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The Visa by Hisham Al Gakh

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I praise you *Allah*
And I fear none but You
And I know I have a destiny that I will surely meet
I was taught in childhood that my Arab identity is my honor
My dignity, and my guide
In school we used to repeat melodies
And sing to ourselves songs like
“The Arab world is my homeland, and all Arabs are my siblings”
And we used to draw the Arab with his head held high
With a chest that repels the howling wind, revered in his cloak
We were mere kids moved by our emotions
Lost in tales that recall our heroism
I was also taught that our land knows no borders
And that our wars were for the sake of Al-Aqsa Mosque
And that our enemy, Zionism, is a devil with a tail
And that the armies of our nation are as strong as the torrent
I will sail when I grow up
I will pass by Bahrain’s beach in Libya
I will harvest the dates of Baghdad in Syria
I will cross Mauritania to Sudan
I will travel through Mogadishu to Lebanon
Hiding my songs in my heart and soul
“The Arab world is my homeland, and all Arabs are my siblings”
But when I grew up, I was denied a visa to the sea
I didn’t sail
I was stopped at the counter with a red seal on the passport
I didn’t cross the border when I grew up
I grew up but the child in me did not grow up
Our childhood is at war against us
And ideas we learnt them from you
Oh rulers of our nation
Were we not brought up in your schools?
And taught your curriculums?
Did you not teach us that the sly fox is lurking, waiting for the stupid shepherds to sleep in
order to eat their sheep?

Did you not teach us that sticks are protected when bundled, weak when divided?
 Then why does this foolish division rule us?
 Did you not teach us to hold fast to the bond of *Allah* and unite?
 Why do you cover the sun with your flags?
 You have divided us, and among you we have become like animals
 The child in my heart will remain your enemy
 We have been divided by your hands, so may all your hands perish
 I am the Arab, and I feel no shame
 I was born in the green Tunisia from Omani origins
 And I am more than a thousand years old and my mother still bears children
 I am the Arab, I have palm trees in Baghdad, and my artery is in Sudan
 I am the Egyptian of Mauritania and Djibouti and Amman
 A Christian, Sunni, Shiite, Kurd, Druze, and Alawi
 I do not learn the rulers' names by heart as they leave
 We are sick of being scattered while all the other people are gathering
 You have filled our creed with lies, forgery and falsification
 Does the bond of *Allah* unite us, while FIFA's hand divides us?
 We have deliberately abandoned our religion and reverted to being *Aws* and *Khazraj*
 We entrust the ignorant among us, and we expect salvation from the fool
 Oh rulers of our nation, the child in my heart will remain your enemy, your judge
 And he will announce the union of all Arabs
 Then, Sudan will not be divided, and Golan Heights will not be occupied
 And Lebanon will not be broken and left alone to treat its wounds
 He will collect and plant the pearls of our Arabian Gulf in Sudan
 And their seeds will grow like wheat in the Maghreb
 People will extract olive oil in lofty, resilient Palestine
 And families will drink in Somalia forever
 From Algeria, he will light unwavering torches
 If Sana'a is suffering, then all our nation will be in pain
 He will ardently revolt against you
 He is the populace, not you
 He is the ruler, not you
 Do your legions hear me?
 Do the offices of your government's strongholds hear me?
 He is the populace not you
 And I fear none of you
 He is Islam, not you, so enough manipulation
 Or he will become an apostate
 And do not overestimate the patience of people
 And if the camel is slaughtered, you will neither get its milk nor its calves

I warn you

We will remain despite your attempts at division because this nation is connected

If your bonds weaken, still *Allah*'s bond will remain steadfast

I will remain

And so does my love for our Arab nation

We have been served humiliation in jugs

We have been served ignorance through supplications

We have grown tired of this serving and of those who serve it

I will grow up and leave the kid my brush and paints

He will continue painting the Arab with his head held high

And the sound of my songs will remain

“The Arab world is my homeland, and all Arabs are my siblings”

Hisham Al Gakh is an Egyptian poet who was born in October 1978. He has written about 30 poems, mostly in Egyptian dialect. In this poem entitled **التأشيرة** (“The Visa”), he harshly criticizes the Arab leaders for not only dividing the nation but also for preventing him from sailing to other Arab countries due to the visa restrictions imposed. In addition to that, he is one of the voices that chanted the union of Arab countries in the wake of the political tsunami that has shaken North Africa and the Middle East, thus toppling oppressive regimes and sparking off further uprisings around the Arab world. While Hisham Al Gakh’s poem rings alarm bells over certain issues such as dictatorships, identity, nationalism, and Arab union, it posits some challenges when translating it to English, notably on the stylistic and cultural level.

On the stylistic level, the metaphor, “my Arab identity is my honor / My dignity, and my guide,” is a tricky one. It cannot be translated literally because some interpretation is needed for the two words: **ناصيتي** and **مُخَوَاتِي**. In Arabic, the first one (**ناصيتي**) has many meanings: while it physically refers to the forepart of the head or the frontal lobe of the brain, it also has the meaning of dignity and pride. During the translation process, I chose the word “dignity” because it is related to the previous word “honor.” The second word, **مُخَوَاتِي**, cannot be translated literally as the address. Among the meanings associated with it, I can cite “home,” “guide,” and “direction.” Since the poem glorifies the united Arab homeland, I chose to translate **مُخَوَاتِي** as “guide” in the sense that the Arab identity is like his compass that enables him to situate and define himself in the world. In addition to that, satire was present in the poem in the line **عباءتكم - رعاها الله - للجمهور مُتَوَدًا سَيُخْرِجُ مِنْ**, which posits a challenge to me as translator because I had to understand the hidden meaning of the sentence first and then render its meaning into English.

On the cultural level, there are many concepts and words that are culture-specific, such as **عباءة** (*Abbaya*), **فتنة** (*fitna*), and **ديوان** (*diwan*). *Abbaya* is a traditional men’s cloak, popular in the Arab Peninsula. *Fitna* is a word that is fraught with connotations related to temptation, trial, affliction, distress, and civil wars. *Diwan* is the equivalent of an administrative office. While translating this poem, I domesticated these foreign concepts to make it easier for a non-Arab reader to understand. Besides that, I provided cultural explanations in the notes for other cultural references that were mentioned in the poem.

In a nutshell, this poem is a call for union and a pan-Arabist agenda that would shield the Middle East from future fragmentations, divisions, and, most importantly, sectarian strife fueled by foreign powers. Thus, translation in this context becomes a political and ideological act.

Translator's Notes

Al-Aqsa Mosque: Al-Aqsa is the third holiest site for Muslims. It is located in Jerusalem.

Sunni, Shiite, Kurd, Druze and Alawi: Sunni, Shiite, Alawi, and Druze are religious denominations in Islam while Kurds are an ethnic group in the Middle East.

FIFA's hand: FIFA is a metonymy in this poem and it refers to an intense World Cup qualifying game that opposed Egypt to Algeria and led to diplomatic tensions.

Khazraj: *Aws* and *Khazraj* were the two main pagan Arab clans in Medina.