

The Curious Fate of Professor Nour Arslan

I saw professor Nour Arslan the first time in the hallways of the Arabic Literature department in Mukadar. Nothing about his looks indicated he was a professor, or that he would be so interesting one, to come across my not so interesting path. Yet he would be not only my professor during the last year of my bachelor degree, but also one to remember. His arrival coincided with a revolt against the government of Mukadar. Some called it a “jasmine” revolt. But I for one smelled no jasmine when bullets flew about and tires and cars burned all around me and my friends on the streets.

Two years after its beginning, things cooled down a notch, but poverty and worries scaled upward. And despite of it all, professor Nour Arslan signed off from a cushy tenure in the department of Oriental studies in Oxford where he taught for twenty years, packed a suitcase and a backpack and headed down to Mukadar – on paper, the country of his birth.

Not too long after he showed up in our faculty, he fell in the spotlight. People had different opinions about professor Arslan. Some thought he was “such a strange man”. Others thought, “hmm, maybe he was a little bit out of his mind”. And others were hellbent on bringing him down, and out again, from the university campus, and back to “whatever the heck he came from”.

When I laid eyes on him I didn’t think he was a professor. But if he was, I thought he’d be teaching in the French department. For me, it was his praline countenance that gave it

off. The dark hair, rumped back in short slick locks. The thin lines of shade underlining his hooded eyes, which, I swear, could have been the work of a top-notch beauty parlour professional, not the product of mother nature. It bespoke to someone who belonged among students of the French department. For we saw in them good looks, sophistication, skirt and jeans-wearing, vacation-affording kind of crowd. Originating in families graced by the above. French department boys and girls loved the existentialist literature of Sartre, Beaudelaire, and Camus. They basked in the New Wave Cinema of Jean-Luc Godart, Agnès Varda and François Truffaut like it was a long-standing family affair, and it made us see them in its cinematic colour, *Noire*.

But, truth be told, he had nothing to do with them French department boys and girls save the looks, the occasional smirk, and the lucky strike dangling from the corner of his drying lips. He was the new Classic Arabic Literature professor. Came all the way back from “wherever the heck he was”, to talk to us about the lives and works of ancient Arabic poets and writers. Half-lame, desert dwelling hobbits that we were, he came to talk to us. He wasn’t about French existentialism, more than about literature. Old, poetic, totally forgotten Arabic words of literature.

And I was just getting ready for it. The prospect of a year with this man changed my feelings about studying. I signed out of a life of perpetual protest and looked forward to the fresh introductions of an experienced, bright mind. But I was a little too hopeful.

What we called the political landscape in Mukadar at the time was still too charged. Hundreds of political parties sprung from the first round of elections. From which dozens of other representations trickled to university campuses. Everyone wanted to become a president of something. And the louder, the more violent a representation was, the better chance it had in representing.

The most notorious of them were the TSJ (the Total Students for Justice), which sprung from the Total People for Justice party (for which Stalin was a role model), and the TJA (the Total Justice for All), which sprung from the theological Total Justice for All party.

The Total Students for Justice demanded:

- The immediate removal of professor Nour Arslan from the faculty of humanities. “Down to imposed education.” In their eyes the professor was imposed by “foreign forces”, and foreign forces carry “thought-disease”.
- The removal of all material from the courses which wasn’t there to tie up poetry, literature, and any human creation into one goal, as mandated by three political theorists of “total-conflict.”
- “Literature is politics and politics is literature”, to be installed above the entrance gate of the faculty.
- The removal of the new dean who is “dipped in the same sauce as Mr Arslan.”

- The banning of student events of theatre, cinema or music that didn't fight for the above.

Whereas the Total Justice for All demanded:

- The removal of Mr Arslan from the the faculty of humanities, being "a work of the devil."
- The removal of all material from the courses which included references and allusions and possible interpretations to and of alcohol, love, sex (aka. non-marital activities), or as much as praising a flower in and for itself.
- "Literature is theology and theology is literature", to be installed above the entrance gate of the faculty.
- "Females" must cover their bodies hither and thither, regardless of the circumstances, inside the university premises, in classrooms, in an exam, in heat, in cold, in conversation, in silence, alone and with others. Must put the body in cloth. To be in hiding or not to be in hiding, is the question.
- Banning clothes which do not keep four centimetres distance away from the skin. Man can wear tight, though. (Note: intriguing.)
- Afternoon naps are mandatory in all language departments, citing the belief that "only devils don't nap." (I personally was in favour of this one. Just saying.)

It was a strange list of requests, especially that both groups were standing completely opposite each other, with opposite belief systems, but they were on the same wavelength.

Two hours twice a week in the amphitheater with professor Nour Arslan gave us a glimpse of the magic in the works of Abu Nawas, Ibn Burd, Ibn Al-Mukaffa'a, Al-Rumi, Al-Mutanabbi, Al-Jahiz and a bunch of other Ibns and Als with whom he fascinated us to oblivion beyond the physical realms of the amphitheater and the reality in Mukadar.

And as soon as the session ended and the amphitheater's door opened, we walked out into a spectacle of TJA students screaming, lined up with impaled banners reading "Not welcome!", "Out of Mukadar!", "Down to the heretic", "Deviant!", "To hell!"...etc, etc.

While on other days the same group would alternate with a group of TSJ representatives and the banners would be more like: "Traitor", "Scum bourgeois", "Cut his way"...etc, etc.

The last day at university was toward the end of June. We had two exams. One in the morning and one in the afternoon with professor Arslan. We finished the morning exam and walked into a hallway buzzing with students coming out of the classrooms. It was an absolutely hot day, flushed with unlimited sunlight, typical to any other June-day of any year prior. Dry, with a sky promising no patch of grey clouds or a drop of rain for months to come. And since the campus was removed from urban areas, common black birds and the occasional swishing and rustling of tree branches and leaves was all to reach our ears.

I left the exam's room with Emir (my childhood buddy and now classmate) on my side.

"Oh, what's with them?" I said nodding toward professor Arslan and the dean chatting by

the wall as students came and went through the hall. Their exchange appeared nerved and hurried. More like one to be had in an office behind a closed door.

“Hmm, I don’t know.” Emir shrugged, then slang the strap of his backpack on one shoulder and helped me slide mine around the freshly cast gips around my broken arm and slowly rested the strap on my shoulder.

“Thanks.” I said, and turned again toward the men by the wall.

But just as I made the turn, I bumped my broken arm’s fist against Emir’s back. Emir wasn’t exactly the muscled, shredded, or whatever gym-dudes call it, kind of guy. He was a skinny one, and so what I bumped against was mostly his hip bone. I hit him hard enough to make me scream. So loud, to bring our morning professor’s head popping out of the lecture room. So fast he popped, I swear it should have only been possible if his body stretched across the amphitheater, over the rows of ascending tables and seats, through the door, while his legs were still fixed on the floor by his desk where we left him. “What seems to be the matter, ladies,” he paused, “and gentlemen?”

“Nothing, nothing at all, Mr Brahem.” Said Emir, just to fill the silence growing in the behest of the mortification. “Hmmm.” Said the popping head, and pulled back inside.

“Fuck, Emir, fuuuck!” I said, the words airing through my clenched teeth.

My body squeezed, colour left my face and my eyes started to water. My arm pulsed under the cast in pain beyond what I could take. Or maybe, *no*, I thought to myself, *I could, fuck, I must, take this*. I tried to take a longer breath but it was hard. No air coming. I

sat down on a bench by a large window opening to the faculty's central square. Emir opened his bottle of water and was trying to give me some water.

"No, I'm fine. Let's go now."

"Tssh, are you sure?!"

"Yes."

"I'm very sorry, really. Shit. You just turned like "

"It's not your fault."

"Hmm, sure you don't want water?!"

"No. Let' go."

"Where do you wanna go?" He said..

"To the cafeteria. Don't annoy me now."

"To the cafeteria, yes, of course."

"Ok go, move! Maan."

Boy was he slow to move then. *Time* itself was slow to move. In fact, at some point that year I was ready to pretend this thing we call "time" didn't exist. I was ready to roll into the new academic year with absolutely no expectations, until someone says the year was over, and a new one was beginning. And here I was, walking around with a suspended arm, and a fate in the hands of the whipping lash of destiny.

A cast around my arm for a month now after I fell and snapped my elbow running behind the university bus. And I never broke a bone in my body before. All things

considered I decided then that breaking an arm was but another casual thing to happen to me. One major fiasco after another for years didn't make a difference what comes next. My brother, shot dead in the revolt no more than two days after the first clashes with the police. Two years of brutal street clashes with the police and no university opened for an education. My father, a long-time member of the ruling party against which the protests raged, still alive and well, but he cut ties with me for not being too big on supporting the same regime. My mother, I never met my mother. Long ago, she passed on before I could tell how she looked or smelled like.

When I told Emir let's go to the cafeteria, I meant the teachers cafeteria. We were in the habit of going to the teachers cafeteria instead of the students' cafeteria. We've been to the students cafeteria before, but the day we made an impromptu stop at the the teachers cafeteria for a pistachio-ed baclava and coffee to go, we just kept coming back. You see, the pistachio-ed baclava and the coffee were phenomenal, but also the teachers cafeteria was right opposite to our department, whereas the students cafeteria was within twenty minutes walk, and tended to be crowded 24/7, or so it seemed. And it didn't exactly give away a cafeteria vibe, but rather a laboratory of sorts. For that as soon as you approach it you're hit with a sour smell and clouds of vapour puffing out of its windows. The smell we attributed to something called "carbonato", which, legend has it, the cooks added to the big boiling cauldrons to make the food cook faster, even though to our senses, it was

more like a chemical hack Musolini's soldiers would have used in their barracks during world war two, and was since banned in Italy and the rest of the world.

Did the professors wonder what the hell we were doing ordering food next to them at their counter? Yes they did, yes they did. One eyebrow after another raised high upon seeing us like the legs of ballerinas lifting in a ballet ensemble. But we could get away with it thanks to a simple theory we followed: We pretended Emir was my boyfriend, I, his girlfriend.

And since the professors who hang out in the cafeteria were mostly from the Philosophy, English or French departments, we knew they were the types to go along with the proposition. Those were critical minded, but warm and empathetic, and open.

In Mukadar in general and outside this very cafeteria, there was no such thing as "boyfriend girlfriend." But in our case we worked hard to back our theory whenever an eyebrow was to rise again. We held hands, walked clumsily, bumped shoulders and smiled like two idiots in helpless love. We also gave off a similar character through looks.

And when not, just the very opposite. We wore black-grey jeans and second hand brown leather boots all the time. We were both short. Emir looked melancholic, I looked cheery.

Which was spiritually complementary. And on occasion, I let him ferret in my purse or backpack for a facial tissue or a gum while somebody was watching. They mainly women professors would turn around and give us the "hmm?" look, then settle back on the boyfriend-girlfriend hypothesis.

My feelings for Emir were of admiration and trust. I can't think of anyone else to share both feelings with. And I believed he must have had the same thing for me, because I knew he didn't have the kind of family to share them with. Emir comes from a special family where his father, known for being a very pious man, wanted nothing from his child but to grow into a good old pious Sheikh at the age of twenty-one. But Emir didn't. And went to study literature. And so they never talked again.

In the cafeteria we ordered our favourites: two white bean soups, a tiramisu for Emir, a slice of watermelon for me, and two large cups of fresh mint and green tea for each. We picked our orders and slowly walked to the far back corner of the cafeteria and sat in our usual spot. A simple wooden table, surrounded by four creaking wooden chairs standing apart from the black faux leather chairs the professors liked to use. Thick white curtains hang between us and the intense lights dashing through the long windows, and a variety of potted plants surrounded us and contributed to the sense of seclusion we were there for. We drew our chairs up and sat.

"So", I said. Slurp. "It's gonna be Kalila Wa Dimna right?" (Referring to the topic of the afternoon exam). Slurp. "I hope so." Said Emir. Slurp. "Yea," I said. "Otherwise," slurp, "I'm gonna bother you big time!" Slurp. Then I went ahead and bumped my knee against the table as I drew the chair up spilling some of the hot tea. It's sort of a tradition you know. Every time I'm at a table, the table gets knocked and something gets spilled.

“Sorry,” I said. Slurp. Sliding my hair behind an ear, then picked a white napkin and dried the spillage.

“Did you actually prepare for anything else other than Al Jahiz and his Kalila Wa Dimna?” He asked. “Yes. I also prepared a bit Abu Nawas. Why? I like both of them.”

“Hmmm, I don’t know about Al Jahiz. He’s a bit too sententious. Too didactic. All that wisdom talk, humbug! Too much moralising overshadows the art my friend.” Slurp. “Not that I have anything against writing about it in an exam, not when the professor gives me the freedom to talk about it. But I don’t see why you should obsess over these two.”

“I am not obsessed! Do you think I am in a position to study more than two people at a time?”

“Oh tough shit. Yes you can. You’re just taking things too personal sometimes, you know that. Like when you obsess about a social issue just because you have issues in and with your own family, you fail to fix them and you project your frustration on the rest of society.”

I stopped eating and we looked at each other over the food. “Don’t toss that soup on my face now.” He finally said.

“Don’t be an ass.” I said and continued to eat.

“Abu Nawas on the other hand is fun to read.” He said. “He talks about wine, beauty, pleasure, lovers, the lonely nights and the longing for a human’s touch.” He said. Then, he raised his spoon in the air, and recited:

“Don't cry for Layla,”

“Don't lose your mind about Hind!

Drink among roses a rose-red wine,

A drought that descends in the drinker's throat,

Bestowing its redness on eyes and cheeks.

The wine is a ruby; the glass is a pearl,

Served by the hand of a slim-fingered girl,

Who serves you the wine from her hand, and wine

From her mouth — doubly drunk, for sure, will you be!

I chortled. “Who’s the one with obsessions you said?”

He went on.

“In the bath-house, the mysteries hidden by trousers

Are revealed to you. All becomes radiantly manifest.

Feast your eyes without restraint!

You see handsome buttocks, shapely trim torsos,

You hear the guys whispering pious formulas to one another (“God is Great!” “Praise be to God!”)

Ah, what a palace of pleasure is the bath-house!

Even when the towel-bearers come in

And spoil the fun a bit.”

“Jesus Emir, you *are* obsessed.”

“You know he was gay right?” He said.

“Most likely yes.”

“An old gay poet man in a rough hooded cloak strolling the streets of a Muslim caliphate town. Can you picture it?”

“Hard to imagine.” I said. Then added, “so what does this mean, Mr know so much about Abu Nawas?”

“What?”

“Are you gay? Haha.”

“What?! No!” He said. “Well not that there is anything wrong with that. I mean having that kind of attraction between men. Other, men.”

His voice came in the most casual tone possible, like an understanding, minding his own business, kind of Muslim boy. But in the end we were talking about something we never talked about before. Not only we were talking about same sex attraction, but we were talking about SEX itself!

“I am not gay.” He said calmly, his eyes shifting between looking in my eyes and looking at my lips. Before red colours took over his cheeks and he was shaking like he was gripping to the precipice of a cliff for ten hours. He cleared his throat once, and then again and said “you know how Al Jahiz died right?”

“No. How did he die, Emir? Tell me.”

“Volumes stacked in his house fell on his head and finished him. Some of the volumes would have been his own work that’s a fact.” He said.

“Quite a way to go for a lover of books.” I said, knowing the story myself, but I wanted to give the boy space to breath.

“Yes,” he added, “and quite a way to live that long mind you, given how many enemies wanted him dead, just to go like ” He said, and we both turned to spot professor Arslan and a colleague of his from the English department walking into the cafeteria. “To go like this.” He continued. Slurp.

The professor and his colleague took seats in the middle of the cafeteria, and two minutes later the waiter followed carrying two double espressos on a plate. Professor Arslan appeared calm, the steam of the hot coffee swirled in front of him. By comparison we were suddenly aware of the afternoon exam. *If I could only read his mind.* I thought. And glanced at his left hand fingers tapping with the rhythm of Cesaria Evora’s Sodade playing in the cafeteria’s speakers. The song resonated beautifully across the spacious cafeteria. And I was feeling warmer, and warmer. I looked at the air-conditioner on the wall, then down at the professor’s fingers tapping away. The first drops of sweat sprang on my forehead, in despite of the cool, whooshing currents of the air-conditioner. I was feeling wonderful, but I wasn’t so much at ease.

I took a sip from my tea, and then another, and another. “This was nice.” I said to Emir. “Yea, the soup was amazing. And, this watermelon is great.” He said smashing another

bite between his teeth. When, out of the blue, a squalor of chairs banging against each other struck into our ears from outside the cafeteria. Feet scurrying and no talking at all. Just movement. "What's going on?" Said Emir. Then suddenly the door of the cafeteria spread open, letting in thick rays of yellow sunbeams, and two long shadows, followed by two middle aged men dressed in black leatherwear heat or no heat outside, leather was the style. Phones clasped tensely in their hands, the two men stomped toward to professor Arslan's table. Their names were Idriss and Korrabi. The two most notorious leaders of the TJA in campus. Immediately recognisable.

The tallest of the two, Idriss, the one with the sunken eyes, dark grease-plastered hair and boney fingers, planted his hands open on the table, leaned forward and looked straight into Mr Arslan's face, while Korrabi by his side standing with the contours of a freshly recruited police officer, eyes glaring at the professor. Completely ignoring the other colleague sitting at the same table, Idriss started talking. But he was murmuring we didn't hear much. Then out of the blue he burst in furious growls raising one hand to a fist, then putting it back on the table, then raising it again to point the index finger inches from Mr Arslan's nose. "I said it once and twice, you don't understand," "this day was about to come." "You wanted to stay did you?" "you love it a lot here?" "you will see the love you son of the whore" were in the mix of what we heard Idriss say.

It was intense enough hearing the words, but Idriss's tight-skinned bony cheek, weirdly handsome face, intense by nature, rendered the display even more intense as his eyebrows knitted harder, and his hand and shoulder moved back, and then forth.

Professor Arslan didn't say anything in return. He placed his coffee back on the table, and did his best to hold his quivering hand still. He folded his arms and leaned back on his faux leather chair. The English department professor was about to blurt something out finally, having his hand held up for a good minute thus far, but professor Arslan motioned him not to, and folded his arms back and waited. Behind the counter the waiter who was patting a napkin around a white plate to dry it, watched and didn't look keen on doing a thing. He blinked his eyes in succession, fast enough to catch what in the world was happening. Two other professors stood by the end of the counter, smoking, two coffees in front of them, watched in disbelief.

I could hear my heart thumping in my eardrums. I thought I might faint and I never fainted before. I was growing very annoyed too, by the increasingly damp sensation in my armpits. "What shall we do?" I said to Emir. "Let's leave." He said. "But we can't leave him like this." I said.

Idriss was more sinister and more determined than ever. Like he was up for something he long waited for and finally someone unleashed him to do it. Of course. How could he, or the people he represented, take satisfaction in a bunch of wooden banners sticking

out of their fists in the blasting heat of the sun? Wouldn't the stream of online trolling do it either? Clearly not. Action, speaks louder than words. This was a statement, in action.

Soon after Idriss and Korrabi left, the echo of a mic hissed throughout the premises of the faculty with an ear-splitting feedback in its wake. The voice of Idriss struck in thereafter. "Brothers and sisters, in the name of "

"Ok c'mon, the professor is leaving, let's go." I said to Emir, and we paced behind him.

Outside we were joined by a group of our colleagues from our class who were heading down to search for the professor. Together we walked to our department.

My heart thumping harder and the sweat now trickling from funny places. We turned right, and we found ourselves wholly exposed to the square where a hundred of students scattered, some standing, some seated and some laying on the green lawn. Only a dozen or so students assembled by the feet of the speaker. Everyone's putting up with the blasting afternoon sun.

Idriss stood on a chair in the middle, his being, a blasting extension of the afternoon sun. The direct sun didn't seem to affect him the least. A vein swelled on the left side of his neck, and vaporous droplets of spit shot out of his mouth and sparked in the sun rays, and were visible even to us from distance. A microphone in one hand, the other hand fumbled for support in the shoulder of none other Korrabi who stood by his side wobbling under the pressure like a rattletrap table.

“I don’t”, screamed Idriss, “want”, “to see,” “frustration”, “because we,” “in the TJA” “against the immoral devils,” “we” “will not” “stand and watch” “while they” “corrupt our girls” “our morals” “and they” “and, ah! there!” “he is,” “in person.” The students turned in sync in our direction. “The so called Arslan.”

“Oh shit.” Said Emir. We hastened the pace. Walked into the Arabic Literature Department, into our amphitheater and closed the door behind.

Professor Arslan closed the windows bringing the rancour to a muffled underground rancour. “Ok.” He said. “I hope that did not scare you, did it? It’s only two hours to go and I’m sure you’re ready for it! It’s just an exam ladies and gentlemen. Let’s do this.” He added eyeing us around. He shuffled through the exam papers, grabbed a pile and tapped it on the table vertically to straight it. Then lifted his head and said “I am sorry you have to go thorough this, I am very sorry, from the bottom of my heart. It is only the last day of this academic year and we will finish it with success. Now, please put your phones away, no papers on the tables, and if you need to use the toilet, please raise your hand and you will be allowed to go to the toilet. Alright. Good luck.” And then went ahead to distribute the exam papers.

The exam was about Al Jahiz. I poured on the paper like I was getting back at someone, with a slight hint of relief, which soon subsided to a tremor. Two paragraphs in, the muffled rancour grew louder, and closer, and louder, and closer. Roars, chains rattling, chairs banging filled the hallway just outside.

I pressed my hands very hard on my ears, squeezed my eyes shut and was consumed by a ferocious desire to cry. But all my senses went numb for a moment, and all I heard was silence. Until my eyes jolted open by the blasting of the door of the amphitheater, the howls of the invaders and the screams of my colleagues.

“Where is he!” Roared Idriss holding a machete down next to his right thigh while the rest of the band got caught in a punch-up on the go with the poor colleagues who tried to block the door. We rushed instinctively toward the front of the room and formed a human barrage around the professor’s desk, but a first blow with a rusted chain on one of the girls head spurted a gout of blood down her face so fast, to make way. Idriss rushed to the window open next to the professor’s desk and leaned out followed by others who opened more windows and leaned in the same manner. The professor was nowhere to be seen. I pushed through to a spot at the back window with my broken arm tucked under my belly as Emir yelled behind me, “no! let’s get out!”, and there was no sight of the man.

But there was this big heap of sand on the ground three-storeys below the front window, which was among other construction debris neglected for three years since intentions to extend the French department came to a halt as per usual with most constructions sites in Mukadar. It was raining the day before, the heap was perfectly smoothened, except the big crater now impressed on it, revealing the dry sand coming from under. “He jumped!” I screamed. “Emir! What the hell! Oh my god! He jumped!”

I burst into tears. I put my head into Emir's chest and wept as the room vacated. Nour Arslan, professor of Classic Arabic literature sprang off the third floor window of his own classroom like a teenage burglar on the run, and was never seen or heard from again. Those unfinished construction projects were good for something after alls, and were still there years to come. Idriss was still the leader of the TJA and continued to be so as long as he was a student and never graduated.