

Singing Iraq: poets in conversation

By Salah Niazi, Fadhil Assultani,
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Question from the audience: Do you think the character of your writing is going to change now, when you write about Iraq?

Fadhil Assultani: There will be great changes – at least for me, both in the settings for our poems, and in the style itself. For many years – 26 years in my case, for Hashem Shafiq 25 years, for Salah Niazi 40 years – we have lived in exile [1]. This has affected our writing, our themes, topics and style. I can no longer call it exile [2]. There will be new themes and a new point of view. And most importantly, I think the vision itself will be different.

Salah Niazi: To answer this question is difficult and cannot be summarised in a few words or sentences because, as you know, with Saddam Hussein in power for thirty years, the face of literature was different [3]. A million Iraqis living abroad learned one or two things.

The three Iraqi poets whose work is featured in **openDemocracy** – Fadhil Assultani [3], Salah Niazi [3], and Hashem Shafiq [3] – all spoke at an event at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts [4] in May 2003, chaired by Stephen Watts. Read here extracts of their discussion about language, literature and patriotism.

The translations come from *Iraqi Poetry Today*, the Spring 2003 issue of *Modern Poetry in Translation* [5].

Don't miss too the work of the Kurdish poet Choman Hardi [5]

What I can imagine now is that, first, because the change taking place in Iraq is not brought about by the Iraqis themselves, the first thing it will do is to kill any conceit in us. Second, there really is no political party who will take the credit for this change. Iraqis will set about thinking over what happened in the last thirty years. Just as in Britain nowadays I can see documentaries, first-class programmes, and the best books are autobiographies, so I think documentaries will take the lead in Iraq. Meanwhile, given the mass graves and the persecution in Iraq, our writings cannot be compared with the realities over there.

Question from the audience: As a non-Arabic speaker, I am wondering how much your Arabic varies? Does your Arabic vary within Iraq, and within the Arab world?

Fadhil Assultani: It is the same language – the classical Arabic language – but there are different accents. For example, I cannot understand the Moroccan accent or the Algerian

accent. But there is no problem understanding Arabic for readers from Iraq to Egypt or Morocco or Algeria.

Question from the audience: Does that language change between different types of poetry?

Fadhil Assultani: No, it stays the same – just the spoken language is different, the pronunciation.

Question from the audience: Is that true of all Iraqi poets? Or are there Iraqi poets who consciously cultivate writing in a vernacular of Arabic as it is spoken?

Fadhil Assultani: There are indeed many of those, yes.

Salah Niazi: The Arabic language is one of the oldest languages in the world and we speak or write – especially in poetry – classical Arabic, which is understood all over the Arab world. Difficulties will only arise in the future I think. You know, we speak a language and then we write in a different language somehow. So you have to master the grammar and you have to read the pre-Islamic poetry and Islamic poetry and it is a very long process. Mastering the Arabic language is not an easy job at all.

So what do you do? The images we use are mental images, which can be understood by all Arabs. Say an Iraqi poet writes a classical poem, you would never recognise that he's an Iraqi or Moroccan or Egyptian. You just read the poem, because it uses the same mental images. Now with the present circumstances we are undergoing in the Arab world, I think in the future we will increasingly turn to our own unique experiences, and if we write our experiences we will need our own words, styles, sentences. At that stage there could be some differences I think.

Question from the audience: With the changed situation, do you envisage any problems now for writers hoping to take up full freedom of speech in Iraq to write and say what they want?

Fadhil Assultani: No, why should you ask that? It is a dream to have free speech and this is what we struggled for, for a very long time. There will not be any problem – on the contrary, freedom of speech will enrich our experience, our culture, ourselves, especially in Iraq's multicultural society. Iraqi society will nurture a very rich culture in the future, which will even be able to enrich Arab cultures elsewhere, especially given what we have to offer of our Kurdish culture, religious culture, scientific culture.

Question from the audience: In England and America and in other countries, poets are not so valued and the public is not so interested in poetry. Do you think in Iraq the poets will be valued and will have large audiences taking an interest in your work?

Fadhil Assultani: They are very much valued in all Arab countries.

Salah Niazi: Just as with opera in Italy or the stage in Britain, the Arab world loves poetry [6]. And this is really a handicap because we think poetically, even when we talk about statistics or anything else! Without exception – and this includes Hosni Mubarak or Saddam Hussein himself – we always talk in poetry.

So for a long time now I have known a large number of writers in Egypt and particularly in Iraq who promote writing in prose. And there is the idea now, especially among the expatriates in Europe, that they cannot master poetry at all because poetry is a national thing. You cannot appreciate the music of Arabic poetry and we cannot appreciate the music of an English poetry. And because they want to learn English or French or German or any other language, they tend

to read prose. If they read prose they will fall in love with English prose [7] in particular because it is so great – and that's what is missing in our literature, that's why we have translated many useful books from French, from German, especially the novels and short stories, and philosophy as well.

Though poetry is very important in the Arab world, the classical poetry just hasn't got the same appeal as it did in the past, because we don't write it any more. We don't write for the masses, we write for the individuals. We don't write it for the ear, we write it for the eye.

poem [7] I read out tonight, I was very proud of myself because I killed every trace of music in it and I made it prose, believe it or not. Najib al-Mana, for instance, wrote a great deal about the importance of prose and that's why he translated about twenty-six books.

Fadhil Assultani: I don't agree at all (laughter).

Question from the audience: Do you see yourself going back to Iraq to try and inspire young poets there, or to deal with helping them to express themselves after the change of regime? Might you return, possibly to stay, especially now that you [to Salah Niazi] very openly make comments and criticise? Will you be able to go back?

Salah Niazi: 'Going back' is not an inevitable or obligatory condition. It is very difficult, living for a number of years in a different country – you go back and everything is different. Really you are neither here nor there. Once I was translating The Empty Space [8] and it was extremely cold so I went to the park and out of the blue I saw Peter Brook [9], the stage director – what happened I don't know. I said, 'Are you Peter Brook?' He said, 'Yes.' I said, 'I was translating your book.' Believe me, I don't know what happened! Had I seen his photo before? We talked and he asked me, 'What do you think of yourself in this country?' And I said, 'I am just like a lily – floating, I have no strong firm roots but I am full of flowers.' Going back [10] there is a very difficult job. I went after eighteen years. Literally everything has changed over there – even the conversation and the language have changed.

Question from the audience: But as a visitor, even just to go as a lecturer for one visit, even if it's so difficult for you...

Salah Niazi: I don't know. What if you go there and find yourself a stranger? It's very easy to become a stranger in these circumstances. When I talk to my mother – even to my mother, to my brother, to my relatives – I find myself on a different plane. The use of language is different. Although we cannot speak English perfectly well or shipshape, we have the manners of the language. Over there for instance, when you say anything to an Iraqi he will start to say 'no, no, no' in your face – and he agrees with you! And you are fighting, you see. He gives you something to eat, you say no, he will insist again and again and again until you cry.

I can give you another example. My daughter was there once and my relative insisted that she eat some fish but she said no, no and started to cry.

Fadhil Assultani: It is well known all over the Arab world that Iraqi culture is very rich. And you know there are many poets, novelists and writers who went underground for more than thirty-five years. So now they have a chance – a good chance – to come out from underground [11]. And in the future there will be magazines, newspapers, a free press. I am sure the Iraqi culture will flourish again because it has the basis – it has the rich tradition. Saddam Hussein and his regime didn't succeed in killing the real elements, the human elements in the Iraqi culture. The real elements are still there and culture will flourish again in a very short time. So maybe they don't need us to encourage them.

Question from the audience: I think you will need more time – you are very optimistic.

Fadhil Assultani: No, because they are still there. Many of them just went underground and stayed in Iraq. More than 500 Iraqi intellectuals left Iraq in 1977-78 – imagine! At that time Saddam Hussein was supported by the west and the east. But also there are many writers, poets, novelists who stayed there and are still there.

Question from the audience: The Iraqis are a very passionate people – what we are listening to tonight, is just a sample of this passion. Every Iraqi is a poet. What we have here is a people who are going to change things around – they will do it – and we Iraqis are very optimistic. My question is if you were all given a chance to speak to the Iraqis and read your poetry either from here or inside Iraq, would you do it?

Fadhil Assultani: Of course.

Question from the audience: Even though the language has changed and people have changed because of the oppression?

Fadhil Assultani: That is another's opinion – it is not mine.

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