

Dokumentation

Mohammed Hasan Alwan Ein Blick auf Saudi-Arabiens unbekannte Romanliteratur

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Begrüßung

Norbert Ehrlich

Your Excellencies, welcome to the central library in the City of Vienna. The festival Salam Orient is very proud to present for the first time ever, an artist from Saudi Arabia, Mohammed Hasan Alwan. Welcome again. Meine sehr verehrten Damen und Herren, herzlich willkommen zu diesem Abend im Rahmen des Festivals Salam Orient.

Der griechische Philosoph Heraklit hat vor 2,5tausend Jahren den Satz geprägt: „panta rhei“, alles fließt. Gemeint hat er damit wahrscheinlich nicht nur den Fluss, dessen Wasser sich bei jedem Einstieg verändert, auch nicht nur das Vergehen der Natur oder des Menschen. Mir sind diese Worte in Erinnerung gekommen, als ich mich mit dem Roman *Sophia* von Mohammed Hasan Alwan beschäftigt habe. Er handelt von einem jungen Mann, der an der Fadesse seines Lebens leidet, der sich nichts sehnlicher wünscht als Veränderung, Action. Erst als er in Beirut einer libanesischen Christin begegnet ist es mit der Fadesse und der Eintönigkeit seines Lebens vorbei. Die Geschichte geht aber tragisch aus.

Veränderungen geschehen in allen Gesellschaften. Keiner von den Anwesenden weiß ob sich aus dem arabischen Frühling ein arabischer Sommer entwickelt oder ob ein neuer arabischer Winter einkehrt. Veränderungen in Saudi Arabien können wir aus der Ferne nicht feststellen und beurteilen. Es gibt überhaupt sehr wenige Informationen in unserem Land über diese zentrale Stätte des Islam und des Nahen Osten. Aus diesem Grund haben wir Mohammed Hasan Alwan eingeladen, damit er uns aus seinem Werk erzählt und einige Ausschnitte daraus vorliest.

Dr. Elga Martinez-Weinberger hat nicht nur den Künstler betreut sondern hat auch in ihrer wissenschaftlichen Arbeit als erste Österreicherin, wie ich glaube, die junge Generation saudischer Schriftsteller zu ihrem Thema gemacht. Sie ist also eine der wenigen Fachfrauen im Land, die über dieses Thema Bescheid weiß und ich bitte sie jetzt den Abend zu eröffnen. Danke schön!



Einführung

Elga Martinez-Weinberger

Danke Norbert für die Vorstellung. Ich habe 2005 begonnen Arabistik zu studieren, weil mich die vielen Vorurteile und Urteile über die arabische Welt gereizt haben und ich mir mein eigenes Bild machen wollte. Das war zwar etwas anmaßend, aber nachdem das Studium an der Universität Wien wirklich sehr hochwertig ist und ich auch einige Reisen machen konnte, habe ich mir ein Bild machen können und habe festgestellt, dass Saudi-Arabien der einzige Ort ist, wo noch niemand von den Forschern, die ich kenne, war. Über die Vermittlung des früheren saudischen Botschafters konnte ich tatsächlich zweimal nach Saudi-Arabien reisen und habe dort mit sehr vielen Schriftstellern und Schriftstellerinnen gesprochen.

Bevor ich den Künstler aufs Podium bitte, möchte ich Ihnen eine kurze Einleitung geben, um ihnen einen Eindruck zu vermitteln, wie es mit Romanen in Saudi-Arabien aussieht.

Saudi-Arabien ist ein relativ junges Land, das 1932 als Staat in der heutigen Form gegründet wurde. Wenn Sie sich die Landkarte anschauen, werden Sie sehen, wie unwirtlich dieses Land ist. Es hat über Jahrtausende eine Kultur gehabt, in der man durch Landwirtschaft, Viehzucht, Handel überleben konnte. Plötzlich kam das Zeitalter der Hochtechnologie, des Ölbooms und alle Traditionen, die über Jahrtausende weitergegeben wurden nützten plötzlich nicht mehr, um mit den Konfrontationen der modernen Welt fertig zu werden. Dazu kam das Internetzeitalter. Es entstanden große Städte. Früher gab es nur relativ kleine Städte heute hat Riyadh rund fünf Millionen Einwohner und ist sechsmal größer als Wien. Diese urbane Kultur ist relativ neu. Heute gibt es einen enormen Diskurs: Wie kommen wir mit all den Veränderungen zurecht? Werfen wir alles über Bord was wahr war? Was von dem ist uns aber wertvoll und wie wollen wir uns im 3. Jahrtausend weiter entwickeln? Hier spielt der saudische Roman eine große Rolle im Diskurs.

Bei uns gibt es seit Jahrhunderten Romane, der erste Roman in Saudi-Arabien entstand zwei Jahre vor der Staatsgründung und der zweite 18 Jahre später. Interessant dabei ist, dass sich der erste Roman mit Bildungsfragen beschäftigt hat und zwar damit, wie westliche Bildung mit den Traditionen der saudischen Kultur zusammen passt. Auch im zweiten Roman *Fikra* geht es um Bildung, nämlich um Mädchenbildung. Das war 1948. Dann kamen feministische Romane, es gab eine Reihe von Themen. Aber der wirkliche moderne Roman wie wir ihn uns vorstellen, wie ihn der legendäre Prof. Schmidt-Dengler in der Germanistikvorlesung definierte: Im modernen Roman geht es um die transzendente Obdachlosigkeit, also wenn der Glaube an die Werte in Frage gestellt wird. Damit beschäftigt sich der saudi-arabische Roman ab den 1990er Jahren. Damals entstanden die ersten Romane, die gesellschaftliche Probleme diskutierten.

Der Autor, der heute da ist, gehört schon zur nächsten Generation von Schriftstellern. Denn der Autor, der in den 1990er Jahren eine Trilogie geschrieben hat, ist ein 68er, also meine Generation. Mohammed Hasan Alwan ist die Generation, die nach 2001 zu schreiben begonnen hat. Er wird gleich über sein Werk erzählen. Ich möchte Ihnen nur noch ein paar Eckdaten zur Kenntnis bringen. Bildung für Mädchen gibt es in Saudi-Arabien erst seit den 1960er Jahren. Sie müssen sich vorstellen, Romane brauchen Leser, wenn sie jedoch nicht gelesen werden können, werden sie auch keine großen Erfolge haben. Während zwischen dem Ersten und Zweiten Weltkrieg die Alphabetisierung in Saudi-Arabien noch bei 5% lag liegt sie heute bei 95%. Auch sind heute mehr Frauen als Männer an den Universitäten inskribiert. Also es ist eine enorme Entwicklung passiert.

Eine Frage, die mir oft gestellt wird: Schreiben Frauen auch? Ich liebe diese Frage sehr – ja natürlich schreiben Frauen – es hält sich ungefähr die Waage. Ich habe in Saudi-Arabien gleich viele schreibende Frauen wie Männer kennengelernt. Was mir viele Frauen sagten ist, dass sie z.B. von ihren Vätern zum Schreiben ermutigt wurden. Also es ist durchaus eine Kultur in der Frauen als Schriftstellerinnen gefördert werden.

Natürlich gibt es Schriftsteller, die zur ersten Generation in ihrer Familie gehören, die lesen und schreiben kann, aber es gibt auch andere, die aus sehr, sehr kultivierten Familien kommen wo das Schreiben schon eine Tradition ist.

Leider gibt es kaum saudische Romane die übersetzt sind. Nur für die Frankfurter Buchmesse 2004 wurden einige übersetzt, allerdings sind diese Bücher bereits vergriffen. Daher war die Überlegung von Norbert Ehrlich im Rahmen des Festivals Salam Orient Sie mit einem saudiarabischen Autor zusammenzubringen und damit darf ich Mohammed Hasan Alwan aufs Podium bitten.

Gespräch

Elga Martinez-Weinberger:

Mohammed, normally people know a lot about writers, they have already checked it on the Internet. I must admit, to most people here you are unknown. So, may I ask you that you tell the audience something about you as a person, your development, and your writing.



Mohammed Hasan Alwan: Good evening everyone. I am Mohammed Hasan Alwan from Saudi Arabia. A novelist, an academic, and I have also a job beside that. I started writing when I was 14 as a poet, as poetry used to be the genre of writing in Saudi Arabia before fiction writing started to dominate the scene in Saudi Arabia in 2000. And this is when I abandoned poetry and started to write novels. I published my first novel, *Saqf al-Kifaya*, in 2002. My second novel *Sophia* followed two years later, which Elga is very much familiar

with. *Tauq al-Tahara* was published in 2007 and finally my last novel, *The Beaver, Al-Qundus*, was published in 2010, and the novel was short-listed for the Arab Booker Prize in Abu Dhabi.

Martinez-Weinberger: Can you tell us about the topics of your first novel? What were the problems or the questions you wanted to ask in your novel? What was it about?



Alwan: Usually it's been commonly conceived that most of my novels have an element of a love story as the main structure of the novel. However, I usually describe my novels as being more attentive to the social aspects that surround such human fiction, the love story that takes place in Saudi Arabia. So my first novel was like that. I wrote it when I was a student at King Saud University. I did a bachelor degree in Computer Information Systems there. At the same time I was taken by novel writing, and I wrote for two years my first novel. It's a love story between a Saudi man and a Saudi woman in Saudi Arabia, where love has been socially restricted to certain legal and social relationships. The novel has described how things go wrong when they are not allowed to transfer this relationship into a marriage. It's a kind of Romeo and Juliet in Saudi Arabia. However, the social aspects of the novel were different. It has moved toward describing the society in general, the Arab societies in general, the main character traveled outside, and he was trying to reflect back on his society, meeting Iraqi immigrants there, discussing the political system in Iraq. So, the noble four hundred pages talk about more than just the love story. However, it was the focal point of the novel. My second novel, *Sophia*, was also a relationship between a Muslim Saudi man with a Christian Lebanese girl in Beirut. Within this very short and tragic relationship they enter into this dialogue about the meaning of death and love in both religions. Both religions are being practiced in that area, and a lot of debates are going on between religions, both politically and culturally.

My third novel is about the psychological aftermath of children who've been, tragically faced sexual harassment in their childhood and how this is being transferred and reflected in the personality of the person growing up. How it hits later, since it never goes away. My last novel, *Al-Qundus*, is about a forty-five year old man who's going through his mid-life crisis, coming from a dysfunctional family. The bad feelings of being abandoned by both his mom and his father, although growing up in a very wealthy family, hit him later when he was at his weakest psychological state in his 40s. The novel takes place both in Saudi Arabia and Portland, Oregon; the state is called "The Beaver State." Basically the main character meets a beaver; we don't have beavers in Saudi Arabia. So, for the first time he sees the beaver, and he's becoming more curious about the behavior of the beaver, only to find out that there's a lot of commonalities between the behavior of the beaver as an animal and human beings. The beaver, surprisingly, is the only animal that actually deliberately changes the

environment around the beaver family for their own benefit. So they build all of these big dams, they change the river current for their own selfish reasons, and we are doing the same. We build these huge cities. We destroy the planet to make ourselves better cities and better standards of living. The beaver likes to live in those dams because beavers are usually insecure. They don't trust others easily and basically this is the same reason why we build our houses in Saudi Arabia and in the rest of the world with high walls, with locks on the door. Because we don't trust our own people who live in the same society. So all of these commonalities have been observed by the main character and start to reflect back about it in the novel.

Martinez-Weinberger: Thank you. You said in an interview with *Arab News* this year, I quote two passages in this interview: "Young writers in the Arab World have a more distinct voice than the previous generation." And the other sentence was: "My voice took a different path from the beliefs my family holds dear." Explain these generation conflicts and how you deal with them in Saudi Arabia or in your life. You cannot speak for all Saudi Arabia.



Alwan: Of course. I meant that novel writing as a genre of literature is very recent in Saudi Arabia. Most of the Saudi novels, maybe the oldest, you can maybe answer this question better than me, but the oldest Saudi novel was written in the 60s or 50s?

Martinez-Weinberger: *Al-Tau'aman* was in 1930 and then there was *Fikra* in 1948. I think there were sixty novels in sixty years and then came the boom.

Alwan: Exactly. I remember that very clearly that even ten years ago there were only four or five names in Saudi Arabia who published novels every year. And that's it. You have five every year, and the whole scene reads them and forgets about them. And all of a sudden in 2000 we started to witness a huge number of novels on the shelves. Definitely with this boom there came a distinctive voice and most of the novels are written by the young generation, the new generation. Sometimes it was their first novel, most of them in their 20s and 30s. The reason why they are choosing to write novels is because they have something to say. They have something complicated going on. They are thinking, and they want to find a way to reveal it somehow. That's where the distinctive voice came from. I'm not talking about the style. Some of them are still adopting that classic style of novel writing, but at the same time there's this message they are trying to deliver, something that is a little bit different from the message that has been recited over and over in the novels written by the previous generation. I'm not in conflict with my family. What I meant is that the society is going through these stages where individualism is taking place whether we accept it or

reject it. Our society or most of the societies in the area are pretty much relativistic societies. However, individualism is kind of a destiny. It's something that society adopts gradually as the society itself matures. That's what happened 20 years ago, 30 years ago, 40 years ago. If you go back to describe a traditional Saudi family, you'll find most of the family members sharing the same ideas. If they have differences, they're very trivial. Now, you go in any Saudi house and you find five sons or daughters and everyone has a totally different ideological stand than their own siblings. So there's this need to show individualism in the family, and that's what I meant as a writer. My writing shows that.

Martinez-Weinberger: Especially your generation writes a lot about very private, very, very personal and intimate things. Is this shocking for the society? Is this discussed or is this like it's nowadays in the chats in the Internet, where we exchange many intimate topics?

Alwan: Yes, it was the center of the debate starting with the boom that started in 2000. The central debate was about what are those novels about. They have repeated the same debate that took place in the 1990s about what we call the modernization movement in Saudi Arabia, which is *al-Hadatha*. It was at that time about poetry, a lot of Saudi poets started to write in a modernized way that has been adopted by other Arab countries. There was an ideological debate about them and how destructive they are to the classic way of thinking and writing and believing in God and all the religious teachings. I believe that whenever we find a boom of novels in any society it means that this society somehow is undergoing a stage of transformation, where there's a lot of questions being asked. They found somehow a venue of asking these questions through the novels. We are going through this stage in Saudi Arabia, definitely. If not because of the political and economic changes in the area, it's because of the demographic changes in Saudi Arabia. 50% of the population in Saudi Arabia is under the age of 30 now. So it's pretty much a very, very young society and this generation is actually starting to replace the older generation in all the decision-making areas gradually. They come with different ideas; they are creating this fast shift. And when you do this fast shift, all of a sudden things are being shaken and questions are born. Those questions are too complicated to be debated easily in everyday conversations. Then they somehow find their way into literature to be able to slowly cook these questions and present them to society in a thinkable way.

Martinez-Weinberger: This brings me to the next question. I was telling in the beginning that when people cannot read, authors will not have big success. So now people are reading. Do you have contact with your readers? Do you get feedback? Do you know which class of society is reading? I imagine it's increasing, but how is your contact with the readers?

Alwan: Very frequent. I published my first novel in 2002. However, I launched my personal website in 1999. The Internet entered Saudi Arabia in 1997. Correct me if I'm wrong, I think 1997. So only two years after that I benefited from my studies in Computer Science, and I launched my first personal website. At that time there were only very, very few Arab writers

having websites. I took that website as a bridge between me and the reader, to hear the feedback directly from the readers, not through any kind of media. I am now using every social network that I'm familiar with, twitter, Facebook, goodreads.com, and all of these websites to be able to be in direct contact with my reader. I still remember when I published my first novel I was talking to one of the most important figures in literature, Dr. Abdullah Khatami, I think you're familiar with him. He told me: "Mohammed, your true reader is the one you never see, you never heard of him. Someone who is there, you never meet. Write for this person." And in my quest to find this person, I established all these bridges in social networks, trying to really hear from somebody who read me for the need of literature. Not because it's a phenomenon or because it's a new novel. That kind of opinion is what I need as a feedback.

Martinez-Weinberger: Are most of your readers young or do you have also reactions from the older generation?

Alwan: No, not really actually. A few weeks ago I was in Kuwait, and I came to a 73-year-old Kuwaiti novelist. His name is Ismail Fahd Ismail. He's well known in Kuwait. He's the godfather of novel writing in Kuwait. I came to present him one of my books, *Sophia*. I give it to him and he says, oh this is your second novel, I know that. When I first started writing, my novel was perceived better by the younger generation. They felt that he's one of us; he speaks our language. He knows what we are going through. So I got more and more feedback from them. However, if we take the demographic scene of Saudi Arabia into consideration, as I just said that 50% are under the age of 30, if you take this into consideration, I think I've been read by different age classes in Saudi Arabia.

Martinez-Weinberger: Für die Lesung haben wir zwei Kurzgeschichten ausgesucht, die auch übersetzt sind. Kurzgeschichten sind nicht typisch für seine Romane, aber ich denke sie sprechen interessante Themen an. Wir starten mit der Kurzgeschichte *Ölfeld*. Would you please start with "Oil Field"?

Alwan: Ok. I did not actually interfere in the selection of those stories.

Martinez-Weinberger: But you had the veto right.

Alwan: The thing is that I only wrote ten short stories in my entire career as a writer since 2002. So I don't see short story writing as my main project. I'm not very faithful to short story writing, unfortunately. "Oil Field" is an interesting story because I was commissioned to write a story by the newspaper *The Guardian*. They had this idea of commissioning writers from all the oil producing countries and asking each one of them to write a story about what oil means for the people of this country. So, surprisingly, being from Saudi Arabia, I've never seen nor touched crude oil in my life, and I don't know how it feels to touch it. So there are a lot of ideas about Saudis being swamped in oil. That's very common. A very common

question that I got from my friends when I was studying in Canada was: Where do you fill up your car? I said, I just drive to the embassy and fill up my car with gas. It was a joke, and they looked at me and said, really? So I was excited to write about this, because I wanted to show that oil means different things to different countries. I wrote this short story in Arabic and then it was translated by Peter Clark, a dear friend of mine in London. Then, the editor transformed this story into something that is readable by the English readers. And then he sent it back to me, and I came to work on it again in English. So I really don't remember what language this story was written. Was it written in English or in Arabic. So, that's why it's an interesting story of mine.



Lesung

Oil Field by Mohamed Hasan Alwan,
translated by Peter Clark

Mukhtar by Mohamed Hasan Alwan,
translated by William Maynard Hutchins

Alwan: Why did you pick that story in particular?

Martinez-Weinberger: I think it has this ironic touch and yeah, I love it. May I say some words about *Sophia*?

Ich möchte noch ein paar Worte zur *Sophia* – seinem 2. Roman sagen, in dem es um einen jungen saudischen Mann und ein junges libanesischen Mädchen geht.

Es ist sehr schwer einen Verlag zu finden, der diese Bücher auf Deutsch herausbringt. Aber ich glaube, dass besonders dieser Roman bei uns sehr gut ankommen würde, denn er zeigt diese ganz spezielle Situation in Beirut. Das Mädchen ist krebskrank. Der Roman beschreibt sehr gut wie es ist wenn ein Mensch immer Veränderung braucht z.B. der junge Mann malt und er kann das leere Papier nicht ertragen, aber wenn die Zeichnung fertig ist, ist er auch unbefriedigt. Es gibt keine Situation in der er sagt das ist es jetzt. Er probiert unterschiedliche Berufe, er heiratet. Es geht irgendwie alles schief und er kommt aus dieser Situation einfach nicht heraus. Als plötzlich seine Eltern sterben bemerkt er, dass das Haus jetzt ganz anders ist. Dann lernt er über Internet ein Mädchen kennen, sie ist krebskrank und möchte einmal in ihrem Leben bevor sie stirbt die Liebe erleben. Er glaubt zunächst, dass sie gar nicht krank ist.

Er reist also zu ihr nach Beirut und erlebt zum ersten Mal wie es wirklich ist, Verantwortung für einen Menschen zu haben, wie es ist eine Beziehung zu haben, die in die Tiefe geht. Das Mädchen hat den Krieg erlebt.

Er schreibt vom Todesengel von Beirut der die Leute holt. Aber er scheitert insofern als der körperliche Zusammenbruch kommt muss er weg und er kommt erst sehr spät wieder als sie ihn wahrscheinlich nicht mehr erkennt. Es faszinieren ihn Dinge wie etwa, dass sie mit ihrem Gott spricht, mit ihm hadert und sie sprechen darüber. Das ist sehr interessant. Jetzt haben wir so lange gesprochen, jetzt lassen wir das Publikum reden.



Publikumsgespräch

Audience: I just would like to ask you, do you have any idea why there was such a boom in the beginning of 2000?

Alwan: I mentioned before, it's an indication of the country going through a political, economic, social, and cultural as well as demographic transformation. That's my theory about it. If you look at this era of 2000, the Internet was introduced to the country a few years before. All of a sudden people have access to a huge amount of information. At the same time, more and more of the new generation reaches that age of being able to write maturely, and they want to contribute somehow to what's going on in the country. Saudi Arabia used to be a very small population with a huge GDP. These things are changing. It's not the same. It's not as easy to be Saudi Arabian, it's just like in any other country in the world. People go, have to work hard to have a decent life. My theory is when any society experiences a stage of huge transformation on different levels, I expect novels to pick up these changes.

Audience: I have only two short questions. The first one is, you talk about a love story in the first novel and the restrictions in society. I wanted to ask if it was difficult to publish legally in your country. And the second question, are the characters in your novels created or do they resemble your friends and relatives?

Alwan: At that time, yes, it was difficult to publish in Saudi Arabia in 2002. However, all my books are being sold and distributed in Saudi Arabia now. That shows a huge difference and, in a way, openness that we are witnessing now in Saudi Arabia in ten years. In 2002 I couldn't publish my book in Saudi Arabia. In 2013 I find my books in the bookshops in my country. However, I still publish my books in Lebanon, because Lebanon is the center of publishing and art in the Arab world, and I have already established a relationship with my

publisher. That's why I keep publishing my books in Dar al Saqi in Beirut and London. No, none of those stories are taken exactly from my friends or relatives. However, the love story itself, it's classic. I mean you can find the same story happening in every corner. There are two people, they meet, and they fall in love. However, my point is to create this as a focal point and then to try to bring all the social aspects of falling in love in Saudi Arabia, in Riyadh in particular, into the story, what that reflects on their destinies and their life.

Audience: Meine Frage wäre über die Zensur in Saudi-Arabien. Haben Sie persönlich Probleme gehabt mit dem System bzw. über was sie schreiben dürfen oder nicht schreiben dürfen z.B. Sexualität, Homosexualität, Atheismus, Religion usw.

Auch an Sie, [Frau Martinez-Weinberger]: Sie waren ja lange mehrfach in Saudi-Arabien. Die Autoren, die Sie interviewt haben, hatten sie auch Probleme mit Zensur oder hatten sie Tabus über die sie nicht schreiben durften?

Alwan: Yes, at the beginning, I remember after I finished my novel I was very naïve. I took it to the ministry in Saudi Arabia that's responsible for getting licenses for the new books to be published in Saudi Arabia. I submitted it there and they told me to come back after two weeks to see what their comments are. And then the man who read my transcript handed me over a few pages and my novel is like 400 pages, and said, those are my comments. I said, only four pages? He answered: no those are only the page numbers of my comments.

Martinez-Weinberger: This was in 2002?

Alwan: Yes, in 2001, actually. I asked, what does that mean, if I change all of these you are going to allow me to publish my book? And he said, yes, but this is off the record, please don't change anything. Just take it out of the country and publish it there. I listened to his advice, and I took my book to Beirut and published it there. However, if I took the same book and submitted it to the same ministry today, I think I would take the license right away to publish it. So things have changed in a very radical way in Saudi Arabia in terms of publishing and writing. And to prove that, the Book Fair in Riyadh is becoming the largest in the Arab World. And no books whatsoever are banned from the Book Fair in Riyadh, except a few titles that directly offend Saudi Arabia, which nobody is regretting not seeing there. But literature wise, I haven't missed any book in the Book Fair in Riyadh that I wanted to read. Unless it was sold out.

Martinez-Weinberger: Bei mir war das so. Es gibt so eine offizielle Institution, das King Faisal Centre for Islamic Studies, das ausländische Forscher quasi als Gastgeber offiziell einlädt und einem auch dort die Möglichkeit gibt Computer, Drucker und Fax zu benutzen. Also die formelle Einladung habe ich von dort bekommen über die Vermittlung des saudischen Kulturbüros in Wien. Ich kannte ja die alte DDR und habe gedacht da kommt der Politkommissar der sagt du kannst nur unter meiner Anwesenheit mit Menschen sprechen. Ich war total überrascht, dass ich in Saudi-Arabien mit jedem sprechen konnte. Saudi-

Arabien ist Handy country, wenn sie nicht die Handynummer haben sind sie verloren. Mohammed war glaube ich der erste, den ich besucht habe, er hat mich sofort mit Handynummern anderer Autoren versorgt und über SMS und Telefonieren habe ich meine Termine gemacht. Ich bin kein einziges Mal gefragt worden mit wem ich spreche, was ich spreche, ich war vollkommen frei. Ich hatte das Visum auch für das ganze Land. Ich war zweimal einen Monat dort nur ich hatte gar nicht die Zeit durchs ganze Land zu reisen. Ich habe hauptsächlich Schriftsteller in Riyadh und Jiddah getroffen. Natürlich wäre die Ostprovinz interessant gewesen, der schiitische Bereich, da habe ich mit einer Autorin telefoniert. Eine Frau hat sich mir nur verschleiert gezeigt. Es gibt natürlich sehr viele Frauen mit Gesichtsschleier ins Saudi-Arabien, wobei das deren Entscheidung ist. Sie war in einem Büro wo jeden Moment jemand, ein Mann, reinkommen konnte und sie wollte nicht, dass man sie sieht. Ich habe das als wahnsinnig irritierend empfunden, weil ich keine Beziehung zu ihr entwickeln konnte, weil ich nur die Augen von ihr gesehen habe. Alle anderen Damen waren überhaupt kein Problem zu treffen. Ich war auch zweimal in Familien von Schriftstellerinnen eingeladen wo auch die anderen Familienmitglieder dabei waren.

Bei der Buchmesse habe ich 2010 drei Bücher nicht bekommen, die hat mir dann sofort ein Saudi aus Bahrain mitgebracht. Also das Buch einzuführen war überhaupt kein Problem. Auf der Buchmesse hat mich die Religionspolizei aufgefordert, die Haare zu bedecken. Wobei ich das während den Gebetszeiten sowieso immer gemacht habe. Sonst habe ich nirgends die Haare bedeckt.

Zensur war nicht das Thema, denn von allen Autoren, die ich dort getroffen habe, waren die Bücher dort im Handel erhältlich. Also ich sage 2010, 2011 das war überhaupt kein Thema. Es gab eine Autorin Zainab Hifni die 2006, glaube ich, oder ein bisschen früher, Publikationsverbot hatte, aber inzwischen habe ich Bücher von ihr auch auf der Buchmesse bekommen.

Audience: I have two questions. One is, how did you come to write, I mean do you come from a certain writing school which is now very modern in Europe as well as in the States, for example, creative writing and things like that. Is it something that is taught at the moment in Saudi Arabia? And my second question is do you have writers' associations, and are you in exchange with migrant writers' communities?

Alwan: Ah, no, no. I wish I had gone to a writing school. Unfortunately there is no such thing in Saudi Arabia that I am aware of. The thing is that writing cannot be taken as a career in Saudi Arabia. It still cannot generate enough income to be considered a career from an early stage of life. I would never have considered that, even when doing my high school, where I had the option to go into the different tracks, I took the track of science. And when I went to college I took a scientific track as well, and I'm still doing my studies. I'm doing my PhD now in a field that is far away from literature, which is International Marketing. Even if there is a creative writing school in Saudi Arabia, you wouldn't find a lot of people joining it because it's simply a big risk. I don't think there are writers' associations in Saudi Arabia, but I'm not really sure. And I don't know if that requires approval from the government or something to

initiate something like that. I am a member of other associations, MBA graduates, business staff, or something like that, but all of these are being established online on websites. Yes, I've been in touch with many writers, many Arab writers who live in Saudi Arabia, Egyptians, Syrians, Lebanese, and met many of them on different occasions. Usually, I believe this is where all the differences between people, the nationalities and ideologies just fall down, and people come to literature because of the love of literature. I don't think that ideologies and cultures count as a differentiating factor here. The only thing that counts is good literature or bad literature.

Audience: Ich möchte nochmals auf die Frage nach der Zensur zurückkommen, weil die Antwort etwas unbefriedigend war. Gibt es Themen über die Sie in Saudi-Arabien nicht schreiben können?

Alwan: Ok, three taboos: religion, politics, and sex. Sex is ok. Finally somebody realized that everybody's doing it, so it's ok to write about it. Religion, it is very complicated. It's not acceptable to attack religion directly. You cannot offend people. Muslims hold their beliefs very dear to their hearts, and they don't accept neither that you offend them directly, nor that you offend them indirectly. And they find that an attack on their personal freedom. They are entitled to live in a country where they are not bothered by ideas that attack their beliefs. So we can debate that, you can agree or disagree about that, but there are a lot of writers who respect this. Somehow they find a way not to tackle this. However, religion and religious differences are actually not a vocal topic in Saudi writing. The problem in Saudi Arabia is not about that. It's not about Islam, is it a true religion or something like that. No, everybody believes in it. In the center of debate are differences about the application of Islam and the social debate about how strict you are going to apply the teaching and interpreting the teachings of Islam. Nobody is questioning the core of it. So, there are not a lot of things to write about here, since it's not been a hot topic yet in the country. You can find a lot of topics around the religion like the sectarianism between Sunnis and Shias; that could be something to write about. A few novels have discussed this, about religiousness, how religious is ok, the level of religiousness you need to see applied in society. This has been discussed heavily, but not the core of Islam. So that's ok. Politics, here we come, we have witnessed a lot of openness in Saudi Arabia on criticizing the politics of the government in general. However, the main political figures in Saudi Arabia, the King, the Crown Prince, cannot be attacked, because a lot of people hold them dear to their hearts as well, as being the heads, the founding fathers of the country. They're very popular. So, no you can't publish something in Saudi Arabia directly attacking the main figures of politics in Saudi Arabia. However, there are a lot of books sold at the Book Fair in Riyadh which attack the government's decisions, historical decisions of the government, historical movements and the historical stance of the government openly and freely, not only in books sold at the Book Fair, even in the newspapers. There are taboos, there are red lines, but they are receding as we mature as a society.

Audience: Your books are distributed also in other Arabic speaking countries? And which markets, which countries are most important for you and for your books?

Alwan: It was very important for me to be published in Saudi Arabia. I just received a message from my publisher, that my last book is going to be sold in the bookstores in Saudi Arabia. There was a lot of bureaucracy in getting the book released, but it was just bureaucracy, it wasn't censorship. They have a pile of books they need to go through and approve them. It's very important to be sold in the Saudi market. The Gulf States as well, we share a lot as a Gulf state. We think that we have something in common with the six countries on the Gulf. We have the same traditions, the same, say, anthropological advances. Also the centers of culture in Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco basically everywhere are very important. I received a message on Ask.fm, a website where people can ask questions anonymously. One of them said, your books are being sold in Mauritania. I was very happy to know that, because Mauritania is very far away from Saudi Arabia. At the same time, they speak two languages, Arabic and other languages. And there are always these differences between the east and west Arab countries. And there are writers from the west like Moroccan writers and Algerian writers, they complain that they are not being perceived as they deserve in the east, and that goes back and forth. Because they sometimes follow a different school. They follow the European school in novels. In the east usually they follow the classic schools of novels. So there's always this debate. So to be read from the west of the Arab world is really good for me as a writer from the east.

Audience: Haben Sie bestimmte Vorbilder oder Autoren, die Sie sehr schätzen, die Sie beeinflusst haben?

Alwan: It's always difficult to answer this question. Because there's not one writer that I can say is the writer who influenced my career as a writer, but there's a collection of writers. And if I mention one, I'm just being unfair to the others, who have actually contributed to this. However, I would say there are some writers who somehow pushed me through a journey of writing. When I was fourteen I read a classic Egyptian writer, his name was Mustafa Lutfi al-Manfaluti. His influence on me was about the use of language. He was very attentive to language and articulated it in his writings. When I was eighteen I came to read a lot of modern poetry. So I read different Arab writers. Then I started to read foreign, non-Arab writers. I read Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and I was fascinated by him. It fascinates me when he writes about a village that is thousands of miles away from my country, and we think that we don't have anything in common with them. I'm just surprised on every page about how much we have in common. And that's a true writer, a good writer who can reveal these commonalities between cultures and writing. I started to read all the classics, so he was actually one of the main influences on me. So yes, I'm kind of a mosaic of different influences from different writers. The reason why that is like this, when I get deeply involved in one writer, I just have this resistance that pushes me to move along and not to be captivated by one writer.

Audience: How big is the percentage of female writers?

Alwan: There are many, actually. I don't have the exact statistics, and I don't know whether you are talking about writers who are published writers and writers who are not published, who are still trying to publish. I think there are still less female than male published writers in Saudi Arabia. However, they are not being undermined at all, actually. The only two Saudi writers who won the Arab Booker Prize, are a man, Abdo Khal, and a woman, Raja Alem. So, fifty-fifty. And there's a lot of books published by women. And if you look at personal blogs on the Internet, which is the easiest way to get published, I would say that there are more females publishing than males. They're not just blogging. They publish their poetry, their short stories, it's just like they didn't go through the classic paper publication.

Martinez-Weinberger: I got statistics from all the published novels in Saudi Arabia, and I counted females and males, and it's true. It's fifty-fifty.

Audience: Ich bin sehr negativ überrascht über diese Werbung für Saudi-Arabien. Wir haben über Kunst gesprochen und haben gesagt wir präsentieren einen Künstler. Und ich weiß Kunst geht nicht ohne Freiheit. Wie kann ein Schriftsteller oder eine Schriftstellerin in einem Land, wo es drei Tabus gibt seine Kunst betreiben und seine Ideen zum Ausdruck bringen? Ich bin in Bagdad geboren und ich weiß von was ich rede. Ich bin echt sehr negativ überrascht.

Ich kenne mich in der arabischen Kunst aus. Sie müssen uns beide ein Bild bringen, das sagt wir brauchen Freiheit in der arabischen Welt.

Alwan: Well, we are bound to make a lot of mistakes when we collectively talk about the Arabs, they are 200 million and twenty-two countries, and each country has a different track in how they develop and what kind of problems they are facing. I came from a perspective that salutes advancement and salutes any brave steps that we take into the right track. I don't say that we need to go faster, we need to go slower, but when I see progress I celebrate it myself. Believe me, as a writer I am very sensitive to censorship. I'm very sensitive to being censored in my writing. And there is no one but writers who can tell you about the level of freedom in any country. I wish that I would be perceived positively in anything that I write. It's not about the legal system. There's also social acceptance of what you write, so you can live anywhere in the world. If your family is not happy with what you are writing, there's emotional pressure on you, and that's censorship. So your freedom has been restricted indirectly. So censorship has always been associated with writing, wherever you live. A lot of good writing, very good writing, top international writing has been written in countries where they're not enjoying the level of freedom like in Europe or in the States.

Audience: That's not right.

Martinez-Weinberger: Excuse me, he sees it like this, and you have a different opinion, but respect the opinion of someone else.

Alwan: This is my opinion. I think a lot of literature has been written and the Nobel Prize last year was won by a Chinese writer, and you know the level of censorship in China. He was asked this question, how did you write. He actually said, the censorship benefitted me because I learned how to go around it. And he won the prize. So that's one example. I didn't say that we are trying to convey a rosy image about Saudi Arabia or the Arab World. I know what problems we have. Saudi Arabia in particular is surrounded by problems from all different directions. In Saudi Arabia we have our own problems. We admit that. But we are a very young country. My grandfather is 86 years old. We just celebrated the 83rd National Day of Saudi Arabia. So my grandfather is older than my country. And my grandfather has lived in a tent. My father built the first house of cement and my son now, he has two iPads and a laptop and whatever. So if you go from here to there this fast, you expect a lot of problems along the way. But looking just at the full half of the cup, we have a lot of anger as Arabs sometimes, especially Arabs when we go abroad, when we live in different countries. I lived in the States, I've lived in Canada. I've seen things that I wish my country enjoyed as well. So that anger sometimes spills out, and we want to say something to those who prevented us from being as advanced and getting the life that we deserve in our own countries. Yes, my heart aches when I see people living in Europe because they can't go back to their country. At the same time, I can't just become totally negative and not salute what I see of progress. And I see a lot of progress happening in Arab countries. When I see something I clap for it. When I don't see something good, I just ache inside. My novels, I have four novels, and none of them are trying to convey the rosy image that you are complaining about. I criticize, I told them in my first novel, it's a love story in Saudi Arabia. It's taking place in Riyadh. The ending is tragic. He lost his mind, everybody is sad. Why? Because they were not allowed to be together for stupid social reasons. So that's how I'm trying to show what happens to the audience, what happens if they are not allowed to be married, allowed to live together, they don't have their freedom. But this is my way of contributing to my society, to going to the right direction. I hope I answered your question.

Audience: In your way, yes.

Martinez-Weinberger: Gibt es noch Fragen? Dann darf ich mich herzlich bei Ihnen bedanken. Wenn ein Abend gelingt, dann hat das Publikum Anteil daran. Ich darf noch in eigener Sache erwähnen: Meine Dissertation ist auch als Buch erschienen. Es kann auch hier ausgeborgt und natürlich auch gekauft werden. Es ist ein wissenschaftliches Buch, aber ich habe es für Leser geschrieben, das war mir sehr wichtig. Danke schön!