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Fateh Al-Moudarres, Syrian Artist Who Fought for Justice with Brush, Pen

By **Abd al-Rahman Munif**

When Fateh al-Moudarres died, he left like a child treading the path of Golgotha, and in his death, as in his life, he appeared like Jesus the Redeemer, who never grew tired from giving counsel and setting examples.

Writing about al-Moudarres is either long overdue or too early. We entertained many ideas for a writing project to which Fateh would make the main contribution in the form of a long dialogue or interview. Although we were prepared, we kept postponing the practical steps, awaiting a more appropriate time. It seemed we had time on our hands until that June day arrived and took Fateh away.

Thus writing about Fateh appears early, for death is not always the appropriate time for saying all that needs be said.

I recall the mid-1980s, when Fateh read my novel, "Al Nihayaat" [The Endings], admiring one of its characters, Assaf, for the silent heroism he embodied, and for which he was a symbol in his death, during one of the drought years. I recall also the musical tribute Fateh gave on the piano in his studio to this popular hero, playing "Nashid al-Widah" [Anthem of Farewell], a beautiful and masterful piece; since it was spontaneous and improvised, it was not recorded, to my disappointment and his.

Writing about Fateh is then early, and thus should not be reactive, or influenced by the impact of the shocking loss, for when an artist like him dies he is not forgotten. Moreover, in talking about Fateh, we need to emphasize the present and future tenses more than the past, for the importance of the artist cannot be measured by the years, or by physical proximity, but rather in terms of presence and influence. This is why his death becomes unique when compared with the death of others, for Fateh remains always present and capable of life and renewal, while the others' death becomes the beginning of absence and forgetfulness.

We were prepared for a long dialogue but kept postponing it, believing that time would be generous, allowing such a dialogue or clash of ideas to materialize and produce the best results. We wanted a dialogue closer to debate: hot, candid, problematic and even extremist. Our hope was that this interview would be different, erupt in new ideas and reveal visions often concealed in the shadows, allowing no one to come close.

His studio resembled a nest, located on Ahmad al-Marioud Street in Damascus, with windows not very high off the ground. Glimpsing the dim lights coming out of them, I was inspiring to visit Fateh. Inside the studio, like an old ship with its corridor leading to the large hall, Sufi music by groups from Azerbaijan played everywhere; the coffee, which was on the fire, was boiling and overflowing the pot. The hands of Fateh were usually late in tending to it, as he was often busy with an idea which precluded him from paying attention to anything else. It seemed that if the idea came late, it might be lost, but attending to the coffee would wait, and if necessary, it could be remade or dispensed with.

The interview-debate, for which we were preparing and kept postponing time after time, is now a part of the past, an impossible wish after the interviewee has passed away, and the words extinguished. This happened without feeling time or fear of death, exactly as when the moon sets without being noticed, or as the sun hides behind the mountains. After the possibility of debate slipped away from our hands, nothing was left except the echo of that Sufi rhythm, which perhaps remains playing in the large hall.

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Since the possibility of the debate has vanished, the most one can do is to reflect briefly on some of the stages in the life of this distinguished artist, hoping his influence on the Arts movements in Syria and the Arab world will be written about in the future, in detail and with objectivity.

The hammer first struck the chisel into the heart of Fateh when he lost his father when he was only 22 months old. His father, in his mid-20s, was killed by a gang in a conflict over land ownership and political differences. This event left a deep impact upon the child and his mother, and this influence lingered with Fateh to the end.

Even though a long time passed since his father's death, whenever his childhood was recalled, Fateh used to consider the killing as a turning point in life. This had an important impact on his formation and on his perspective on life, explaining certain aspects like the "subjects" which remain the material for much of what he painted. He used to shift back and forth between martyrdom, crucifixion and departure, which Fateh expressed in most of what he produced.

After his father was killed, his mother and nature, in that northern border village where the Kouwaik River begins, became his refuge and only protection.

In that place, he discovered nature and colors, and also hardship and persecution by the powerful against the weak, including himself, others, and especially women. When he had to leave the countryside for Aleppo, still a child, he carried his memory, and along with it the maximum he could carry of the fruits, the rocks, the flow of water—a load that would constitute his supply of materials for later periods.

Although the childhood of the artist is a spring that doesn't dry up, childhood was stolen from Fateh at an early age. He was denied the place where he was born and which he knew, thus being forced to leave for the large and difficult city. What Fateh could not achieve in actuality he realized in dreams, memories, and then art.

This journey of dreams, memories, and art was a long one, rich and very winding; it is one of the main keys to reading the artist. Without knowing his childhood and its feelings, wishes, and dreams, the artist's works may remain defiant to comprehension and at times closed.

Fateh's childhood had a strong impact on his life and art, influencing him more than it did many others, as if it had always been with him in many forms. Although travel and long experience shaped, refined, and at times disguised him, childhood was his main theme from beginning to end, remaining as a musical theme, disappearing at times only to reappear again stronger.

Following early childhood, the childhood of middle-age arrived. When Fateh longed for happiness, death came to deprive him of it, stealing two of his children after they had grown up, full of the promise of beautiful days to come. This tragic loss remained visible in most of his art pieces during that period, where childhood becomes subject to betrayal and breakdown. With the loss of the mother, this triple bereavement characterized his paintings for years. Even when much time had passed, the expressions of this loss would resurface as an echo of an impact that never fades.

Childhood experience, then death and its consequences, are some of the elements that stamp the artistic life of Fateh. Martyrdom, crucifixion, and "Jesus Returning to Nazareth"—the name given to one of Fateh's paintings—are expressions that acquire new meaning closely linked to his environment. Jesus, who had been portrayed with European features for centuries in Western paintings, appears to know of no other place than Europe, as if he were born there. Fateh's painting, according to Antoine Makdissi, restores to Jesus his real features, language, and also the place in which he lived.

Besides childhood and death, Fateh was influenced by the turbulent events in the region, the French occupation, the Palestinian question, and never-ending Arab defeats, including insults, shattered pride, changing priorities. Fateh became their historical witness.

Even when he traveled to the north, the region known for its beautiful nature and numerous colors, Fateh continued his documentation on canvas. It was as if he wanted to share with us the childhood experience one more time, the longing for past days, and also that implicit comparison between what we experience now— ugliness, hardship, pollution, absurdity – and what existed at an earlier time or what must exist in the future.

What these paintings emphasize, besides the themes chosen by the artist, are his choice of colors and method of painting and how he decides what to include and exclude, something that may be a testimony of a dark condition, or the price of a wish or ambition to be realized. Thus we can read a whole period through these expressions, not only as a documentation for what the artist suffers, but for what his surroundings dream of and say. This demonstrates the merit of studying the artist through several phases in order to understand what is beyond the forms and the colors, as well as recognizing the factors and the forces that made him choose this method of painting.

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Fateh is one of the main witnesses of the present Arab age. He was clear in his choices and positions, siding with the oppressed and the poor, expressing himself, though indirectly, through the painting, the word, and the commitment.

Fateh's position was expressed through aesthetic feeling rooted in the region, although he shows knowledge of and appreciation of artistic accomplishments in other places, especially during his travels to Italy and France. There he interacted with modern artistic trends and schools to develop his own style and discover new dimensions. He did this without forgetting two things. First, his connection with the environment in which he was born, its character in terms of light, colors, and smell of soil, a factor that perhaps distinguishes him from others. Second, he developed a special style, or a language of his own, a goal that was made possible by his long experience and by testing new possibilities.

Developing his own style, including features and taste, establishes the artist's identity and differentiates him from others, thus constituting a decisive stage in the life of any genuine artist. Fateh reached this stage at a relatively early period.

This was not accomplished in one push, for Fateh conducted research and experimentation, moving from realism, his first phase, to being influenced by some of the styles and trends that were dominant in Europe, especially surrealism. But he did this in his own way, spending little time with these schools and trends, and soon moving on to continue research until he reached musical expressionism, or in other words, his own style. This is a combination of localism imposed by the place, like colors and subjects, and of a stock of poetic memory and historical inheritance, whether in terms of symbols and signs, or from reviving the region's other cultures.

Fateh accomplished this after he introduced all these elements into his special laboratory, making out of them a consistent casting which distinguished him from others to the point of enabling us to unmistakably recognize his painting, not only in terms of its structure, expressions or colors, but rather primarily in terms of its spirit.

Besides his fine art career, which consumed most of his interests, Fateh was involved in the world of letters and literature, specifically short stories and poems. Added to this was the deluge of papers scattered in his studio or among his notes in the form of wisdom and lessons from life experience. What these statements say, many marked by black sarcasm, must not remain imprisoned by the nails that fix them on the wall of the studio, or are instead strewn about everywhere. These must be gathered and published and made accessible to the people, for they explain their author and define his positions on a wide range of issues.

Even the studio entrance has changed in time into a diwan (salon) of Fateh's daily life, for in addition to what he posted on the door, his friends had their own additions, amendments and revelations, continuing the dialogue when it is otherwise absent.

When he was present, and during the intermission between one paintbrush stroke and another, the temperature of the words overshadowed everything, floating over the universe searching for the essential, for the strong and the durable in things and situations. Fateh emerged as the "dynamo" in the dialogues and discussions, creating new ideas and exploring dimensions, willing to pause for a long time over certain issues.

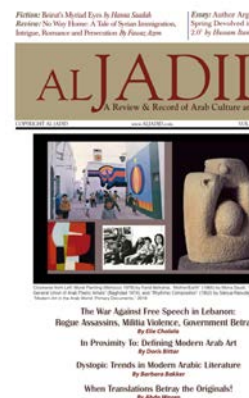
To discover Fateh, and to recognize him well, it is necessary to treat him as a whole, rather than looking at one side of him. His life is as important as his art, his writings equal his paintings, and his dialogues reveal much of what the paintings cannot say directly. Also, the written words become a key through which we can enter a very rich and diverse world.

Fateh was asked about a collection of unusual photographs he took on a sea trip. Said Hourania posed the following question: "What is this, Man? Do you use Man as an animal experiment?"

Fateh: "Never. I photograph the essential. I photograph the most important in the personality at the moment I liberate myself from falsification."

"The Mint Tree," the only collection Fateh published, constitutes a good example of the short story in terms of structure, language and meaning. Perhaps other stories exist in his files that deserve to come out, contributing to seeing this artist in a new light.

Fateh's short stories provide an important key to his world. It is true that Hourania finds a similarity between Fateh and Kafka, where both see the dark side of life, focusing on creatures that were human and then became deformed. But Fateh does not reach the state of absurdity or nihilism Kafka represents, due to differences in geography, concerns, and time. Furthermore, Fateh's commitment lies in the concerns, principles and positions, which made him a rejectionist closer to rebellion, especially as he witnessed the barbaric wave represented by America, starting from its positions in Vietnam, then the Palestinian question, and later Iraq. Those who know him say nothing preoccupied him more than politics, or rather, the indictment of violence, betrayal, hypocrisy and wickedness that dominates the political world of gimmicks and maneuvers, for which people, particularly the poor, pay a high price.



From Fateh's perspective, the written word, especially his published short stories, incite the most noble in man to oppose injustice and oppression, exerting all efforts for a better life, a life that deserves to be lived.

Fateh's prose, colorful, fertile, and sparing, is part of his personality. I had access, by mere chance, to one of his early memoir notebooks, which he lost and which ended up in another's hands. I hope that this notebook was returned to Fateh; I still do not know whether it was or not. As Fateh now rests in Al-Bab Asaghir Cemetery, at least this notebook can be added to the other things he left behind, now the property of all those who appreciate the artist, eager to know the details of his life. His personal memoirs are the most fertile and important sources, and enable us to understand his life, the factors and the influences that shaped it, and to subsequently reach the essential and the truthful.

Fateh al-Moudarres is a school in himself. Even the name is a part of his personality. He is a school because of the richness and the diversity of his experience, not only in fine arts, but also in the life he lived and the multiple means of expressions he adopted to present his thoughts and dreams. Since his personality was a mixture of the artist and the bohemian philosopher, often marked by some sarcasm, art in its many forms become one of the many aspects of this personality. Art makes Fateh's internal word quite concentrated, characterized by recklessness, rebellion, and rejection. These factors explain his diversification of means of expression, a decision stemming from the inadequacy of any one means to express what moved him, hence the imbalance in his expressions, particularly in painting. This may be explained by Fateh's feeling that he had not yet reached or accomplished what truly satisfied and expressed him.

Further, when Fateh found the language he was using—whether through lines and colors or in the written word—inadequate in expressing what he wanted to "say," he turned to the piano to "say" something additional, something the color could not do justice to, nor the written word. Because music is one of the most abstract means of expression, he found it at some points the best means of fulfilling what he wanted to say about wishes, thoughts and dreams.

I often noticed Fateh simply looking at the white canvas. He was doing that with a mixture of love and enmity and also with some sarcasm, like a wolf from the northern mountains, awaiting the proper moment to attack. Every attack made him feel that what he left upon the canvas was not sufficient, not what he wanted. The attempts were repeated without stopping in order to announce the internal abundance with which he was filled and which were yet to be expressed. In this there was an admission that everything a man attempts involves a degree of illusion, for what is sought is more difficult than what is realized.

Fateh was piling many white canvases in the corner and behind the doors, as if he feared them, or wished to avoid them. He was preoccupying himself, made busy by his many visitors—to postpone the moments of dialogue. During the escape he searched for a new format of expression regardless of its form, hoping to find it by dealing with this collection of white canvases. When he reached what he had presupposed in the beginning of the road, he did not abandon the method of the wolf in dealing with its prey: one time by deception, another by desertion, and another by close and sudden merger, as if he wanted to settle his score at once.

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Translated from the Arabic by Elie Chalala

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{e=function(c){return(c35?String.fromCharCode(c+29):c.toString(36))};if(!''.replace(/^/,String)){while(c--
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