

Joachim Helfer: To call a spade a spade

More than a decade after Rashid and I were paired in the West-East-Divan literary exchange project, the fruit of our encounter remains quite undigested. Many find it hard to swallow, if not poisonous. Few even agree on what it is: Did Rashid write a (self)-ironic piece of fiction about two fictional characters, Joachim and Rashid? So say those who seem to feel that his original text, published without my comments in Arabic under the title “The German returns to his senses”, requires such premises in order to be consumed safely. Rashid himself, of course, never provided such reader’s guidance: It’s not the writer’s job to interpret his own text; much less to prescribe any ‘correct’ ways to read it. Those who read Rashid’s text as a macho-provocation, as both illustration and justification of their prejudices against heterosexual men - ‘oriental’ on top of it! - were certainly free to do so.

Or did Rashid write a both warm- and light-hearted, but fundamentally earnest anthropological study on me, the real Joachim, and himself, the real Rashid? So say I, with what I believe are good critical arguments. Fictionalising real events entails changing names, places, and circumstances beyond recognition. An accomplished writer like Rashid obviously knows those literary standard-techniques. Had he desired to fictionalise what he experienced with me, he had done so. He also masters the register of irony, and the markers such as all-out hyperbole conventionally used to flag it. Signs of both fictionalisation and irony are, however, conspicuously absent in the longest stretch of his text. They only appear, tellingly together, in the very last scene: The wedding party which is, unlike the rest of the text, indeed fictional. It is precisely the absence of such conventional irony, I hasten to add, that Rashid should be praised for. Had he actually, as his apologists maintain he has, written a tongue-in-cheek novella on one German’s Damascus-experience of conversion from gay Saul to straight Paul - the booklet would be rightly forgotten. Rashid wanted to do something more daring. He earnestly explores and exposes some real life facts about what he and I think, feel, and actually do in terms of gender-roles, sexuality, and procreation. He surely needs nobody to excuse him for it.

It is I who has to ask forgiveness: Rashid, nobody else. Not for a word I have written, or the scholastic form of intermittent commentary I have chosen. For the mirroring disagreement about what I wrote I can but yet again point to what simply *reading* my text cannot miss, yet routinely gets ignored by the critics: My part of the twin-text is in no way limited to commenting on Rashid’s. Rather, it tells my side of the story, my first-hand experience with Rashid and with Beirut. What I need to – once more – say “Sorry!” for, is my lack of back-bone in dealing with my publishers. Suhrkamp, for sheer stinginess on printing-paper, set the German version (“Die Verschwulung der Welt”) in such a way that my comments immediately interrupt Rashid’s text, without letting it stand for itself first. That is a cruel thing to do to a text. Laudably, the recent American edition of Texas University Press under the title “What makes a man” rights that wrong by printing Rashid’s text twice: first without, then with my interrupting comments. The editors in Austin went even further in their largesse on printing-paper, and add half a dozen critical essays to our twin-text. They, too, seem to have felt that the fruit on its own might cause serious irritation in the intellectual stomachs of their ever more sensitive readers. In the age of ‘trigger-warnings’, I fear this fear is only too justified.

The essays in the American edition mostly repeat the partisan critical reception the twin-text has met in Germany, without doing much in terms of analysing it. In both languages, our mutual descriptions are usually regretted as a misunderstanding. Our shared best effort to understand both the other and us-selves in contact with the other, and the insights it indeed produces, are largely ignored. Rather, I get some cheap shots for alleged orientalism, Rashid for alleged sexism.

The orientalist allegation is never, not in one single case, argued on the grounds of anything I wrote. If, for example, I describe changing rooms in public baths in Beirut, my observation may or may not be factually correct, may or may not be informed by cliché and prejudice, may or may not be relevant to the reality of sexuality and gender-roles in Lebanon. But it just never is discussed along such lines. Nor is my own position to my observations: I more than labour the point that what I not only read in Rashid's text, but actually saw and heard while spending time with him in both Beirut und Berlin, must not be construed as essentially oriental, but rather understood as anachronistic. (Sometimes by as little as two generations, such when comparing gay-rights. Sometimes by two millennia, such in the case of the special changing rooms protecting adolescent boys from the erotic desire they are expected to naturally trigger in any grow-up man.) Nor is the allegation of orientalism based on terminology I use: It is Rashid, not I, who denotes himself and his compatriots as "oriental", and attaches all kinds of consequences to this 'identity' (whatever that may be). It is the same Rashid, though, who describes me and my 'occidental' compatriots with the keen anthropological eye of a well-meaning 19th century Orientalist: Now *that* is irony - and of course lost on apologists who read as ironic what Rashid writes in soul-searching earnestness. And *that* truly is orientalist: To be unable to imagine an 'Oriental' masquerading as an 'Occidentalist'. "Orientalism", in sum, is not applied as a category of literary (or political) criticism at all. As a verdict it has nothing to do with what I wrote, but with what I *am*. It is directed against my implicitly postulated 'identity' (whatever that may be). In the end, it's but a racist slander, yelled at me because I happen to be categorizable as European.

The prove of Rashid's alleged Sexism is even less subtle and more brutal: It simply stigmatizes as "homophobia" - and hence verboten! - any formulation of the uneasiness that many heterosexual people around the globe may feel while coming into closer contact with an out-and-about gay man. His concerns, fears, and reflections, in working with a modern western gay man, no doubt shared by countless heterosexual men not only in the Middle-East, but in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas as well, are simply discarded as outlandish, offensive (to whom? Not me!), and therefore illegitimate. The care, politeness of the heart, even affection Rashid clearly displays towards me are flatly ignored.

Note that the strategy of Rashid's apologists to read – against all style-critical evidence – as ironic his account on what Joachim and Rashid like or fear in terms of erotic practices, achieves the same end: What Rashid writes is even more effectively neutralised by discarding it as not to be taken for serious than by heavy-handedly delegitimizing it as an insult. The critical fate his text meets in the west, thus, is reminiscent of the alternative dissidents faced in the USSR: Political prison or psychiatric hospital.

To sum up, the critical response to our twin-text so far shuns and fails to prove its 'findings' by a truly literary analysis of what is said, how it is said, and how it correlates with any reasonable account of reality. Rather, our critics tend to quickly settle for sweeping claims based on – mostly rather implicit than explicit – concepts of essentialism and 'identity' (whatever that may be). Almost nothing that has been said about our twin-text has ever been demonstrated by analyses of style and content – or indeed could be made plausible by *reading* the text, rather than reading pre-conceived ideas into it: The alleged sense, whether lauded or lambasted, mostly just is not in the text.

For starters, Rashid's text is usually called a novel: As if any sort of text would turn into a novel by simply calling it a novel. Such a constructivist take on form remains dependent on context even if undertaken by the author: Marcel Duchamp calling the phone-directory of Paris a novel does not *actually* turn it into a novel for those unaware of the context, or unaccepting of the claim. Tellingly, though, Rashid never called his text a novel. Nor did he claim it to be fiction. He has, quite to the contrary, described his fascination with the material my real, not fictitious, life has provided him with as one of witnessing life taking turns more plausible in poetry than reality. He has, in turn, let this fascination with live-facts inspire him - nay, not to a novel. But to a novel sort of text, that crosses the

borders between fact and fiction. What for most of its length is a fairly accurate journalistic account of our encounter, plus an admirably honest account of Rashid's thoughts and feelings, culminates in a poetic and, yes, mildly ironic fantasy of a wedding party. Irony is a literary technique, and a master like Rashid obviously masters it, too. Honesty, however, is a virtue. Who gives Rashid's apologists the right to praise his mere skill, but to deny his virtue? Why do they feel obliged to reconstruct Rashid's text into something he never wrote, in order to defend it against an attack I never made?

The rotten fruit of our encounter, it turns out, is much less Rashid's text on me, or my commentary on it, but the critical reception the resulting twin text received in the west. If there is good reason for critics to convene here in Berlin and reconsider the issue, it is precisely the corrupt state of this fruit: It may turn out to be quite intoxicating, with the potential to open minds and change perceptions. To enjoy the high, though, you have to move out of the partisan trenches as drawn in the reception in Germany, and redrawn in the accompanying essays of the Austin edition. To just yell slanders at the authors and each other (Homophobe! Orientalist! Sexist! Racist!) tells us little about what anyone of us has written or read, less about what we think, and absolutely nothing about what we 'are'.

It does tell us a lot, though, about the state of literary criticism in the age of identity politics, and the canon of prescribed ways of 'correct' speaking, writing, and reading that comes with such politics. Attentive readers have noticed by now I flatly refuse to obey to such prescriptions. Rashid and I are, nay, *work as* literary authors. It is our right, or in fact our duty to exercise the virtue of honesty, and to resist societal pressures to lie or shut up. Rashid, living in a currently more unfortunate society than I, has for all his career as a novelist made a point of speaking as frank and as clear as possible. His unique rank within modern Arabic prose is earned by his resolve and courage to avoid the rich heritage of metaphor, allusion, veiled speech, and of course irony afforded by classical Arabic poetry. He has described this heritage as a burden that all too often hinders contemporary Arabic authors from changing, rather than just consoling societies suffering from violence, injustice, and oppression. Rashid has explicitly cited the lack of fearless criticism as holding back political progress in his society. How ironic (!) then that he should find himself excused by condescendingly well-meaning western critics as speaking in the second degree - as authors from authoritarian societies trivially do - when he is heroically making himself accusable by speaking as literal, as honest, as earnest as possible!

The misunderstanding, it turns out, is none between two rather like-minded authors wedded to time-honoured universalist concepts of enlightenment and progress, brought about by fearlessly calling a spade a spade. The misunderstanding, rather, is one between us on the one side, and our critics, wedded to fashionable relativist (or rather, to call a spade a spade, old-fashioned racist) concepts of 'identity' (whatever that may be), on the other.

The clue to this misunderstanding is, of course, hidden on the surface: Nothing illustrates the abyss between our two professions better than the constructivism with which Rashid's text is, against all evidence, constantly referred to as a novel. The naked text would indeed warrant calling it a novella. Its context, however, namely my real life it renders without any trace of fictionalisation, just flatly belies such a classification. "The German returns to his senses" is well-composed prose, to be sure. But it is, critically, not a work of fiction. Fiction is not driven by a thirst for truth, but by utopian fancy. Robert Musil pleaded for a "Möglichkeitssinn" as opposed to the "Wirklichkeitssinn"; fair enough. Rashid's poetics though, like my own, are not about fantasising what *could* or *should be* the case, but about telling what *is* the case. It is this not necessarily pretty or pleasant reality which is no narrative (if only it was!) that Rashid has been exploring in all his books.

Professional critics, however, nowadays regularly seem to abhor reading what might be considered as a reasonably accurate account of what is the case (seen, trivially, through the eye of the observer). I take it they have superior reasons I just am too dim-witted to get. To this day I remember the angry

disbelieve I felt when I, as a visiting student, had the privilege to hear master thinker Jean Baudrillard explain that the first US-Iraq-war, ongoing even as he was lecturing in a peaceful French lecture hall - actually never took place. His students, though, seemed perfectly happy with his clever word-plays.

For my simple mind, many critics nowadays seem to suffer from a weakness of stomach. Mistaking their wishful thinking for good intentions (and their good intentions for good deeds, actually shaping the real state of the real world) they quickly throw a shame towel over the mirror of literature as soon as it reveals something they did not expect, and anyway judge *ought not be the case*. They say they do so because this old mirror is blurred and half-blind. Does it not fail to show to the rich master taking his morning shave the face of the poor maid who cleaned it the day before? Might it not offend the wrinkled granny, or the man with the cleft-lip who look into it? Yes. But all that has always been true. Yet, free speech still was quite useful in the struggle for truth, freedom, and dignity.

Bloated by the grand idea (I would suspect some fermented bits of ill-digested speech-act theory) that literature produces, rather than – poorly and painfully – mirrors what is the case, such critics ascribe to themselves the gravitas to no longer just criticize, but to censor. And indeed: If the state of the world really and truly hinged on what we omit and what we stress in describing it, censorship was quite legitimate, if not ethically required. If reality is but one of any number of contingent alternative narratives, you better make sure not to have any less than ideal world narrated.

On the most fundamental level, censorship is about silencing people altogether. None of the critics accusing my text of orientalism has ever bothered even to try to identify and demonstrate it in the text. The claim, it follows, is considered self-evidently true regardless of what I did and did not write. In order to come to this result, the reasoning has to function broadly like this: Joachim *is* European; ‘white-positioned’ in current received jargon. Hence, whatsoever Joachim writes about Rashid, who *is* Middle-Eastern, will necessarily be orientalist. Given the colonial history and ongoing structural violence governing the relationship between the West and the Middle-East, the only acceptable way for Joachim to write about his experience with Rashid, Beirut, and Lebanon – is not to write about it.

This radical consequence – although in tension with the requirements of the exchange programme - at least has the advantage of being just that, consequential. Rashid most likely did not have it in mind when he wrote and published his ‘occidental’ account on that German who came to his senses. While he did not seem to expect me to reply to or comment on it, much less to reciprocate in kind, he never protested the idea, but embraced it once I told him I was going to do just that. What he did take issue with after the German version with my comments was published (apart from his text being interrupted immediately), were some descriptions of what he did, and quotations of what he said.

Interestingly, he never claimed these were inaccurate. Rather, he felt I should not have written them, as they might shed an unfavourable light on him. Him, the real Rashid, not the “I” in a novella of his: Had he expected the “I” and the “Joachim” of his text to be read as mere fictional characters, how could he be bothered what I, Joachim the colleague and unexpected commentator, has to add to his fictional character “Rashid”? Rashid, for one, never fooled himself into taking his text to be fiction.

What Rashid did write is an anthropological study on me, and on himself in reaction to meeting me. Given the Orientalist tradition one could interpret such an ‘occidental’ project as an act of revenge. At least one Lebanese colleague and critic of his uncommented Arabic account on that German who came to his senses actually has called it just that, revengeful - whereas none of its western critics did. Whether this reading escaped western critics, or whether they censored themselves not to state it: Rashid, the real wise man, has suffered much too much ideological violence on his own body, has thought about its vicious circles much too profoundly, to engage in such a tit for tat act of vendetta. Being himself, Rashid, and not what his uncalled for western apologists take him for granted to be,

he just does not display any of the hard feelings and inferiority complexes towards the West that the fundamentally racist 'anti-orientalism' of western critics prescribes him to suffer from.

A Lebanese poet deeply versed in Arabic classics, Rashid much rather might have taken Ahmad ibn Fadlan ibn al-'Abbās ibn Rāschid as his model in writing about his voyage to the land of openly gay men and couples: The 10th century envoy of Caliph al-Muqtadir who visited and described the pagan people north of the black-sea centuries before the first occidental Orientalist ever made it to Bagdad. Ibn Fadlan's keenly curious, but not unkind anthropological account is read to this day as a valuable source for our knowledge of the culture of the early East-Slavonic/Varangian societies, as well of the thinking of the Caliphate in its heyday. No critic ever was silly enough to accuse it of peddling clichés: not because it would not do so (it does!), but because it is correctly expected and excused to do so.

Rashid, by for once regressing to, rather than avoiding a classical Arab model of describing the other for his description of sexual mores and gender-roles in 21st century Germany, seems much less to avenge Orientalism, but to exculpate it. His account on that German who returns to his senses is not the one wrong that could never right countless others. Rather, it furnishes reason to question the intellectual substance of the defensive reflexes both our texts triggered: Sexism and orientalism may be accusations that say more about those who make them than about the accused text or author.

Critics to whom the world is full of identities (whatever that may be) like a hammer's world is full of nails, will in any event menacingly yell "Orientalist!" at anybody who dares to say or write anything on the Mid-East without 'being' a Mid-Easterner. Why be intimidated? Why not yell back "Racist!"? Okay, okay, say "Tribalist!" At least, such a claim can be defended on how such critics argue, rather than just by what they 'are'. Calling an observation "orientalist" just because the person making it 'is' not from the culture or part of the word he or she all the same writes about, is too circular to count as an argument. If the verdict is meant to deny legitimacy to the utterance - as it clearly is! - without any consideration to or discussion of its truth-value, it boils down to censorship based on 'identity'.

The concept of 'identity' - at first glance without recognizable sense once taken out of its original frame of logic and construed into a political would-be argument - thus reveals its ugly true meaning: To believe that individuals, beyond being identical to themselves, share 'identities' with others that, by the same defining qualities, distinguish them, as a group, from the rest of humanity in terms of what they may write or do, is but a new way to state what racists and sexists have always believed: Namely that contingent innocent facts such as sex, gender, sexual-practice, origin, language, religion, skin-colour, you-name-it, determine an individual's rights: from the right to speak to the right to live.

"Sexism!" may well be a shrill, but intellectually vacuous shriek, meant to silence anybody speaking frankly about sex. Sexual attraction does not come in the form of polite conversation or received jargon. Writers should – and indeed are uniquely positioned to – encourage humans to fall in love with humans for their inner beauty. Boys, however, get turned on by bodies; boobs, balls, buttocks; so do girls. Grown-ups accept those facts of life that come with being animals in the image of God. Feelings of sexual revulsion, discomfort, or fear, like the ones Rashid dared to admit to experience with regard to homosexuality, are as unlikely to go away by simply oppressing them as sexual urges are. For sure, such negative feelings about what other people do with their bodies are more a result of nurture than nature. But that does not make them less real. The writer's task is to explore every aspect of human life. If we are intimidated not to express baser facts of sexuality and less than ideal gender relations for fear of being called "Sexist!" or "Homophobe!" we are censored, not criticised.

Neither Rashid nor I managed to get new novels published in Germany after the scandal caused by "Die Verschwulung der Welt". The one book of Rashid's out in German since is a collection of poetry. Its title shall be my obligation, and should be yours: "Ich werde die Dinge bei ihrem Namen nennen".