

Ahdaf Soueif's talk at the Gala Opening of  
"Arabesque: Art of the Arab World,"  
Kennedy Centre for the Performing Arts, Washington DC

Ladies and gentlemen,

I have a pretty difficult assignment here: to represent Arabic linguistic culture – if you will – in 5 minutes. And in English. Yes, you may well laugh! Well, I've decided to read you 3 texts – very different – and from different periods. They don't 'represent' the Arabic literary culture, but they give you a taste of it.

My first text will be from **May Ziyada**, an Arab woman, Syrian, born in Nazareth in 1886 to a Palestinian mother and a Lebanese father, May goes to Egypt in 1907 and sets up as a woman of letters and cultural commentator. This selection is from a piece she published in 1923:



“Most western writers who make the Arabs their concern seem to find difficulty in understanding us; even though they may have lived among us many years. They see themselves as ‘different’ and seem to constantly need to compare between our ways and theirs. They are unable to see us except with a ‘Western eye gazing at the East’, in other words with an eye that perpetually questions, wonders, and looks to approve or disapprove of our slightest gesture....

And yet, great authors and thinkers of genius are not formed in moulds nor are they limited by nation. They belong to mankind and serve all without exception. And whether they speak and write in Greek or Latin or Arabic or Hindi, what they write of are human needs and desires.

Every nation produces prose and poetry that expresses its consciousness in its own way, and when this is called literature and philosophy, and written down in books and sent to faraway lands, it is like a love letter to readers there, reminding them of the commonality of human existence – or even showing them a new aspect or a surprising disposition of their own selves.

For the true literary artists, it is as though the great heart of humanity beats in their own breasts, and the echo of those heartbeats are heard in the scratching of their pens.”

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A literary artist of whom it can truly be said that “the great heart of humanity beat in his own breast” is the late great Palestinian poet, **Mahmoud Darwich**. Writing out of a specifically Palestinian experience, he

does what great artists do: makes it universal. This is a short poem called  
"Musiqa 3arabiyyah"

Would that the young man were a stone.  
Ah! would that I were a stone.

And every time two eyes lose themselves in the distance will I  
Be made homeless,  
A cloud among these clouds?

Or every time a bird claws the horizon  
Will I search there for a presence?

Will every time the guitar shines bright  
My soul undergo its death in the furrow ploughed by ships in the ocean?

Or every time a woman finds her womanliness  
Will lightening strike me at the waist  
And burn me?

Will every time a green plant dies  
Or a bird laments on a branch  
Sickness strike me  
So that I cry: oh my homeland!

And every time the almonds blossom  
Will they set me on fire?  
And every time they burn  
Will I be the smoke and the scarf  
Torn  
By the north winds, the rain erasing my face?

Would that the young man were a stone.  
Ah! would that I were a stone.

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I would like to close with a text about the great leader, **Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi**.

Salah al-Din came to power at the time when the Crusader armies were at their strongest and it was he who gathered the Arab princes and leaders and defended Cairo and Damascus and liberated Syrian and Palestinian cities culminating with Akka and Jerusalem.

A brilliant strategist and charismatic leader, Salah al-Din was ever a reluctant warrior: honourable in his treaties, resilient in defeat and magnanimous in victory. And charitable to the point that when he died in Damascus on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 1193, his estate was 48 Dirhams and one gram of Syrian gold.

Salah ed-Din left no great texts: his life and example were what he left us. So the text that I am going to end with tonight is the letter that al-Qadi al-Fadel, the Chief Judge of Damascus, wrote to Salah al-Din's son, al-Malek al-Zaher, King of Aleppo, to inform him of the death of his father. He says:

“The turbulence of the hour is of great magnitude. You have no better example (in dealing with it) than that of the Messenger of God, Muhammad, peace be upon him.

Our King, the Sultan al-Malek al-Zaher: may God console him and heal his wound, and make him a good heir (to his great predecessor) in this terrible hour.

The world of the Muslims has been shaken; tears dig channels in eyes, and hearts are in throats, and I have bade farewell to your father, my master: a farewell after which there is no meeting. I have kissed his face for myself and for you, and surrendered him to God empty of recourse, weak of strength, content with Fate - for there is no strength and no recourse except through God.

At the door were thousands of his soldiers, and arms and munitions in readiness - none of which could prevent this disaster, neither could any kingly ally delay this hour. The eye weeps and the heart trembles and we say nothing except what sits well with the Lord. We sorrow for you, Salah al-Din.

As for instructions – you do not need them. And as for opinions - the terrible loss at hand allows them no room. And as for the immediate concern it is this: if you can keep the unity of the Arab kings and leaders you will have lost nothing except the beloved person of your father, and if otherwise then the catastrophes that lie in wait for us will be such that his loss will be the least of them.

May peace be upon you...”