

'I have always looked at life as though it were a novel'

In the second of our series of interviews introducing the Vienna Writers' Festival, Michael March talks to festival author Ahdaf Soueif about the war in Iraq and the west's view of Islam

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Michael March: Your recent collection of essays, Mezzaterra, opens with a quote from the Koran: "The one that God honours most among you is the one that fears him most". Why did you choose this?

AS: The quotation actually opens with "and we have created you of nations and tribes that you may get to know one another." It continues: "the one that God honours most among you is the one that fears Him most". As far as God is concerned, there is nothing to choose between people of one nation and another, or one tribe and another. The ultimate measure of people, in the language of the quote, is "the one who fears Him most". In Arabic, the expression "to fear God", means to behave in daily life according to certain standards, to be just, truthful, compassionate, honest and so on. So it is how one behaves in the world, on a daily basis, that makes one person better than another, not any inherent racial, ethnic, tribal consideration.

MM: Hannah Arendt said that "mercy insists upon inequality". How do you see this?

AS: Perhaps mercy is the function of God, whereas compassion is the function of human beings.

MM: Can compassion relieve?

AS: Yes, I guess it can. All the charities currently functioning in the world are based on trust in people's compassion. For most individuals I think it is compassion that makes them send money to, say, tsunami victims. Also, compassion stems from empathy, from being able to imagine yourself in another person's situation - and feeling for that person. And I believe our sense that our sorrows or our difficulties are felt on our behalf by others - that in itself helps us to bear them.

MM: We seem to have entered another cycle, the insufferable cycle of dispassion. Victor Klemperer said: "What is tradition? Everything begins with

me."

AS: Only a very small number of people can afford to think like that. Unfortunately, it is their ideas that are now trying to shape the world.

MM: Jean Genet said that "I'm drawn to people in revolt because I myself have a need to call the whole society into question". How do you respond to that?

AS: For Genet it was a true statement. He spent his life being outside society; not accepting the forms society imposed or demanded. It's a statement born of self-knowledge. He always identified with revolutionaries. The artist questions and, at times, subverts.

MM: Where are we situated today?

AS: Well, I had believed that we had entered a historical stage which was genuinely post-colonial: a free space where the ideological, emotional, philosophical underpinnings of inequality had been repudiated, rejected by the west, our past colonial masters. In the 60s, it seemed that, along with racial discrimination, the subordination of women and queer-bashing, colonialism had become profoundly unacceptable. And now we discover that this sense of a new-found equality was not, in fact, well-founded. That the idea of there being enormous essentialist non-negotiable differences between cultures and peoples is actually one that remains powerful and might be the idea that is going to shape the world in the decades to come.

MM: You don't want to be a slave.

AS: No, you clearly don't. Not that you want to be a master either. What you really want is a level ground for everybody.

MM: But under the ground there is oil.

AS: Yes.

MM: And there is water and the rights to these resources in dispute.

AS: Yes. And I guess somebody like me will always be naïve, because I don't see why people cannot negotiate. There is the tradition of reaching an agreement, of negotiating, of trading one thing for another, of working things out. Why not? Given that in every relationship you need to work things out, can it be that now, in the 21st century, everything is to be decided on the basis of brute strength?

MM: If you don't negotiate, there is the possibility to gain everything.

AS: And there is the possibility that you lose everything and that you lose

everything in a way that you had not dreamed of.

MM: In Mezzaterra you point out that the world is upside down, that "our joy-cries now only ring out in the face of death". If the world is upside down, it's easier to reach China.

AS: Yes [laughs] - I'm waiting to reach China - or for China to reach me.

MM: In The Myth of Sisyphus, Camus proposes that "there is only one serious philosophical problem and that is suicide". In I Saw Ramallah, which you translated from the Arabic, Mourid Barghouti suggests that "living people grow old but martyrs grow younger". What do you think?

AS: That's an enormous question. If we limit ourselves to talking about the wars that are happening now, the war in Iraq for example, I don't see any positive outcome at all.

MM: For Camus, "A nihilist is someone who doesn't believe what he sees." In a sense, what we see is hard to believe. It's a spectacle. It's false.

AS: Here we need to talk about different people's reactions to different things. The war being fought in Iraq, in Falluja, say, is a different one for an American audience than it is for an Arab audience. Speaking as an Arab, I believe what I see and I am horrified by it. I find the pictures tremendously painful. It's different for an American audience because they are not exposed to the same information.

MM: Sweet alienation, with amnesia thrown in.

AS: I hope that the world is just taking a pause. Before the invasion of Iraq, when people thought there was a chance of stopping the war millions of people got out there trying to stop it. My hope is that there will be a way in which people will show that they have not become numbed and used to all these horrors. One change that happened to me, for example, is that I cannot watch the "spectacle" of this war anymore. I cannot listen to it or watch it, because to do so and not act has become too painful and wrong. I imagine that there must be many people who feel the same. I don't know what happens to all these feelings in the end. I don't know whether they just kind of dissipate or whether they give you cancer or what?

MM: We are not entirely helpless ...

AS: No. One way is activism. Another is take hold of a situation by putting it into a work of art rather than in any direct attempt at analysis. You find some sort of fictional way of dealing with it.

MM: Art is a form of self-protection - given back to the world as a personal

treasure - "the power of stones".

AS: In a sense you are opting out, but only in a good sense, because the thing you are engaged in has its own autonomy. You are holding onto a world in which certain things matter, and one of them is culture.

MM: You are exposing the world by imagining the world. It's almost too close to paradise.

AS: It's the most immediate, the most vivid way of reaching people.

MM: Literature as a way of life ...

AS: It is quite interesting how people can be sympathetic to a character in a novel and indifferent to people in life. I think I have always looked at life as though it were a novel. As to how I would have felt or what I would have been writing if I weren't writing in English, I'm sure my subject matter would have been quite different. The core, the heart would have been the same, but things would be seen from a different angle. I might not, for example, have been so concerned with how the west perceives the Arab world.

MM: Nature continues without us. We are not even conscious of our role in the constellations. And this question of terror is a question of control, a control mechanism.

AS: When the mainstream western media talk about "terror" today, they mainly mean suicide bombers and what's happening in Iraq and Palestine. Whereas if you look back to what became known as "the Terror" in France, say, after the Revolution, that was a different thing. The word "terror" denotes the attitude of whoever is using the term much more than it describes any specific activity.

MM: It's not original.

AS: No, none of this is original.

MM: Shouldn't the cordiality of the Arab world, a world of vast cultures, create a situation of joint accountability? **AS:** Open any Arabic newspaper and you will find endless questions and analyses: What is it that is wrong? What can we do? At the simplest level you have in practically every Arab country a state apparatus that is so powerful, so bankrupt and so corrupt it can only afford to ensure its own continuance, its own enrichment. And the level of brutality with which it represses any opposition, any attempt to do things differently, is rising. So you have societies that are simmering with discontent. Our colonial oppressors couldn't have done it better - the humiliation, the torture, the collective punishment. You have a situation where political institutions have been systematically emasculated over 30 years or more. So yes, people think and people are angry and people try to organise and to do things, but all this is against a backdrop of,

for example, emergency laws. When the USSR was in existence, at least people could navigate a path between two huge power blocks; now there is nowhere to turn. Governments are becoming increasingly vicious and the whole business of repressing your own people plays to the USA as "fighting the war on terror". The reason why the Egyptian government was so extreme in its collective punishments in Sinai [after the Taba bombing] is to prove to the Americans and the Israelis that it is very serious about the war on terror. So the dominant power in the world is encouraging regimes to suppress their people - even while it talks of democracy and human rights.

MM: We are waiting for the birth of an alternative philosophy, a political system, a true alternative. Perhaps this won't happen.

AS: Some people would say that maybe Islam, as a political ideology, offers an alternative. Maybe that's what the current conflict is about ... that everybody is supposed to agree that a particular model of capitalism has triumphed and there is no longer room for alternatives.

MM: Why is Islam so misunderstood?

AS: That's a historical matter. The west has defined itself as "not-Islam" since pre-crusader times.

MM: Name five points from Islam which could redirect history.

AS: If - rather than looking at what specific Muslims have done you look at what Islam says about itself - you find lots of ethical positions that one could build on. Diversity and equality are pretty good starting points: several texts celebrate diversity and affirm it as a positive good. And hand in hand with diversity comes equality. Putting a high premium on knowledge. Islam, until recent decadent times, has never set its face against science.

Encouraging you to simultaneously engage with the world and yet maintain a level of detachment: "Live for the next world as if you were to die tomorrow, and live for this world as though you were going to live forever." There is a tradition of the prophet that says that if the end of the world were to come and you were carrying a seed in your hand go ahead and plant it.

The notion of zakat - the idea of redistribution of wealth, that a certain portion of your wealth, a certain portion of your capital, and a certain portion of your income every year does not belong to you, it belongs to the poor. This isn't charity, this isn't you being good or kind or compassionate, this is you giving the poor what is their due, because this isn't yours, this is theirs.

The idea of consultation, of no-one having the monopoly on the best way to go, but on moving through consultation.

The idea of collectivity, of people behaving as a collective, having responsibility for each other's welfare ...

Anyway, I'm not at all into proselytising but I think that there are a lot of ideas here that could be articulated in a way that would offer an alternative to what we were talking about earlier, which was that "the world begins and ends with me". Which it clearly does not.