

Reinventing the Margin: Tales of Syrians around the World and a New Narrative for the Future

by Abdullah Alkafri



To Alaa Abdel Fattah, who is still here, and whose echoing voice is rattling in the ears of his oppressors, and whose words will eventually end this nightmare and to Sari Alkafri, the creator of neglected miracles.

This project began with my desire to think about various issues and experiment outside any existing framework. This was, of course, quite naïve for two reasons. The first is that the existing frameworks probably exist because they are the best options, tried and tested approaches to conceptualising major challenges. The second reason is that the moment one begins talking about Syria, one is forced into dealing with absurdity: any prediction or suggestion of what is 'possible' in Syria is instantaneously immaterial to the point of futility. This leads us to ask: what do we really mean when we say that something is 'possible'? What is 'possible' in Syria, a country afflicted by a black hole that has devoured its present and future and is erasing its past one day at a time?

Despite everything, my desire persisted, and I asked myself how we might write about Syria without it being the victim, but rather as the main protagonist. How can we overcome the challenge of focusing constantly on responding to emergencies and crises, and kick our habit of neglecting those innumerable other matters of paramount importance that simmer urgently just beyond our reach? Simply asking this question, I realised that the problem of Syria is one that has yet to be understood, such is its complexity and our collective lack of effort to deconstruct it. Our understanding of Syria is sufficiently sprawling that, should one type the word 'Syria' into Google, one yields results ranging from the rich philosophical writings of Sadiq Jalal al-Azam all the way to cheap pornography. Nothing, truly nothing, can reflect the magnitude of what has happened in this country, which has witnessed a level of destruction argued to be the most complicated event in our modern history, and a damning representation of our world.

This country – to the extent that one can even call it a country – which has endured ruin, tragedy, disintegration, and abandonment, urges us to study it. It urges us to deconstruct it, examining it in its most essential form: a fully-fledged catastrophe, both in a post-dramatic and a post-modernist sense. Naturally, anyone who examines any aspect of modern Syria under the proverbial microscope faces innumerable moral questions of indescribable complexity. And while these moral questions may initially seem tailored to the situation of Syria, one finds that they actually lead us to dig into fundamentally similar complex issues discussed by artistic works in all manner of global contexts. Echoes of the Syrian experience are everywhere: art can guide

us in conversations about how our world could be, and it can prevent us from overlooking the most challenging moral issues we face.

Indeed, since time immemorial we have resorted to performing arts disciplines as creative means to talk about catastrophe. Tragedy, as a genre, has served enduringly as a lens through which to study the essence of catastrophe in the human experience. Performing arts are ideal for this purpose by nature of their ephemeral qualities, their inherent vulnerabilities, and their timelessness. We have recently witnessed how performing arts have succeeded in overcoming the spectre of the Covid-19 pandemic: our collective acceptance that in-person performing arts were suddenly 'over', discontinued unanimously for the first time in history, triggered immense scepticism, anxiety, and gross admission of vulnerability. And yet, performing artists dared to start again from ground zero. This project therefore aims to address the unfocused human experience, shattered, scattered, and isolated in the absence of performing arts encounters. It will also consider the future purpose of performing arts as a medium itself, resolute and agelessly important as a means of standing tall against whatever challenges and structural reforms it faces, now and in decades to come.

Over recent years, the situation in Syria has demonstrated how the word 'margin' can develop radically new meanings: indeed, the margin – of society, of culture, of everything – has become the defining driver of change in the Arab region. This margin has developed both inside and outside Syria, and it has strengthened organically and spontaneously amid a unique mixture of contradiction and diversity. The margin has expanded to the extent that it now reigns supreme, crowned with the sacrifices of those who pushed its boundaries against all manner of resistance, and nourished by their research, learning, and celebration. It is a margin slowly and progressively gaining momentum as it generates more knowledge. Only by delving into and exploring this margin can we work out how to dismantle the complexities of the world and its persistent failures.

In this project, we hope to showcase a series of original theatre texts, artist testimonies, personal experiences, multidisciplinary works, and academic research papers, all commissioned for this platform. The works of our contributors chart a conceptual framework with which we can consider complementarities between migration and performing arts. On this platform, we are sharing our ignorances, our concerns, and our confusions about the complexities of our present and future. We are sharing our modest experience of talking about Syria – The Catastrophe – eleven years after the theft of its revolution, the fragmentation of its social fabric, and the ransoming of its humanity. When we observe Syria's image as it is portrayed around the world, we face a petrifying scene plagued with problems, and yet also great hope. This project is a collaboration among friends from different generations and fields of interests, each contributor willing to ask bold questions and participate according to their individual experience and knowledge. In this sense, we believe that the project is not the fruit of Syria alone, but a smorgasbord of works that spotlight Syria and many other global contexts, paralleling each other in importance. This is an approach we hope to adopt more in the coming years.

We invite anyone who wishes to scrutinise these questions alongside us to read, republish and share these works. All are available for use under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International, which permits the copying, redistribution, transformation, and modification of the content free of charge, provided that the work is [attributed appropriately to its licensor](#) in the production or performance of any works addressing questions of migration.