



JUSTICE, REPRESENTATION, AND THE
CONSTANT SEARCH FOR HOPE
MOHAMMAD AL ATTAR

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I was one of the last speakers of the day, and it was my turn. We were assembled in the large colloquium room for informal and brief introductions. I had listened in awe to the Co-Fellows I was meeting for the first time as they presented their research topics, finding myself overcome by the realization that this was my first time in the company of so many distinguished academics. Coming into the fellowship, my relationship with academia could be described as lukewarm, verging on sceptical. Now, here I was, immersed in a world of distinguished academics!

As I prepared to speak, I watched my planned remarks vaporize. Instead, I heard myself saying: *“If I ever seem grim in the morning, rest assured it has nothing to do with you or the space we find ourselves in. I just tend to work at night and abhor early rising. Also, I will unfortunately not be sharing this charming compound with you because I already reside in*

Berlin and would rather keep living in my humble home near Hermannstraße in Neukölln. By the way, Hermannstraße is the complete opposite of Grunewald, where we now find ourselves. It is poor, grimy, and hosts a mix of immigrants, workers, and students.”

As I sat back down, it dawned on me that I had substituted my polished notes about my upcoming plans for the year with trifling personal detail about my strange lifestyle and home address. What exactly possessed me in that moment, I can't be sure. But I did feel a need to be frank right from the start. An inner voice had guided me towards spontaneity – to ask these walls to embrace me as I am, to free us all from the binds of formalism, to speak freely, unencumbered by the weight of this prestigious institution and its famed history in science and academia. I took a gamble on the place without knowing what its halls had in store. It turns out my hunch was right; the gamble paid off.

Did I make the right choice staying in Neukölln rather than moving to Grunewald? In retrospect, I certainly missed out on the full experience. For my colleagues, Grunewald was much more than academic discussions and Tuesday Colloquia. There were lunches, ping-pong tournaments, a running club, reading sessions, frequent meetings, and impromptu meet-ups in the institute's halls or the Fellows' apartments – all crucial ingredients for creating this small community. I feel fortunate to have belonged to this community, to have exchanged ideas, attended cultural events, and walked Grunewald's streets and woods. But I know that, because I did not live there, my presence was less tangible.

My work schedule also placed me in the White Villa in the evenings, where I worked through the night and departed in the early hours of the morning, without witnesses to my comings and goings. Grunewald was my personal parallel universe, a unique opportunity to experience parallel time. I must confess that I feared growing accustomed to this parallel universe – with its unique space-time, the boundless kindness and support of its inhabitants, its abundance of books, its infinite horizons for contemplation – because I knew it was temporary. I needed to steady myself with a foot planted firmly in Neukölln, home of the real world, the one I am used to, in all its beauty and crassness. My (almost) daily journey between both worlds unearthed a new way of seeing and thinking about Berlin, the city I was exiled to years ago.

I have not visited Grunewald since the fellowship ended, though I am but a single train ride away. I am certain I will do so soon, reuniting with Barbara, Daniel, Katharina, and other Fellows. I imagine we will laugh as we reminisce. But for now, something keeps me away. Maybe I am afraid of acknowledging how much I miss this parallel universe, how much I didn't know I would miss it until it was gone.

As I reflect on the year that flew by, I am shocked at how little time I actually spent with the institute's team. Aside from the Thursday dinners and Tuesday Colloquia, I had limited interactions with Barbara, Daniel, Katharina, Sophia, Iris, Petria, Vera, the staff at reception, the amazing librarians, the incredible IT department, and Dunia and the dedicated kitchen staff. Yet even if infrequent, these encounters made an impression on me. I felt camaraderie, support, and the certainty that I would always find someone ready to help if needed. Such a sensation is far from trivial; one rarely comes across it, and I will forever be grateful for the generosity I received.

One day, as I stopped by her office on the way up to mine on the top floor of the White Villa, Sophia Pick noted that I seemed restless, deflated. She said I would do well to remember that in this place, should I need it, someone would jump out of the bushes and hold my hand. Sophia's metaphor was charming, and I came to realize it was no exaggeration.

When I first learned I would be a Fellow, I was both excited and anxious. My mind went to two former Fellows, giants in Syrian writing and thought to whom I owe a great deal of my education and political awareness: Sadiq Jalal al-Azm and Yassin al-Haj Saleh.

I met Sadiq Jalal al-Azm only once. Yet I read his work at a young age, so it made a deep impression on me, especially by how critically and boldly it challenged orthodoxies and taboos. Two books in particular come to mind: *Self-Criticism after the Defeat* and *Critique of Religious Thought*. As I was writing this text, Salman Rushdie suffered the assassination attempt he had feared ever since Khomeini issued his infamous fatwa against him in 1989. Al-Azm was among the first in the Arab world to write unequivocally in defence of Rushdie and his right to write, and in opposition to the fatwa and similar attempts to silence intellectual battles by the executioner's sword. These positions are best articulated in al-Azm's *The Mental Taboo: Salman Rushdie and the Truth Within Literature*. Al-Azm also drafted a statement signed by 50 Syrian intellectuals denouncing the fatwa, in defence of Rushdie and freedom of opinion. Coming at a time when Hafez al Assad ruled Syria with an iron fist and in strong alliance with Khomeinist Iran, this initiative spoke volumes about the courage of al-Azm and the other signatories.

As for Yassin al-Haj Saleh, our friendship can be traced to our very first meeting, in 2003 in Damascus, a few years after his release from 16 years of detention in the Assad regime's prisons. From my first engagement with Yassin's early political writings, I have not stopped learning from him, not only through his work, but also through his life. I owe him the example of his personal courage and lucidity in the face of tyranny, despair, and

bitterness. What Yassin was forced to go through is unfathomable, but he has always remained coherent, thoughtful, and able to craft meaning even in the darkest of times.

Knowing these two men had walked the Wiko's halls overwhelmed me sometimes as I walked the same halls, thinking that we now had this experience in common, just as we did our Berlin exile. Sadiq al-Azm passed away in December 2016 in exile in Berlin. Yassin continues to live in Berlin, like me unable to return to Syria. His presence in Berlin, the gift of our human, intellectual, and political partnership, is invaluable.

During my year at Wiko, I worked on three themes in parallel. The first was Justice. Not in its abstract sense, but in what the word represents in the current Syrian context. It was Germany's Koblenz trial that inspired this theme. I was captivated by the story of a fleeting chance encounter between a victim and an executioner. Here were two people who had found themselves in roles not of their own choosing, tried to escape them by fleeing Syria, believing they had left the past behind, only to find themselves coincidentally staring at each other in exile. How is justice achieved through this confrontation, and what does it mean for a country that has been destroyed and fragmented like Syria? A country teeming with victims and torturers who must one day find a way to live side by side.

The second theme I worked on, in the form of the draft of a theatrical text, was Representation. I was interested in the power that artists possess – consciously or not – in times of turbulent wars when they find themselves authoring novels and making films and plays about people who have no voice or platform of their own. Artists reap fame and even awards for their work, while their original characters remain in the shadows, voiceless, alone in facing the tragic reality that the artwork tried to shed light on. In my script, one of the sons of a main character in an award-winning documentary film seeks revenge against the director who used his family's story to make the film. The director harboured no ill intention; in fact, he was driven by sincere political concern. Yet the lines between the artistic, the political, and the moral become blurred for him as more opportunities for funding and fame flow in. I am deeply concerned with the boundaries of artwork that builds on real stories or makes real people its main characters. Where do they intersect and where do they part ways? What is the nature of the power held by the writer or director in these contexts? And how should we think of the freedom of artistic experimentation: is it absolute, or should it be subject to ethical standards in works of this kind?

The third theme that absorbed me, and continues to do so, is Hope. It is the most pressing of the three and I have failed to bring any ideas into focus. All the stories I ideated,

I failed to finish. Perhaps this continued failure to write about hope says something about how difficult it is for me to summon it today. I find myself constantly contemplating hope, my need (our need) for it, and my concern that I should not create it as an illusion.

Every time I told Eva there was no hope that I would ever master German, she would reply without fail, “*Doch*, you will master it.” Eva is the German language teacher at Wiko, and despite my feeble efforts to learn the language during our weekly lessons, she has not given up on me. With her gentle smile and insistence that I can learn, Eva taught me a lesson in hope.

Less than a week after the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we received an invitation to gather in the large colloquium room to reflect collectively. I had been seething since day one. And it wasn't simply a case of *déjà vu*. I was most angry that no one had listened to us Syrians when we warned repeatedly of the consequences of overlooking the atrocities of Russia's brutal military intervention in Syria in support of the Assad regime. We had pointed not only to Russia's grave violations, but also to the dangers of Putin's growing ego and sense of impunity. My frustration grew at the contrast between the discourse that accompanied the arrival of refugees from Ukraine and the one that had prevailed in Europe on the eve of the arrival of refugees from Syria and other sites of conflict and war in the Middle East.

All those present that day spoke with open minds and hearts. Participating allowed me to release the anger. We could do nothing meaningful to stop the war that day. But I remember leaving the room grateful that the institute was at least not ignoring what was happening or dismissing it with the pretext of not disturbing the calm we needed for our scientific and academic endeavours. This event signalled a clear recognition that no concern is greater or more important than neighbouring war and human tragedy. Quick on its feet, the institute went on to host several writers and academics who had been forced to flee with their families from Ukraine, as well as from Russia because they opposed Putin's war. This initiative was very generative for me personally. I recall writing to Barbara to thank her and to express how proud I felt to be a Fellow of the institute that day.

I will miss many things about Grunewald. My neat little office on the top floor of the White Villa. Our Thursday dinners, especially those on warm summer and spring nights, are hosted in the garden that is only a stone's throw from the banks of Lake Halensee.

Above all, I will miss the entire Wiko team and its hospitality as well as my Co-Fellows, whom I now count as friends. It is no easy feat to gain new friendships and to be able to grow them in an atmosphere of trust and affection. Ours blossomed in the institute's halls, offices, and apartments, as we debated, laughed, and ate, but also as we expressed vulnerability, doubt, and anxiety – about our work's worth and feasibility, about our lives post-Grunewald in an ever wilder and more turbulent world. Scattered across the globe, we are bound by precious memories of the year and a renewed hope of reuniting in Grunewald, in that garden around Lake Halensee on a moonlit summer eve.