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About Mohammad Habeeb

Mohammad Habeeb, Bachelor of Arts, English Department. Tishreen University, Lattakia, Syria. An English Arabic and Norwegian Arabic translator. With over 15 years of experience in translating literature and ideas. He also writes short stories and poetry. He is a member of the Union Arab Writers in Syria and a member in Norsk PEN in Norway. He has worked as a teacher of English language at high schools in Syria. He started his translation career in 1992. His first translation into Arabic was T.S. Eliot's *The Family Reunion*).

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The Monday Writer Interview

Mohammad Habeeb

In conversation with **Ana Stjelja**

You grew up in Syria where you got educated and lived until the war. How do you recall these years and what is that you remember the most of your life in Syria?

Life is a one-full-package. You open it and try to focus on a part of it though you know it is one package and all its components are deeply rooted in each other. Nevertheless, we often try to concentrate on the most influential element of it and how it has affected us and how it has led us where we are now.

I have spent most of my life challenging circumstances and dreaming of the best. This combination of standing the general retreating political and social circumstances and managing to get my dreams to meet realities, which were going from bad to worse, made life more meaningful, especially when I found that any small achievement mounts up the will and the strength to go on further in life. However, at one point I found out that the real salvation can't be an individual whatever the individual achievements are. Therefore, I involved myself in the common social and national affairs. That is why my memories of my life in Syria are always a mixture of happiness and depression. I feel Happy for what I managed doing and depressed for what I couldn't, not to mention the status qua in Syria now.

Now you live in Norway. How did you get used to it? If you were asked to compare two cultures (Norwegian and Arab) what would you say about each of them? What you admire in one and what you admire in the other. If you could choose the most important cultural heritage of both Norway and Syria what would it be?

Freedom of speech and opinion is the first thing I admire here in Norway and feel pity that we miss it there in Syria. Here, there is no policeman in the background of writers' mind or conscience. They are free to express their views towards all affairs without fearing punishment or threat. Norway is still celebrating Ibsen, who attacked the people of his own hometown and still celebrating Knut Hamsun apart from his controversial attitude towards Nazism and Hitler.

Culturally, Syria, as a part of the Arabic and Islamic cultural heritage, in addition to its mosaic ethnic structure, has more cultural diversity than Norway has. Nevertheless, Norwegian literature has achieved more international success than

the Syrian. Even though both countries were occupied for a long time: Norway by Denmark, and Syria by Ottoman Empire and France later, Norwegian culture blossomed as efforts continued to achieve an independent identity in the areas of literature and music and got three Nobel prizes, while Syrian literature, though there are many prominent writers and artists, couldn't get there.

In Syria, the best writers may sell 10000 copies to 20 million inhabitants. Most of the people can't afford to buy a book, while not all those who can do buy a book.

I admire in Norway that it is a nation of readers. Statistics show that one in four Norwegians pick up a book on a typical day. Moreover, libraries are everywhere and offer people all kinds of books, newspapers, audio books and even musical instruments (guitar, violin, etc.), and those who cannot afford to buy a book can order it at the library, in the city they live in, which buys it or orders it from other libraries in the country.

In Norway, they celebrate their old and contemporary writers. Every year they have programs and festivals to celebrate their new literature, arts, and music works.

You write and translate, so tell us a bit more about your work, ongoing or future projects. Who are your literary idols or favourites? What kind of work would excite you at this moment and draw your complete attention?

Like all readers, many authors have affected me in different ways. Nevertheless, I would not like to name any as an idol. I don't want to be unjust to any. I have taught myself a lot from all books that I have read, in different fields of literature, psychology, philosophy, and ideas. For the time being, here in Norway, I am interested in drama. Now I am working on translating Jon Fosse's drama. It astonishes me that his drama has not been translated into Arabic yet, though his writings (prose, drama, and poetry) have been translated into more than 40 languages and his drama is compared to Becket and Ibsen. However, many other Norwegian authors have written good drama and I am considering translating them into Arabic as well.

Tell us a bit more about Norwegian cultural and art scene.

The Norwegian culture and art scene is very rich. I can assume that is not only because Norway is a rich country, but because Norwegians are in love with culture, art, music, and nature.

Unlike some can imagine, Jo Nesbø is not the bestseller writer nowadays, but Åsne Seierstad (a nonfiction writer). She became known with her book *One of Us*,

which recounts the horrific attack of Anders Breivik back in 2011 and won her the Leipzig Book Award for European Understanding 2018. Maja Lunde's *The History of Bees* (2015) was an instant hit and sold to several territories before Norwegian publication. It was the bestselling book in Germany in 2017.

Writers like Karl Ove Knausgård brought the Norwegian literature scene into the spotlight, showing the world that Norwegian writers can do a lot more than noir crime fiction. Karl Ove Knausgård has sold 450,000 books in a country of five million people. Jostein Gaarder is another writer whose book *Sophie's World* was translated into many languages.

Jon Fosse, an author and a dramatist, is widely considered as one of the world's greatest contemporary playwrights. Those, mentioned above, and other contemporary authors are the reasons Norway was the Guest of Honour in the Frankfurt Book Fair of 2019.

Many other famous writers, artists, and musicians are celebrated each year in the annual festivals, which take place each Autumn in all cities in Norway. In Stavanger, the city I live in, there is an annual tradition called 'all Rogaland reads.' It celebrates one of the writers in the city. The community chooses a book by one of them and print 50 thousand copies of it and give it out to the readers for free.

You were also working as a humanitarian worker and educator, what is your experience regarding this period of your life?

For me, teaching was not ever work I had to do for making money. It was joy, a mission, and a process of keeping in touch and interacting with the young generations. I learned from my students a lot about the gap between teachers and parents on one hand and the youth on the other. I tried to make the best of this experience as a teacher and a father. I took their feedbacks as messages to improve my way of teaching, behaving and thinking.

May be that helped me a lot to make up my mind and choose to work in the field of human rights and democratic freedoms. Because our students, children, the most vulnerable victims of the tyrannical regime and the traditional patriarchal social system, can reflect this catastrophic problem in their hostile behavior at school.

That is why I mostly feel a little bit satisfied with my experience in this period of my life. I tried and did my best at the given time of my being in Syria.

How do you look at the idea of cultural diversity? How can we preserve it? Is it sustainable in your opinion?

Whenever I read or hear this expression “cultural diversity”, I imagine a one-color-spring and that is impossible of course, that is because nature is wiser than man is. Life is unbearable with only one color, gender or culture. As the essence of natural life depends mainly on two genders: female and male; culture and intellectual life need not only two but more genres. I believe that we should think of cultural diversity as a necessity rather than prestige. Throughout history, minorities and their cultures inspired and motivated dominating cultures more than man could imagine. Even though a monotype culture can survive, it will be boring and impotent, that is because only one is none. On the other hand, speaking about cultural diversity brings us to the language. Our language shapes our perception of the world, our knowledge and experience in life. Maybe that is why there are great efforts now to save endangered languages and local cultures all over the world.

Mr. Mohammad Habeeb, thank you so much for accepting this interview. **SLQ**



Ana Stjelja obtained her PhD in Serbian Literature in 2012. She is a poet, writer, translator, journalist, researcher and editor. She has published more than 30 books of different literary genres and is the Editor-in-chief of the *Alia Mundi* magazine for cultural diversity and is also the founder and the editor of the Web Portal *Eastern Pearl* dedicated to the literature art and culture of the East.

A Life Trip

(excerpt from new work by Mohammad Habeeb)

Once upon a time, on scattered islands, lived all creatures happily in peace. One day, Knowledge said that the islands would be drowned due to the melting of snow on the hills and mountains! Therefore, Knowledge advised all to move to the mainland as soon as possible. All the islanders did not take Knowledge's news and advice for granted, as she had always been a loving and trusted mother. They began packing their boats with their most treasured possessions. Only Love resisted the idea of leaving his island. He told Knowledge that the flood might not happen, or at least his island would escape because life would be merciful on him.

Love: Dear Knowledge, Water has always been a blessing for us. We drink it, we sail on it, we fish in it; irrigate our plants with it and wash with it. So why would it flood our islands and drive us away from our roots?

Knowledge: Dear Love, first, when it comes to roots, we all take our roots with us wherever we go. Moreover, it is rather easy when we all move together. Second, just remember that Water does not think. Despite Water being the essence of life, it is the same fatal, almighty element if one ignores its power. When Water flows, it does not care about others, but only itself. It cuts its way into the soil and sometimes curves its way round hard deep-rooted rocks and mountains, but nothing stops it. I am sure that Water will soon flood all these islands, and there is no way to ignore that.

Love: I think Water will not drown my island.

Knowledge: Believe me, it is stupidity to resist it or risk staying here.

Love: Then, I will be the last to depart. You know, I am so attached to my place, not to mention that I do not have a boat. You know that I have lived all my life travelling on my friends' boats.

Knowledge: I know that. However, we must often accept outcomes we do not like, especially when they are out of our control. For me, I am leaving today. You can join me. You know that you are always welcome.

Love: Well, may safety be with you. I will cling to my hope and stay here until the last moment.

Knowledge leaves and other islanders begin following her after they have filled their boats with their most treasured possessions. Some stop to say goodbye and urge Love to follow them.

Love stands to watch the departures and to say goodbye to those who stop to see why he is not leaving. He says to all, "I trust Knowledge, but I trust my intuition too. My intuition tells me that my island will be safe. Moreover, I can't imagine myself leaving my lovely island." *SLQ*

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