WRITING EAST AND WEST

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The United Kingdom has pulled out all the stops to deliver a world-class exhibition as this year's guest of honor at the 41st Cairo International Book Fair.

Inside the UK stand at Hall 15A, tables with umbrellas and deck chairs provide a place for visitors to relax and sip coffee while enjoying the exciting literary events scheduled for the week. These include performances by the National Theater Company, lectures on a variety of topics, and Literary Cafés showcasing some of Britain's top writers.

Saturday's Literary Café featured world-renowned Egyptian novelist Ahdaf Soueif interviewing Sudanese-British writer Jamal Mahjoub. Reclining on plush chairs, the two authors discussed everything from the inspiration for Mahjoub's novels to the politics of translation, to the necessity of reclaiming history through literature.

Soueif began by asking about what led Mahjoub to write. A trained geologist who finds stories in stones, Mahjoub began working on his first novel, "Navigation of a Rainmaker" (1989) upon finding himself among Sudan's ranks of unemployed university graduates. This book led to an interest in other historical themes and two more acclaimed novels, "Wings of Dust" (1994) and "In the Hour of Signs" (1996).

"After exploring the current era, I wanted to look back into history and write about my father's generation, how they were the first generation of independent Sudanese elites, arriving to study in London as free, independent people preparing to lead a new country. Then I got interested in the previous, colonized generation and the roots of the Islamic rejectionist movement in the Ottoman period," he said.

Mahjoub's other novels explore his family background and the connections between Europe and the Arab world. These include "The Carrier" (1998), "Traveling with Djinns" (2003), and "The Drift Latitudes" (2006).

When asked about his inspiration, the author explained that his goal has always been to "put Sudan on the bookshelf," of western readers by writing in English about the Arab world.

As part of a group of British writers inspired by the "Empire Writes Back" (a 1989 book about theories in post-colonial literature) or the Post-Colonial novelists led by Salman Rushdie, Mahjoub has been committed to rewriting Sudan's history in a way that is both accessible to the west and demonstrative of a counter-narrative of Sudan's experience; the goal being to overcome the colonial narrative that has defined western conceptions of Sudan for so long.

What he calls the "failure of imagination between east and west" is the root of this problem, and he emphasized the phenomenon, in colonial literature, of colonized peoples being "forced to look at their world through others' eyes, but not the other way around," as a major stopping block in communication that he hopes can be bridged by the translation and publication of more Third World writers in English.

At the end of the discussion, Mahjoub fielded questions from the audience about the true nature of multiculturalism, and the politics of publishing in the United Kingdom. He also discussed his experiences as a volunteer with the Palestine Festival of Literature, a project initiated by Ahdaf Soueif that brings Arab writers to the Occupied Palestinian Territories to speak, give readings, and work with students.

"I had the chance to see the light of Palestine — the humanity, feelings and culture of the people there, as well as the darkness of the occupation and the way people are forced to live. It was the most emotional literary tour I have ever been on," he said.

Seeing these two world-famous Arab authors discuss the politics of literature and its import as a tool to rewrite colonial narratives was profoundly relevant to the event's context. Egypt inviting Britain as a guest, and Britain holding events where such issues were brought up, is a reflection of how times have changed, and a great testament to the power of literature to open people's minds, now and in the future.