiliary to empower the ideology. In this respect, it represents a crucial political means in the hands of who is steadily good at using it.

Over the last three decades, the main subject of discussion among critics of Arab and Amazigh writers living in Europe was how to assess their commitment-allegiance to their new homelands, by the simple facts that they used their idioms? And how would it be possible they wouldn't mess up and jeopardize both social peace here and there?

By the same token, how would it be true that the same commitment-allegiance was also unshakable with respect to their native

countries? And above all: would it be accurate to assume that they have really succeeded in conveying their messages here and there?

We touch down here to the issue of 'messages transmitted' as part of 'the job is done process.' This issue is deeply related to the *hidden script* and *public transcript* in both writing and disseminating domains.

And this apply also to writers who write in foreign languages but by dealing with issues specific to their new homelands. Two categories must be taken into account in this respect. The first category involves writers who stage their own existence there as a singular journey meant to adapt, adjust and be fully accepted in the new community.

The second category involves writers who, while abiding by the rules of their new community, take the risk of judging, assessing without conceding an inch of their ancient roots. Both categories are looked at by the mainstream as a curiosity, good enough to listen to, but are also requested to take it easy from time to time.

The main reason is that no matter what both categories of writers might bring to the community, they are seen as trouble-makers who have no clue about what they are talking about. And above all, as writers, they have to abide by the general mood, which encompasses also the material to be produced and read. To what extend these writers are free to express themselves? In all cases, they are advised to stay away from bringing about chaos, disorder and social unease.

We face here the same cliché that is unconsciously shared elsewhere: the community doesn't like to see itself in a mirror. And if it should, a foreign writer is banned from doing it on its behalf.

One thing that writers from both sides are facing is that nobody understand their true motivation. Nobody dares to assess their need to balance between their true self and false self? Basically, their need to be accepted by working hard to make the community accept who they really are, and tolerate their judgment –and even their ill-perception of the reality on the ground.

I am sharing all this for a purpose. That is my own experience with creative things whether be they novels, poetry or essays in two foreign languages, French

and English. A very tricky experience if added to my overwhelming propensity for also writing in Arabic.

I remember when I first submitted a draft novel to two publishing houses in France. Refused, because the text dealt with *La Banlieue* and described the controversial relation between *La Métropole* and its former colonies. I dared to depict situations from the South perspective and it was not accepted. I later published it without changing a sentence. Anyway, I leave my journey with French language here, and share with you the one I experienced in the United States of America.

I went to Washington D.C, as diplomat at the Embassy of Morocco, in July 1999. Keen to adapt as fast as possible, I made sure to hang around and pick up every single new word that would come to my ear. This not to mention my addiction to some Sitcoms such as *Married With Children*, *Full House* or *Friends*. My friends tried hard to prevent me from doing so, as they truly thought that it would be a bad way to help me advance in my English learning. I ended up mixing sentences and missing their main significance to the astonishment (and anger) of my American new friends.

My English was not that bad, though. I had learned it both at school and at American Language Center in Casablanca years earlier. Nevertheless, as a former freelance journalist back in mid-1980s, I had a couple of American friends, professors at John Hopkins University (Washington D.C), and Fordham University (New York), who advised me to jump in the river and face my destiny, which is to write in English. I hesitated for a while. I felt the '*hshouma*' syndrom the other way around. What if people make fun of me? What if I make it sucks? What if I miss the target?

And September 11, 2001 took place. All of a sudden, the world stopped turning and I witnessed, as many people all over the States, a disaster swallowing peaceful people in the neighborhood. I was so shocked that I decided to write something. It took me a few weeks later to write a novel in French called '*Il a neigé du feu en septembre*'<sup>3</sup>. It was published a few months later. I offered a couple of copies to my American friends who were very good at French language and literature.

They called me back, said they liked it and advised me to translate it into English. I told them I couldn't and I wouldn't find a good translator. They said: 'You do it, you, loser and coward!' They challenged me. I resisted a month or two. And I embarked in a new adventure. I didn't translate it into English as I think that translation no matter how good it could be kills the original version. Rather I wrote two books. One novel called '*Scratches Never Heal*'<sup>4</sup> and one essay called '*Diplomacy and Communication, the Might and Might-Not in Arab Developing Countries.*'

*Scratches Never Heal* is based on a true story merged with fictional ingredients that made it a little attractive. Some events related in the story took place in Washington D.C and New York. The book on *diplomacy* was inspired by my steady participation in think tanks around the Federal Capital.

I published the novel, few years later, and I couldn't find a publisher for the essay, so I published it in its French version I wrote a little later<sup>5</sup>. Since then, my experience with the English has evolved and so far I wrote and published four novels. The common ground cementing them is that I made the pledge to be witness of what I deem worth it to be told with, however, a deep commitment to understand what was going on from a foreign perspective and yet a balanced view.

When you read the novels inspired by stories in USA, you may feel like walking in Washington D.C or New York City. When you take a look at those inspired by events that took place elsewhere, you may feel the vibe of Baku, Copenhagen, Kabul, London, Paris, Teheran, Budapest, Istanbul, Dushanbe etc.

This is my story and I remain faithful to friends who injected in me the spirit of learning no matter what. A special mention to the Americans among them who made sure not to judge me or look down on me. And I wouldn't forget those among them who served in the Middle East Institute, the Washington Institute and George Washington University, to mention but a few, who invited me to share my thoughts there. They surely helped me out as to improve my English in both speaking and writing.

I have never pretended I got the job done the way I wished to, yet I remain convinced that writing, painting, playing music etc., is the most beautiful gift that one can get from God. I feel blessed. It belongs to everyone to make the best of

that gift to deserve to live in peace with their mind and be, by the same token, useful to their community.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup>Osman Sembène is a very famous Senegalese writer, screen-writer and director. He directed some masterpiece-movies such as Xala in 1974 and 'Le Mandat' in 1968.

<sup>2</sup>Mohamed Mbougar Sarr 'La plus secrète mémoire des hommes', Editions Philippe Rey et Jimsaan, 2021.

<sup>3</sup>Il neigé du feu en septembre, Editons et Impressions Bouregreg, 2003.

<sup>4</sup>Scratches Never Heal, Ganun Publishing House, Baku, Azerbaijan, 2015

<sup>5</sup>Vouloir et pouvoir dans la périphérie arabe, Editons et Impressions Bouregreg 2014