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At Language's Edge

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Panel: At Language's Edge

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Odeh BISHARAT

At Language's Edge

My mother language is Arabic. My first words were Arabic. I express my feelings in Arabic. Even carnations have a special smell when I spell the word in Arabic: "kronfol."

Language is not just a tool for spreading and receiving information. Over time it becomes a vital part of your personal and social experience. Our sense of pain and joy passes through our language; it is not just a pipe you can replace with an English, a German, or a Japanese pipe. The language becomes a part of your being and is involved in the meanings of the words themselves.

When I was seven years old, I began studying Hebrew in school. When I was fifteen, I could often be found waiting for the Hebrew newspapers, which came around noon. In the seventies and eighties, the internet did not exist and there were only a small number of TV channels. The wide world was in the Hebrew newspapers.

Today I write in both these languages, Arabic and Hebrew. I love them both. On one hand, the Arabic language is rich in metaphors. These metaphors enabled the ancient Arabic poets to express different and complicated feelings, which now, thousands of years later, retain their glory.

Sometimes, when I don't understand what's going on around me here in Iowa because of the language, I remember Abu at-Tayyib al-Mutanabbi, the greatest Arab poet throughout the centuries, who said he felt like:

ولكن الفتى العربي فيها غريب الوجه واليد واللسان

("the Arabic young man who feels that his face and hands and tongue are strange.") Even the ancient Arab poets, who were illiterate, created wonderful poems to describe nature and the spirit of the people in the desert. In addition, they describe the desire to fight injustice and oppression. And today, even if Arabs want to surrender, the Arabic language would prevent them. They may remember this saying of al-Mutanabbi himself:

الخيل والليل والبيداء تعرفني والسيف والرمح والقرطاس والقلم.

("the horses, the night, the desert, know me...the swords, the spears, the paper, and the pen.")

On the other hand, since the beginning of the last century, the Hebrew language has renewed itself. It draws from its rich past and is developing consistently, and adapting to this new age.

For a long time, I was known among Arab readers when I was in the political scene. I often asked myself why the Hebrew media was dominated only by Jewish journalists, and why they had the right to shape the public opinion in Israel, while the Arab inhabitants were in the position of being shaped. I tried for a long time to enter this world without success, and it was six years before the editor of *Haaretz*, Aluf Benn, opened the door and I started writing opinion pieces. Later I wrote a weekly column.

I don't write in an empty space. I don't write only for myself. I write from within myself, but I hope others will understand me. So when I write, I put myself in the reader's position. Did the reader understand my intentions? For me this is a cardinal question when I write fiction or non-fiction.

Generally, when I write an article for a newspaper, I would call this rational writing. You raise arguments and try to refute other arguments. Today in Israel, there is much discussion regarding fundamental issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the problematic definition of Israel, and the

status of the Arab citizen in Israel. So I can write in both languages normally.

My weekly articles deal with current affairs. And these affect me personally, creating feelings of happiness, sadness, or anger. For example, when the Arab Spring began in Egypt, I wrote very warm articles about the Egyptian people. The title of one of these articles was in both Arabic and Hebrew:

שאלוהים ישמור אותך, יא מסר

(“God Protect You, Egypt.”) In all these cases I have no problem with writing and expressing myself.

However, my writing in Hebrew is still Arabic writing. I mean here that I’m carrying on my back, even when I write an article, my cultural baggage: the Arabic legacy, literature, popular stories, sayings, and legends.

Literature is another story. Here you deal with deep and long-term issues. So when I’m writing literature, I try to be relaxed, far away from the daily worries. I wrote my novels in Arabic. In this case, I wrote about my personal experience. I can write about my experience and feelings in Hebrew, but in Arabic, my feelings flow out as a part of me.

Now I live in four worlds: Arabic, Hebrew, fiction, and non-fiction. I feel good about all these worlds. Here in Iowa, I’m trying to enter a fifth world: the amazing English-language world.