

Ahmad Azzam

Interview by Mustafa Can

Translated by Ian Giles



Ahmad Azzam. Photo: Anders Hansson

Everyone said it: ‘You’re going to be hit by terrible culture shock. The people in Sweden are peaceable but not especially social or hospitable. And it’s quiet, dark and cold for ten months of the year.’

‘Which bloody culture shock did they have in mind?’

36-year-old Palestinian-Syrian City of Refuge scholarship recipient Ahmad Azzam gesticulates so energetically that the ornate Arabic coffee pot in front of him almost gets swept onto the floor. He catches the pot and empties its final drops into his cup, gulps it down, asks the waiter for more coffee and then leans across the table before continuing:

‘The seasons, the cold – oh, I hope it snows soon – the dark and wind suit my personality. I can barely write a line when the weather is beautiful – I usually just read. And the streets and neighbourhoods in Gothenburg that are still cobbled remind me of the Old Town in Damascus. I’ve only been here for forty days, but I already feel at home.’

He gazes out of the window again, the light from the neon signage and the car headlamps forming Technicolor patterns in the pouring rain hitting the street outside. Despite the fact that it is only two o’clock in the afternoon, it is as if night has already fallen: the weather is mild, but it is grey and dark.

Ahmad suggested that we meet at the Mosaik art café in the Majorna area of the city. He says it is the first oriental place he found in Gothenburg. The owner is an artist, photographer and fellow Palestinian-Syrian who also lived in the unofficial Yarmouk refugee camp in Damascus, just like Ahmad. This could be a café in the Syrian capital: small, low tables, hand-made copper items, oil lamps, oriental carpets on the floor and walls, colourful mosaics dotted all over the place, hammered, round metal trays on which to lay out all manner of small Arabic dishes.

‘Although I like the weather, it can be hard ending up in a new city in a new country. The café is like a salon where most patrons are Arabic speakers, which makes it easier to build a relationship with your new city. Without people, you end up feeling alienated.’

Exile, flight and alienation are themes that come to characterise much of our conversation. And Ahmad is more than happy to talk. He rarely answers my questions directly – his digressions are many and lengthy. Sometimes he adds a ‘listen, this is what it’s really like’ or ‘for me to answer that question, I have to tell you about this and that’.

In his essay ‘The Biography That Never Begins’, Ahmad Azzam depicts his childhood in Damascus and what it means to belong to the Palestinian diaspora, who have homes in many countries but who have a collectively internalised sense of homelessness. The majority of Palestinians in Damascus live in refugee camps, but his family – a total of 11 people – lived in an ordinary Syrian neighbourhood. His father was a lawyer and his mother a Maths teacher.

‘Our house became something of a landmark. People would say things like “beyond the Palestinian house” or “before you get to the Palestinian house”. We were the “Palestinians” in that neighbourhood, even though I and my siblings were born there. When we visited our relatives in the camp at Yarmouk – which housed hundreds of thousands of people in one square kilometre in an impoverished and violent setting – we were the “Syrians”. We weren’t marked by the tough camp life, and we spoke a different dialect. But when I was 28, I moved to the camp. Despite the misery and the cramped conditions, I found life there to be more authentic. Politically and artistically, Yarmouk is perhaps the Palestinians’ most important place. Culture there is more than just a pleasant way of passing the time. Poetry, the art of the novel, film, theatre, painting and dance are all buzzing. And...’

I interrupt Ahmad and point out that I need some chronological context to keep up with these twists and turns, so that I can understand who and what he was before he wound up in Gothenburg.

He grins and points at his head with his index finger, as if telling me that there is lots going on inside it. All at once.

‘If you’re part of a diaspora, it means your upbringing and education become absolutely critical. Obviously, when I and many other Palestinians realise the dream of an independent Palestine, it’ll need more than just skilled craftsmen and academics, it’ll need artists. I wrote my first poem when I was ten years old, but in my family art was considered a pastime. It’s best to become a lawyer, doctor or engineer, which wasn’t what I wanted. That’s why I did Sociology at the University of Damascus.’

It was only when Ahmad travelled around Syria working in the field as an assistant social worker that he became aware of what kind of country he lived in. Poverty, social vulnerability, strict gender roles, extreme corruption... This was not the time to dream and reflect on existential issues like who you are, what life is about, and why. But what was he supposed to do with all the stories that wouldn’t fit into the doctored official reports?

‘The silent anger in the wider population was so tangible you could almost touch it. I wrote secret pieces that were almost like reportage for online newspapers critical of the regime. When the revolution broke out... It was the moment I had been waiting for. It was like being swept along in an enormous wave of different emotions: anger, longing, relief, anxiety, hope. Words don’t do justice to that feeling of gathering day in, day out in the streets and squares together with hundreds of thousands of others and screaming “Freedom”.’

Ahmad filled his Facebook page on a daily basis with his personal accounts of events, while also writing for online outlets critical of the regime. The spirit of the revolution and the conviction that the dictatorship would crash and burn had replaced fear: for the first time, he wrote articles under his real name.

However, he wasn’t naive. Everyone who was now openly demonstrating had become an enemy of the regime and risked imprisonment, torture, murder or ‘disappearance’ at any moment. Despite all the road blocks and military checkpoints, he was not arrested a single time.

‘In a violent, unpredictable environment,’ Ahmad explains, ‘you have to be crafty and audacious to avoid capture. In some situations, I played the role of a dedicated Bashar Al Assad sympathiser who would die for “the great leader”. Since Syria is under the control of Alawites, the way my girlfriend dressed was also an important factor – shorts, skirts, trousers, tops and t-shirts instead of headscarves and fully covering clothes. And she was always driving the car. The general perception in Syria was and remains that Sunnis dress more traditionally and that it’s always the man driving. Other times I would bribe the secret police to get a lift to or from work or other places.’

In January 2015, he made the decision to flee Syria. ID checks had intensified, the Syrian security services had become better organised and were using more advanced technical surveillance techniques. After several years of war, the already-notorious secret police had become even more uncompromising, human life had been devalued and the madness was accelerating. Anybody could be snared at any moment.

‘I’d been living like a rat for years. Well... I wasn’t living, I was surviving. I paid a considerable bribe to an official to get him to leave my public profile on ice for two months so that I had time to make plans and leave Syria.’

Every artist who openly expresses critical views about society and the regime in dictatorships like Syria is always faced with a dilemma. Where does the artist draw the line in terms of their critical activities, since their actions have an impact on the people in their direct surroundings?

Ahmad sighs loudly and sips his coffee as I ask whether the artist’s right to express themselves is more important than the safety of people they love. For the first time, he pauses for thought before replying:

‘My family questioned what I was doing. Cancer had taken Dad, but Mum and my older brothers went crazy one time when I ended up on TV. I was standing behind a well-known actor who was giving a fiery speech at a huge demonstration. “Do you want to be our undoing?” they yelled at me. Of course, I felt bad about it but their protests didn’t stop me. What else can I say...?’

Ahmad looks at me as if he is expecting an answer.

Did you never hesitate?

‘The revolt was about more than just me and my family. It was about existence itself for the young and future generations in the Middle East. That’s why the cause is greater than the individual. It wasn’t just about one single person’s life – it was part of something much bigger. Another important reason for engaging in self-censorship was and remains the fact that a democratic Middle East means, by extension, freedom and democracy for Palestine. Let’s be honest: for as long as chaos reigns in the Middle East, it’s easier for Israel to get away with its policy of occupation and argue in favour of its brutal policies towards and treatment of Palestinians.’

During the course of five years as a refugee in Turkey, Ahmad Azzam developed and widened both the mode of address and the language in his artistry. He wrote scripts for cartoons and TV shows broadcast on channels critical of the regime. He also produced artistic shorts, including the film ‘Yellow’, which is inspired by his friend’s experiences in a Syrian jail.

‘Wael, my friend, was a wreck of a human being when I met him in Turkey. He’d been in prison for years. He’d spend all day sitting in his flat staring at the walls. I tried to encourage him to go out, visit museums and cafés, to meet new people, to explore Gaziantep – the city that we lived in close to the Syrian border. He opened up to me and told me about the torture, the smells, how the prisoners slowly deteriorated into formless anonymity. He often returned to a particular colour in the cell.

Everything was yellow. The faces, the eyes, the skin – all of the bodies. Even the walls and the air. The cell was below ground, so the only rays of light that made it inside were from a small crack in one of the walls. Without sunlight, the muscles waste away and the skeleton becomes brittle.’ Ahmad suggested that they made a film based on Wael’s memories: perhaps it might be a way of processing the trauma?

‘I went out into the streets to search for actors and I had two conditions: they had to be skinny, and they had to have been in prison.’

He quickly found his cast for the film ‘Yellow’, which features no dialogue. When a new prisoner is put into the cell, the camera clearly shows that he has a different, healthier hue than those who were already captive. Slowly, with movements that are bordering on choreographed, the newcomer’s body is surrounded by the other prisoners. It is as if the still-healthy – yet tortured – body is tasked with irradiating their yellow bodies with health and freedom.

‘Wael was the director, while I wrote the script. We submitted the short to the film festivals and it won several prizes. Including in Canada. Wael was invited there, and he now lives in Toronto. He encouraged me to leave behind my refugee life in Turkey, and one of the things he did was to send me a link to ICORN. I filled in the application in 2016 – and now, four years later, I’m here. As soon as I landed in Sweden, something happened to my body. I felt lighter and...’

He stops himself mid-thought, something he does throughout our conversation, and tells me amid loud laughter that he needs something sweet. He returns with a plate of baklava and describes how for the first time in his life he feels wanted – that he is welcome in a community.

‘During the two years I’m going to spend in Gothenburg as a City of Refuge artist, I’ll be able to move around freely. If I want to head to Malmö or Stockholm to visit friends, then I don’t need to apply for permission and wait for two weeks to get my papers stamped. Out of the forty days I’ve been here so far, I’ve had no bodily or mental stress for thirty of them. No men in uniform out on the streets. No nightmares. No looking over my shoulder constantly. I’m not worrying about what’s waiting for me when I go around the street corner.’

Ahmad explains that life has always been about the here and now. He has never thought about what he will be doing in two or three years' time. The future is a luxury for people in safe and secure societies. The only thing troubling him is the novel he is writing. He is halfway through and unsure which way to take the narrative.

'What if it ends up being a disaster? But I still want to finish it and start work on the script for a feature film that I've been thinking about for ages. I'm full of stories that need to get out.'

Do you want to stay here and will you be applying for a residence permit when your scholarship ends?

'You mean, make Gothenburg my home?'

What is 'home' – is it primarily a physical place or is it a mental state?

'Home... home...'

Ahmad settles back in his chair and lets out a loud sigh. As someone who also belongs to a stateless people, I can only guess what is going on within him as he stares past me with a melancholy look on his face. While he sits there in silence, I look down at my notes where I've scribbled down passages from his essay 'The Biography That Never Begins'. Is it his grandmother he can see right now – the one who would remain on her prayer mat after prayers holding her string of beads, swaying her head back and forth and talking quietly to herself? In the light of the oil lamp, it was as if all of Palestine radiated from his grandmother's face: the extensive plantations, the vineyards, the olive groves. But also the massacres that she witnessed in the village just outside Akka, the banishment, the flight to Syria. Until her final days in exile, Ahmad's grandmother would leave her house every morning and he and other family members used to spend the day searching for her.

'When we found her in the evening and asked why she had been gone for so long, she would cry like the child she once was and answer in exhaustion and confusion: "I was on my way back to Palestine... But I got lost."'

'I have strong feelings for Akka,' Ahmad says in a subdued voice. 'The Palestinian city that I have never visited but that my family comes from. I was born and raised on stories from there. Perhaps my emotions are based on the pain and longing or the dreams of returning that the refugee is always connected to. Sometimes, I think that Akka is actually my only and true home. Another book that I've been writing and that I would really love to finish is based on stories from Akka. It's as if I've lived there, because I can smell the scents, can name the plants, know the streets and parks, can see the views, know where the mosques and churches are, and in which areas of the city this or that event took place.'

Ahmad reflects that perhaps a home is where he happens to live at any given time. Recently, he visited a friend who lives outside of Gothenburg. Two days

later when he returned to his apartment, he said to himself: ‘Ahmad, now you’re back home again.’

‘I should add that from a purely artistic point of view, exile – being a refugee, a stranger – is a bountiful source. It gives you a different perspective and accustoms you to the idea that identity is an incessant reciprocal action between humans and their surroundings. What you’re confronted with are other stories, conventions, social codes, different ways of mixing... And each community has its own myths, legends and historical truths. It may sound paradoxical, but... I’m comfortable with being a refugee just as long as I don’t have to be afraid. And so long as I have the chance to create.’

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Cultural Affairs Administration, City of Gothenburg

Norra Hamngatan 8, SE-411 14 Gothenburg, Sweden

Phone: +46 31-365 00 00

Email: kultur@kultur.goteborg.se

goteborg.se/kultur