
‘With Love, For Love, Through Love’: A Literacy Confession of a Middle Eastern Writer

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As I sit at my usual table for two in my favorite coffee shop two minutes down the street from my house, I try to pioneer my way through undiscovered territory in my brain and consider the literacy factors that have shaped me into the writer I am today. This approach is an unprecedented challenge, something that does not fall in line with what I learned in the past seventeen years.

It All Has to Start Somewhere

I grew up in the metropolitan city of Amman, Jordan in a house built by a Palestinian father, was raised by a Syrian mother, and blossomed with four sisters born all over the Levant; diversity was conceived in me on a lunch table level. Around our house, amidst the collection of unheard-of herbs lying around, our shameless Palestinian advocacy posters and frames, and Qur’ans of every shape, size, and color neatly exhibited on our living room shelves, one thing can stand out as misplaced: the only English phrase drowning in a sea of what looks like a manifestation of the Arabic language over time is a “Love Ain’t a Thing, Love Is a Verb” poster with a faded picture of my mum and dad hanging on the wall. They had it created in Los Angeles, California as a memento of their honeymoon in 1990 (for a \$20 poster, it sure did hold up well). Out of all the clichéd, stereotypical posters they could’ve picked to have lying around the house for the next 28 years, my parents chose this, unaware of the rest of the John Mayer song behind the lyric. They chose it because in this ever-changing world, their philosophy was that love is the one constant. Growing up in such a household enabled me to espouse the same principle, always exploring the different types of love I can give to others. Throughout this exploration process, I was able to discover more about myself than anything else.

According to James Paul Gee in his article “Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics,” a primary Discourse is “the one we first use to make sense of the world and interact with others” (279). I could easily integrate this proudly acquired Discourse from my first parent-made environment into my later secondary Discourses—this exploration method has no expiry date that I know of yet. Eighteen years later, everything I have done has been giving love, showing love, or spreading love. Every action I have taken has been done “with love, for love, or through love,” as my mum usually says.

Ball Is Life

My dad was a prominent basketball player back home. He played others 1-on-1 for money in the streets when he was 14, but later he became captain of Jordan's National Team, achieving a career high of 105 points in a single game. He accomplished this in a community that never held athleticism as a priority dear to heart. He was an inspiration to many, including his four daughters. Every hour we could spend with my dad was spent on a court that later became the location for all of our childhood milestones. It's where we took our first steps, threw toddler tantrums, and made our first shots. I wanted to show my dad how much I loved him by taking on his favorite sport and experiencing all the thrills it offered him. He used to guide us using a well-known Islamic phrase, "Allah loves someone who when works, he performs it in perfect manner." With or without any reinforcement from my dad, I knew that this verse would shape my identity kit because it was a "saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing combinations," which is, according to Gee, a vital thing that shapes identities (278). This phrase made me passionate about things I chose to engage in and it taught me to value hard work and stand eager to reap its results—it has become a foundational part of everything I stand for today.

By the time I was fourteen, my dad's favorite sport had become my favorite sport. He made sure that we had every resource available, whether it was the newest shoes, gym time, gym attire, or our very own personalized built-in hoop in the backyard. And I made sure that I took full advantage of these resources through my steely identity kit; in a matter of two short years, I was following in my dad's footsteps as captain of my National Team.

My Second Home

At the age of seven, I was enrolled in a mixed private school. The National Orthodox School, established in 1957 as the first coeducational school in Jordan, is a place that I have grown fonder of more than my own home. Not only was it the best opportunity, it was—more or less—the only opportunity for my parents to ensure a safe transition to secondary Discourses, which Gee defines as Discourses "command[ed] and demand[ed]" by social institutions that are acquire[d] ... fluently to the extent that we are given access to these institutions and are allowed apprenticeships within them" (280). In spite of my male-dominated community, I was able to interact with individuals of the opposite sex, as lab partners and even as best friends, as opposed to my neighbor who only knew of them through her experience with the one that she would be forced to marry. This prepared me for my later reality, beyond my school's protective wings. It empowered me to find my female voice, acknowledge its importance, and to use it positively and influentially. This has ultimately made me the vocal person I am, and this translates into my writing as much as it does anything else. Here, along with the basketball court, is where my inner leader was born, where my ability to socially influence people toward a bigger goal originated.

When I was in the 4th grade, I was introduced to another literacy sponsor, which are "any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way" (Brandt 72). Usually, all of the teachers you hear about in literacy narratives are superheroes in disguise. They push you to your limits and bring out the best in you. Miss Sandy, my Arabic teacher, fell quite the distance from that description. Instead, she was one of the most mundane teachers I've ever had, come to think about it; a mother of two, occasional stains from whatever baby fluids she dealt with that morning on her infamous black sweater, she never cracked a joke, but was never mean either. She was as middle-grounded as one can be. However, Miss Sandy's material taught me what other materials never bothered to: appreciation for languages, and appreciation for strict grammar rules and even those exceptions that you never encounter. She always accentuated the impetuous nature of humans and made sure to include examples of the wrong turns she had taken due to her

impulsiveness. It all made sense now: these rules grant us chances to think about our words one more time before they transform into something bigger than words. They limit how impulsive one can be. In between choosing “to” and “too” are scant milliseconds for you to stop and think. As someone who always comes up with better comebacks the day after in the shower, I appreciate the extra time—in fact, I need the extra time.

This has changed my perspective completely on viewing grammar and spelling as burdens while writing. I enjoyed learning it and applying it throughout my writing. One day while creative writing, I chose to write about betrayal, quoting directly from the pilot episode of my favorite Arabic TV show, another integral literacy sponsor of mine. Here’s what earned Miss Sandy a one-of-a-kind place in my narrative: as a response to my desperate attempt to woo her off her feet, she

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invested her time in me. I had chosen to write about betrayal for our creative writing exercise, and instead of dissuading nine-year-old me from the mature topic, she gave me books to read, offered out-of-class writing assignments that she would grade on her own time, and nominated my name for every speaking role in any school event. Miss Sandy was the most underpaid and underappreciated teacher, and yet she taught me far beyond the 4th grade. In fact, the lessons she imparted still influence my learning now, and one day these nuances of language will be impressed onto my children. Every piece of writing I compose, every book I read, every article I annotate is my way of giving back the love

Miss Sandy offered me. I am beyond sure that the love for my mother tongue wouldn’t have been cultivated in the way it has if it wasn’t for her one-on-one attention.

A Walk Down a Different History Lane

In the sixth grade, my dad decided that we were old enough to hear his story. His family had once owned a house in Palestine, but they were forced to flee during the Zionist occupation. He told us how, every month, he went olive and fig picking with his father. He told us about the girl he went to school with, who was found shot dead in the street a few days after they had met. The Zionists refused to remove the dead body to teach a lesson to those who showed resistance. He opened my eyes to an apartheid regime, ironically labeled as “the only democracy in the Middle East.” This is when I started to gain a political voice. Too many articles and podcasts later, I have formed opinions. Once, I asked Professor Lambert as to whether someone can be their own literacy sponsor. She responded, “No, but one’s ideas can.” My self-motivation is another one of my literacy sponsors. My drive towards embracing my Palestinian roots is my way of displaying love to the home that raised every generation of my family. It is my way of giving back to the land that has been too busy giving a place for people to call home. It is my way of paying my respects to the countless lives that were sacrificed in the fight for this holy land.

180 Degree Turn Across the Globe

On the summer leading to my senior year of high school, we were granted an interview by the American embassy. My dad had been working on getting our papers for seventeen years, for as long as I had been alive. The American embassy was a place where people deliberately slowed down when they passed, where they lowered their music, and even subconsciously straightened their posture, almost as though they temporarily traded their identity kit for one that would make them more acceptable in this given rhetorical situation. No one could blame them for their

reverence. The number of armed men lined up in front exceeded all the other embassies around Jordan combined. Not to mention the increasing number of people trying to squeeze through each migration window, before it closed into an impenetrable wall. Just like that, the entire family was transplanted from dear Amman to the US. I say “transplanted” because just like every other organ transplant, the new organ fits, the antibodies have been cross-matched, but the new organ is nevertheless foreign, and with all of the tests they carry out, the organ still faces a risk of rejection from the new body. I knew America had a brighter future than Jordan, but how was Jordan’s future meant to improve if everybody just left?

Out of love for my family, I didn’t object to the choice of moving across the world. Out of love for my country, I plan to someday soon return and utilize everything I am learning here to help rebuild my home to how it was before.

Last Call to Flight Number 2356 Leaving to the States

When my family and I landed at Orlando International Airport, I experienced a radical shift in my secondary Discourse. Our arrival was problematic because of the widely perpetuated single story about the Middle East in the States. As the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie says in her TED Talk on the dangers of a single story, “The problem with single stories is that they rob people of dignity” (13:33). Customs took twice as long because we were asked irrelevant questions—were camels my main method of transportation, if I had an arranged marriage to get back to after I finished school here. My English proficiency was questioned, even though I raised the point that I was elected to give the graduation speech.

In the face of this, I chose to spread my own version of the single story. I shared my perspective on how positive and amazing my life back home was, and only that. Everything that I had said was true down to the last word; how simple and easy life back home was, how much you can learn by simply looking out of your window, and how human-on-human interaction is vital. I highlighted my top-notch private education that was entirely in English. I even FaceTimed a few of my teachers from back home to assist my friends and myself on the topics here (personally contacting our teachers is considered normal and encouraged because of the tight-knit teacher-student relationships back home). I mentioned how a single examination we sat for back home equaled the weight of four AP classes I took in my senior year in America, I clarified my religion beautifully, I accentuated the safe environment in which I was raised, and I expressed that my favorite “ethnic” music would most likely be a Chris Brown album. I owed this to myself, to a home that nurtured me with love for all my life. This was all true, incomplete but true.

According to Adichie, “it is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power.... Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person” (9:25). I never thought I’d find a sequence of words to describe my thoughts at that time, but now that I have, it’s time for a confession. I exploited the pliability of the people not knowing any better than their single story by introducing my own. I was not better than the media I criticized for so long now, and even though I was protecting myself against prejudice, I could’ve

A person’s true measure is what they choose to do with their power, regardless of its magnitude. The power to combat ignorance and promote freedom of thought; that is to know every side there is to know about a story and have the liberty to take a stance, make a choice, or simply just have the full knowledge.

done a fairer job. The fact that I had the power to access the complete story should've made me do just that, not abuse the power given to me. So, I went back and fixed it. The people who were interested enough to ask me in the first place got the full story: How amazing my education was, but how there was a chance every year that my dad wouldn't be able to pay the exponentially increasing tuition of a private school. How close my family was, but also how that relationship was tried by every political terror invading the country. And lastly, how much we feared for the lives of our friends and family living in places other than the capital, who never received the privileges of consistent electricity, water, and proper education. I was able to amend the story then, and this paper is my way of fixing it now, and I will continue to be aware of single stories. Consider it my way of saying a person's true measure is what they choose to do with their power, regardless of its magnitude. The power to combat ignorance and promote freedom of thought; that is to know every side there is to know about a story and have the liberty to take a stance, make a choice, or simply just have the full knowledge. To be able to do that, we must trust people with our full stories and hope that they will in turn use that to fulfill a bigger cause.

I have acquired many literacies (I probably have a couple hundred more to go, too), but the single literacy that I learnt by coming here—the ability to use the power given to me to benefit a greater good that doesn't necessarily include my own, the ability to stop a toxic cycle—is the single most literacy I am proud of. It required a combination of all of the literacies I have: academic literacy to get this paper done, social literacy to influence people to do the same with the power that they have, the ability to be vocal and speak up regarding my story, the ability to keep an open mind throughout this entire process, and the self-desire to make this paper one of the more honest pieces of writing. All of which I was able to do “with love, for love, or through love.” Thanks, Mum.

It All Has to End Eventually

This all struck me half an hour before closing time, and the barista is literally begging me to leave at this point. She also wants to instigate a drinking game where she takes a shot of espresso every time I say “love.” Fair enough, but here's where the real takeaway lies. Some literacies are acquired in our comfort zones, within the four walls of our blue bedrooms, in streets we know like the back of our hands, in places that speak our first language. Other literacies are forced upon us when we move to the other side of the world. You must do something you've never done; you have to test your morals and abilities for them to come into focus. You have to take actions you never thought you could take, ones that will leave you shaking as you do and probably hours after that. I have come to learn that literacies acquired in spite of the adversities that come with them are the most influential and worthy. But in order to navigate through something as messy as life, a combination of all of these literacies with one constant in the midst of the endless change—like love (take a shot)—is needed because they complement each other to completion. I think I am ready to head home now. This barista deserves a raise.

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