



CURATOR'S CORNER

The Out-of-Flock Dissident: An Interview with Kurdish – Syrian Writer Jan Dost

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Abstract

The recent Syrian uprisings have impacted all sectors of life and played a major role in redrawing internal boundaries among different groups in Syria, not only between Kurds and Arabs but also within the fabric of Kurdish life. Among Syrian Kurds, calls for militarization and separation based on national chauvinism (*Qasad*) are countered by more moderate voices warning of the dangers of escalation and calling for Kurdish civilian rights within the Syrian homeland. Jan Dost is a Syrian–Kurdish writer whose literary oeuvre includes poetry books, numerous translations from and to Kurdish, and twelve novels, some of which have been translated into Turkish, Arabic, Sorani, Persian, and Italian. His criticism of what he calls “Kurdish fascism” prompted this interview, which is part of my current doctoral research on internal dissent in modern Middle Eastern narratives that negotiate the failure of “nationalism” in building modern states. Dost was born in Kobani in 1966 and has been living in Germany since 2000. His novel *Mokhatat Petersburg* (Petersburg Manuscript, 2020) was longlisted for the Sheikh Zayed Book Award. The interview is my translation from Arabic. It has been lightly edited for clarity and concision.

Keywords: Syrian Kurds; Ethnic Nationalism; Kurdish Literature; Arab Spring; Kurdish Fascism; Dissent

Askar: I would like to start our interview with the following question. Specifically in my mind is Frederick Jameson’s controversial article, in which he stated that the problem of Third

World literature is that it is loaded with the concerns of the nation: “The story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society.”¹ His article sparked controversy and was criticized

¹ Fredric Jameson, “Third-world Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” *Social Text* 15 (1986): 69.



academically for several reasons, one of which was its generalizations. As a writer, where do you see your novels considering this viewpoint?

Dost: Despite the generalization that the critic is supposed to know all the literature written in the Third World, which is a huge body of literature of course, the argument of this Marxist critic, who is well acquainted with the literature of the Third World, is not without truth. As a writer, I belong to the Third World: I am from the Middle East, from Syria, and as a Kurd, I do not set myself apart from “Jameson’s generalizations.” I am working on the question of identity, the question of the nation looking for a foothold in the sun of history and a solid spot on the map. I am a writer haunted by the pain of a struggling people; the literature I write is an attempt to participate in their struggle.

The literatures of peoples under the yoke of colonialism, or of slavery, or of statelessness, are of a militaristic nature. This is so because literature is never separated from reality; it echoes nations’ ideas, lifestyles, and visions. Kurdish literature, since its inception, has been characterized by “struggle” – defending the national self and enhancing the nation’s standing.

Askar: Jameson complains in the same critical article about the existence of a cultural barrier between the original text and the Western reader in suggesting that the latter does not understand the text saturated with symbols, as if there is an “Other reader” concerned with the text.² First of all, I would like to ask: Who are the readers of Jan Dost? And in your opinion, if his argument is true, does this problem reduce the chances of translation into these languages? Do you blame publishing houses for not translating your novels?

Dost: My readers have been, so far, from the same cultural sphere as myself. Whereas Jameson identifies a cultural barrier between our texts, as writers from the Third World, and Western readers, there are no barriers between me and my readers, who come from the same cultural and social environment. Regarding translation, yes, chances are few, and translations are individual efforts where cultural mafias and literary agencies, which prefer this writer over that one for various reasons, often intervene. You will notice that my novels are well accepted in Middle Eastern languages, because they are comprehensible to regional readers who do not need any interpretations to illuminate the text for them.

Askar: In speaking of the environment and reality in the Middle East, as you well know, the so-called “Arab Spring” constituted a radical change not only in the political, economic, and social conditions, but also in our imaginations and literary narratives. How do you interpret the changes in Syrian literature in general, and in Kurdish literature

² *Ibid.*, 66.

in particular, before and after the latest uprisings: at the level of themes, language, form, structure, and characters?

Dost: Syrian literature drowned in the quagmire of war. This was the consequence of war; it was not the desired choice. Most, if not all, Syrian novelists have been involved in writing about the Syrian revolution since its first year. The war has perturbed the world of Syrian literature and moved it away from the creative interests in which it was engaged before March 2011. The tone of lament became loud and clearly audible in every novel. Regardless of the narrative methods and techniques used by Syrian novelists, the Syrian novel has become essentially a war novel, just like the novels of Europeans during World War II. Undoubtedly, the war will produce many stories, and time will sift them so that the good will remain and the bad will go to the realms of oblivion.

I wrote from my own viewpoint. I watched the war all over Syria, but I have been interested specifically in its repercussions in the Kurdish region of Afrin, so I wrote about the Turkish invasion of that region in my novel *A Safe Passage* (2019). Kobani was the setting of my longest novel *Kobani: The Tragedy and the Quarter* (2018), in which I chronicled the disintegration of a city into complete ruin. Before that, in *Blood on the Minaret* (2014), set in Amuda city, I wrote about the Kurd who shed Kurdish blood in a scene that has been repeated many times.

Askar: You said in *Blood on the Minaret*: “Every mirror is a trap for forgetting. Your existence, like images, flows into it as long as there is light in the surroundings. If light fades away, the mirror forgets you and you vanish.” You also have a short poem entitled “The Mirrors of Turning Forty” What is the meaning of mirrors in your literature? Are you afraid of the pain of memory and forgetting?

Dost: We do not know ourselves, nor do we know our faults and merits, except in the presence of mirrors. I do not mean only physical mirrors made of glass and mercury-silver, but also intangible mirrors. Literature is a mirror. Cinema, theater, and other visual arts are also mirrors. Novels are mirrors that reflect what others cannot see when they are inside the mirror. We have to create a certain distance between us and the mirror in order to see ourselves. Humans are fond of discovering themselves. The myth of Narcissus does not indicate self-love as much as it refers to man’s quest to know himself. As for the pain of memory, it has hurt me so much, it has destroyed me from within. I am now relieving myself of the heavy burden of memory. After the Kobani novel, I felt I had buried my memory with that city in which I was born and had lived for many years. Now I do not have anything to do with the current city. It is not my city; the crumbling ruins stir me and stimulate my imagination more than the many buildings built after the war. Now, I don’t mind going back to it. It is all over. Kobani, my Kobani, ended in the novel.

- Askar:** Let's talk about languages. Was your decision to write in Arabic, for example, in your first Arabic-language novel, *Blood on the Minaret*, made in order to document your departure "outside the flock"?³
- Dost:** I have been writing in Arabic for more than thirty years. My first book in Arabic was published in conjunction with my first book in Kurdish in 1991. But I made a personal decision to distance myself from writing creative texts, poetry, and novels in Arabic. This was due to my concern for the marginalized national language in which I wrote all my literary productions. Even my novels, which I first wrote in Arabic, *Blood on the Minaret*, *The Translator's Lover* (2018), *A Safe Passage*, etc., I later translated myself into Kurdish. I love the Arabic language – even the word "love" is not strong enough to capture my spiritual relationship with this enchanting language. I don't feel it is a foreign language; it is by no means foreign to me. It is my language. I learned it just as Naguib Mahfouz learned it in school, as Gibran Khalil Gibran learned it from books, and as any other Arab writer learned it.
- Askar:** You have explained your relationship with Kurdish and Arabic in the introduction of this novel, in a wonderfully transparent way. Sometimes you feel you are betraying your mother tongue, sometimes you apologize to Kurdish, but then you confirm your closeness to Arabic and your love for it despite its hegemony, since it is the language of stifling political surveillance. I wonder if your decision to write in Arabic is a way of reconciliation with yourself and Arabic?
- Dost:** A way of reconciliation with myself, yes. As for Arabic, I had no quarrel with it, and we never had a dispute. How can I reconcile with the language that was born with me, and whose first words were whispered in my ears the moment I heard the *Adhan* [the Arabic call to prayer] when I came out of my mother's womb?
- Askar:** Well, you have said: Arabic is "the strong co-wife of my language," and you mean here a "competitor," which reminds me of Karla Mallette's metaphor of language as being "a mistress" in her book *Lives of the Great Languages: Arabic and Latin in the Medieval Mediterranean*. Concerning the desire to learn Arabic by non-Arabs, like Sibaweh, she says: "The cosmopolitan language is a tongue that one covets and seeks to win: a mistress tongue (in a formulation that has been used by more than one enamored and unfulfilled author), rather than a mother tongue."⁴ I have two questions in

³ "Outside the Flock" is a famous political satire by the prominent Syrian playwright Muhammad al-Maghout (1934–2006). Using Brechtian theatrical techniques and symbolism, he incites people in this play, staged during the era of the late Syrian president Hafez Al-Assad, to rebel against despotism and thought police. The flock means the submissive popular current, and here it is an insinuation that writing in Arabic contradicts the general current of Kurdish writers of writing in languages other than Arabic.

⁴ Karla Mallette, *Lives of the Great Languages: Arabic and Latin in the Medieval Mediterranean* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 18.

mind: the first is about language as a female figure – the mother, the competitive co-wife and the mistress. Tell me more about her and about the female in your novels. Secondly, can we indeed become “enamored” with language? Does language change us, change our identities, or are we the ones who change languages when these languages meet in our narratives?

Dost: Let’s start with the second part of your question. Our relationship with languages is interactive and not just love and infatuation. It is a chemical relationship whose basic equation is: Thought produces language and language produces thought. Through this powerful dynamic, languages evolve and ideas change. Thus, language changes us because it produces modernist ideas, changes our societies, and sets either proper or unsound frameworks for their thinking patterns. There is no philosophy, for example, without a developed language rich in philosophical terms. And such is the case with the rest of the sciences.

Going back to your first question, I say: yes, language is a female. She is a fertile mother who gives birth to meanings and ideas. Without it, the wombs of our imaginations will not produce any idea or sentence. The femininity of language is the secret of its strength and permanence. In this sense, it cannot but be extremely tender and compassionate, with a lot of tyranny that takes us back to the goddesses of the early human ages. But there are chauvinistic tyrannical regimes that use this female in a different way, using her to enslave another language, to expel her and remove her to the margins or even beyond the margins. And this is exactly what happened with the Kurdish language in any place in which the Kurds have lived, especially in Turkey after the establishment of the republic. The Turkish language has become a nightmare that does not allow the Kurdish language to breathe. Turkish has become a hideous manifestation of attempts to dissolve the Kurdish identity and replace it with the identity of the ruler.

Askar: Our conversation leads to my following question: To what extent do you adopt the viewpoint of the Lebanese scholar Amin Maalouf in his book *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong* (2000), which also reminds me of Amartya Sen’s *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (2006). Both titles speak for their content. How do you anticipate the destiny of the Kurds in your rational and realistic views evident in your novels?

Dost: The Kurdish identity, despite centuries of being on the margins, has begun to dust off the ashes of that marginalization. It has survived due to three factors: first, some characteristics of the Kurdish personality; second, the psychological nature of the Kurdish people, the most important being their stubbornness, fighting spirit, and dignity; and third, geopolitical conditions. The political geography was a disaster for the Kurds on the one hand, but, on the other, it “protected”

them from ethnic cleansing because of the need of a Kurdish presence for the conflicting states, especially the Persian and Ottoman empires.

The future or fate of the Kurds will be determined by the way the Kurdish cultural and political elites deal with the events experienced by the Kurdish people. The Kurdish cultural elite has withdrawn from engaging in criticism and dissection of the political situation, favoring the silo of “passive neutrality” and leaving politicians to manipulate the fate of the Kurdish nation as they wish. As for the political elite, it has been repeating mistakes that have been made since the decisive battle of Chaldiran in 1514 when they first accepted playing the role of pawns in exchange for personal gains.

Askar: At the beginning of your work, and here I mean *Blood on the Minaret*, you alluded to the Kurdish conflict and the extremism of some factions or parties, which you later called “Kurdish fascism.” Your criticism has crystallized more in recent years into what looks like self-criticism. Tell us first, what do you mean by this expression, and do we today, Arabs and Kurds, specifically in this geography, need self-criticism? And can we say that you, and here I quote from al-Maghout’s broad title, tweet “outside the flock”?

Dost: I don’t like swarms! I fly alone. I am Jonathan Seagull and as soon as I enter the ranks of any flock I lose my privacy as a creator. I criticized Kurdish fascism in all of my war-related novels, especially, as you have indicated, in *Blood on the Minaret*. Kurdish fascism is an undeniable fact that is reflected in the control by an extremist Kurdish faction over the capabilities of the Kurdish people in Syria and the practice of organized terrorism against citizens, including kidnapping, imprisonment, torture, killing, absenteeism, and conscription of minors in the war and many more abuses. My national affiliation does not blind me from seeing this fact. I am not a folkloric nationalist, to chant with the Arab poet, “If you go out, I follow.” Rather, I repeat with Al-Mutanabbi, “I am not one of them though I live with them.”

Yes, we need criticism – not only to criticize, but also to fight against local fascisms cloned from the mother fascism. The emerging fascism should not be kept silent, it should be beaten to the cradle, so that it does not grow and swell and then swallow up everyone.

Askar: Allow me to bring you back to al-Maghout because of the immediacy of the question he posed in his play “Outside the Flock” (1999): Will “the stock of hatred among the antagonists or the stock of stupidity of the authority run out”?

Dost: The Authority is not stupid. Any authority in any part of this world possesses at least the amount of intelligence that enables it to remain in control of the destinies of millions of people.

Askar: And what about the stock of hate?

Dost: The stock of hatred will not expire for one reason: mankind feeds it by generating ever- renewable differences. Races, denominations,

creeds, and religions have caused wars, massive human patrimony, and deepened hatred among people. Every two neighboring countries have disputes that can only be solved by wars, hostile mobilizations, and feeding the stock of hatred. With all of this violence, human life cannot continue. There is also the dilemma of the human mind that, in so far as it can represent the good and the ideal, it represents absolute evil. The mind that invents a vaccine for the virus for the happiness of mankind is the same one that produces the hydrogen bomb to destroy it.

Askar: Finally, have you paid or are you afraid to pay the price of “flying high”?

Dost: The pleasure I find in flying away from the flock and in not surrendering to its destiny is enough for me. It is enough for me to feel the freedom that possesses my whole being and gives me the utmost ecstasy. Therefore, I am not afraid to pay any price. Because individual freedom is worth sacrificing “publicity” and the satisfaction of this or that group. The swarm intellectual, if I may use this expression to describe the authority intellectual or the flock educator, is bound and cannot fly away from his/her flock because s/he feels inferior in his/her heart, and therefore s/he accuses every bird that came out of the flock of treason. The swarm intellectual does not have the courage of the seagull Jonathan, nor the courage of the little ant Khabat, the heroine of my novella *Sira Khabat* (2020), and does not imagine him/herself outside the flock. The flock is his/her kingdom and outside the flock is an absolute nothingness for him/her. The real intellectual is a swarm alone. Yes, every real intellectual is a swarm in him/herself.

Askar: I see that you are presenting a significant point here which is the role of the intellectual and whether he/she is submissive or enlightening. Jonathan is outside the flock, and he, as you believe and as you have explained, is also a flock, a dissident. Can we agree on the title of this interview: Jan Dost, the out-of-flock dissident?

Dost: Let it be. Here, I'd like to point out that, in the epigraph of my novel *Martin Al-Saeed* (2012) which was reprinted and published in Tunisia under the title: *The Happy German*, I added a wonderful saying that is sometimes attributed to Spinoza. It says: “Crows fly in flocks, and the hawk flies alone.”

And though I don't pretend to be a hawk, I certainly do not accept to be a raven in any flock.