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Ashur Etwebi

Panel: Fantasy and Reality

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Ashur Etwebi (Libya)

For the topic of the discussion “Fantasy and Reality,” I would rather use the term “imagination” than “fantasy,” as fantasy is part of the imagination and it uses imagination as its tool.

Words, symbols and feelings are all the basic materials for the imagination. Can we define imagination? Is it the other side of reality? But what is reality? I still remember when I was young and started to read the old Arabic epics of ALF LYLA WA LYLA, SIAF IBN DI YAZAN, ALI AZPBAQ and HAMZA ALBAHLAWAN; I was haunted by the force of the images of those powerful characters and their adventures, and the constant struggle between good and evil. Birds and animals have the ability to speak with a human tongue and have stories to tell. There was something odd about those books—they lacked punctuation—so I was fascinated by them. I even wrote my novel, insisting on the omission of punctuation, hoping it would give the same effect on my reader as the other books had on me.

As I come from a place where an oral tradition of literature plays a major role in our culture, I find it amazing to see how simple words can turn into magnificent images and tales. I still recall the part where when SIAF IBN DI YAZAN helps the giants in defeating their enemy, the Guol, he was rewarded betrothal to the princess, and on the wedding night he realized that he could not have normal sex with his bride, because the size of her vagina was so big as to be his grave; the idea of a vagina as a grave captured my imagination, revealing the relationship between sex and death, pleasure and pain. Of course he managed to escape.

I also enjoy the epic of Alhilalya, a tribe from Najad in Saudi Arabia that had to flee its land for some political reason, and traveled all the way to Tunisia, where they were faced with strong opposition by the Tunisian leader, Alzanati Khalifa. Abouزيد Alhalaly Salama was the fieriest fighter, and the only one able to look after the welfare of his tribe. They noticed that the only way to defeat Alzanati Khalifa was to get his daughter, Aljazia, on their side, in which Marie was successful in doing; so they captured Tunis. This epic was usually told by a local storyteller. There was a joke commonly told when I was young, that when a man was listening to this story one night, the storyteller grew tired and had to stop mid-story and go home. After midnight, the man who had been listening before knocked on the storyteller’s door, and told him that he had to know what happened to Aboزيد Alhalaly before he could be able to sleep. But the storyteller declined his request, and the man threatened that if he didn’t hear the story then he was going to kill the storyteller.

Regarding again the oral tradition of literature in my country, after some consideration, I found that all our traditional tales, which were and still usually are told by our mothers or grandmothers, were about marginal people—those who were usually treated as outcasts, either because they were poor or of a racial minority. They struggled against the evil work of others, and they succeeded. Those tales were invented by unliterary women who were given the role of teaching their children the difference between right and wrong. Men were not very interested in either making or telling these tales. But they were influenced by them. I know that our cultural heritage is the product of great imagination, like every nation’s cultural heritage.

At present, it seems that this tradition is being replaced by cartoons: Yogi the Bear, Harry Potter, and others. Now my children do not know anything about our traditional tales; which is a shame.

When I grew a bit older and was introduced to the literature of wedding ceremonies, it was to my surprise, again, how in such a conservative society, it is permissible to have openly erotic songs and tales from both a man's and woman's perspective (which were allowed only at wedding night). Many years later in one of my trips to southern Libya I found a book published by the Centre of Libyan Heritage and Oral Tradition. The book was about Libyan wedding songs. I was very happy to find this book, but to my surprise, it had none of the erotic songs in it. How could they do that? How could they censor a great work of fantasy?

In my youth, when I read *Invisible Cities* by Italo Calvino (a little book), it took me weeks to finish it. I had to reread each section many times to get a grip on the subject: cities made of words, which keep transforming from one form to another, breeding more cities, creating illusions that are multilayered and multifaceted. Marco Polo did not know the language of Kubla Khan, the emperor, so he had to use signs and gestures. The emperor seemed to understand. After he learned the language, it became more complicated, and the emperor had to make more effort to understand. Later, words ceased to satisfy the eager emperor, so there was nothing Marco Polo could do except to sit in front of the emperor and look at him without opening his lips. There was no need for speech, the emperor has gone beyond words; they had become an obstacle for his imagination—destructive to the new language, which was silence.

Another fascinating thing about *Invisible Cities* is the realization, of both Marco Polo and Kubla Kahn, that cities and life are not more than illusion. The emperor realizes that his empire is out of his reach, and that he has nothing but a thin air balloon which he can easily penetrate with his little finger, or blow it without even looking at it. It was very frustrating to him.

Now I am in a constant search of invisible cities, which I may have to invent myself.