

Unfinished Identities

EXPRESSIONS OF COSMOPOLITANISM IN
LEVANTINE LITERATURE

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he Middle East has historically been described as a region of discontinuity, diversity and pluralism. It is the cradle of civilization, the birthplace of the three Abrahamic religions, and home to a multitude of ethno-religious and linguistic groups. Centuries of intermingling have created an elastic and variable Middle Eastern and Levantine identity, embraced in different yet legitimate ways by those in the region. As Philip Mansel states in *Levant: Splendour and Catastrophe on the Mediterranean*, “a Western name for an Eastern area, the Levant was also, by implication, a dialogue between East and West: and therefore—after the Muslim conquests of much of the eastern Mediterranean in the seventh century—between Islam and Christianity.”¹

However, although the region is known and embraced for its variety, many have tried to enforce their specific idea of Middle Eastern identity onto others, creating great sources of tensions and warring factions. Lebanon is a perfect example of this, as it is a microcosm of the Middle East. This miniscule country nestled on the Mediterranean coast of the Levant is home to almost twenty distinct ethno-religious groups, and has been the meeting place of Maronite, Sunni, Shia, Greek Orthodox, Melkite, Druze, and Jewish traditions. It is extremely diverse geographically, politically and ideologically, and can truly illustrate the issues the modern Middle East faces in the 21st century.

With its unparalleled diversity, the Middle East has the potential to become, and in places already is, a haven of cosmopolitanism. This recently popularized ideology advocates that all human beings, regardless of their political, religious, or ethnic affiliations, should constitute one global community that respects all its members equally, rather than multiple exclusive communities that only look out for people of their own.² Middle Eastern intellectuals of all backgrounds have advocated for this kind of inclusive and fluid form of identification, one that avoids hostility and calls upon institutions to respect the natural human right of individuality. Despite its long tradition of pluralism, however, the Middle East is today ridden by sectarian conflict and political dysfunction, and inspires fear in foreigners who think of bloodshed before thinking of the beautiful and multi-faceted Middle Eastern history and culture.

Modern Arabic literature, from works of prose to poetry, mirrors the exceptionally complex political reality of the Middle East. Against the backdrop of Arab-Israeli conflict, the rise and subsequent fall of Arab Nationalism, and warring forms of identification in the region, there have arisen diverse works of literature remarkably poignant and illustrative of their times. Adonis and Amin Maalouf, two Levantine authors of the 20th century, are known as idealists and provocative writers who defend this concept of

cosmopolitanism in the very challenging and hostile Middle Eastern reality; they are strong critiques of the current sectarianism and violence and yearn for a cosmopolitan Middle East where all human beings with their differences are respected. Looking at the Middle East of the 21st century, is this cosmopolitan view realistic and possible? Or, is it a dream that only a privileged few can imagine and aspire to reach?

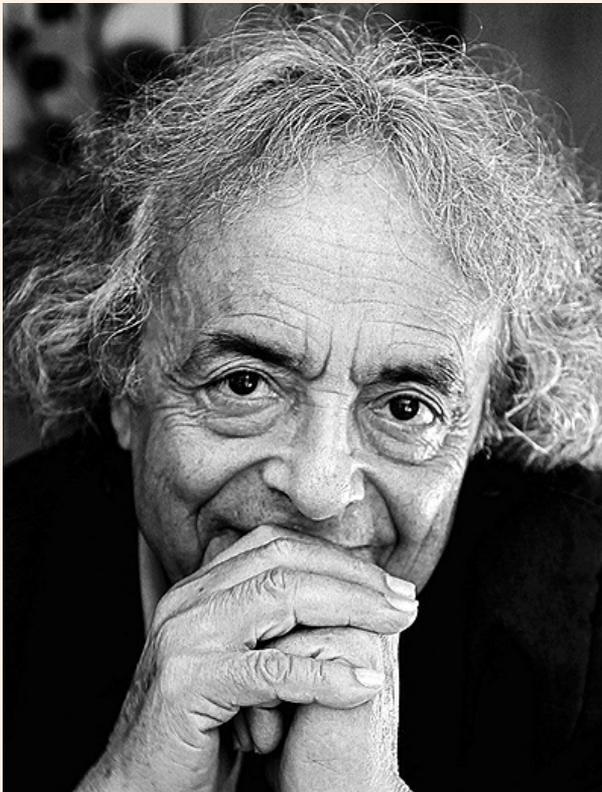
The term ‘cosmopolitanism’ can be traced back to Ancient Greek civilization; it derives from the Greek *kosmopolitês*, meaning “citizen of the world.” This groundbreaking concept transcends the manmade boundaries of nationhood, looking towards the world’s well-being rather than that of local communities based on ethnicity, religion, social status, or political consensus. It does not impose universal moral guidelines, and maintains that men and women of different backgrounds must respect and embrace one another’s differences instead of feeling targeted by them. In other words, there is not one group, culture or civilization that is superior in any form, as they are all legitimate in distinct ways. It is a utopian vision of the world that would, in theory, eliminate any form of discrimination, mistrust or violence among people of different groups. In the documentary series *Examined Life*, self-proclaimed cosmopolitan and intellectual Kwame Anthony Appiah expresses his vision of cosmopolitanism and its importance in today’s increasingly globalized society:

“We need a notion of global citizenship [...] The cosmopolitan says you have to begin by recognizing that we are responsible, collectively, for each other, as citizens are. But second, cosmopolitans think that it’s okay for people to be different. They care about everybody, but not in a way that means they want everybody to be the same, or like them.”³

This idealistic vision is challenging to implement in a world where political boundaries are synonymous with human identities. Manmade separations enforce a language, history, and culture on an individual, who consequently identifies him or herself as an

actor of the nation state. Ernest Renan grapples with these issues in his famous essay “What is a Nation?,” observing that the modern state is a relatively new Western invention. The modern state, he contends, promoted the perception of racial differences, as certain peoples implicitly or explicitly began to identify only with their own co-nationals. This exclusivity helped justify the quest to dominate other European countries. Renan uses the example of the formation of the French nation to illustrate this point:

“France very legitimately became the name of a country into which only a very imperceptible minority of Franks had entered. In the first chansons de geste of the tenth-century, so perfect a mirror of their time, all inhabitants of France are French. The idea of a difference of race within the population of France, so evident in the writing of Gregory of Tours, is to no degree to be found among French writers and poets



The Syrian poet known by the pen name Adonis. Wikimedia Commons.

following Hugh Capet. The difference between the nobleman and the villain is as accentuated as possible but the difference between the one and the other is not at all an ethnic difference.”⁴

The European continent, partitioned this way for centuries, has managed to spread this political system to the rest of the world through imperialism. Although artificial, the concepts of nations and races will continue to play a crucial role in society for as long as people continue to identify with a specific nation or race. In the Middle East, and particularly in Lebanon, people are classified along ethno-religious lines, further accentuating division and leading people away from cosmopolitanism. However, several 20th century Levantine intellectuals, most notably Adonis or Maalouf, echo Appiah’s call for global citizenship. They see their society as outdated and sectarian, and, through their works of poetry and prose, call for social reforms promoting tolerance and embracing diversity.

An influential proponent of cosmopolitanism in modern Arabic literature, the poet, essayist, and critic Adonis is one of the most celebrated literary figures of the Arabic language. Born Ali Ahmad Saïd Asbar near Latakia in 1930 and educated abroad, he is known for his provocative and contentious writing, which constantly questions the morality and legitimacy of modern Arab culture and argues that it is in urgent need of a full transformation. In his view, Middle Eastern norms enforce a monolithic and rigid identity, failing to give Arabs the liberty they deserve to develop their own identity. In *Identité Inachevée* (translated *Unfinished Identity*, 2004), Adonis promotes a fluid and forever-changing conception of identity, which, in his opinion, is the only path to true authenticity. This philosophy opposes the existing inflexible and outdated form of identification that currently exists in the Middle East, one that has led to the inevitable self-destruction of Arabness. Although he mostly addresses Middle Eastern and Arab issues, his message is meant to be universal and is relevant to people of all backgrounds.

As an Alawite, a then-repressed sect in majority-Sunni Syria, Adonis grew up removed from normative Islamic and Arab culture, in a land under foreign European mandate teeming with both religious and ethnic diversity. He is therefore a product of “a hybrid and a conflation of cultural legacies, ethnic accretions, and geological depositions seldom compatible with prevalent paradigms [...] unhindered by the barriers of his time’s ideological, conceptual, and spatial orthodoxies.”⁵ His non-traditional style certainly stood out among the waves of Pan-Arabism taking over the Middle East at the time, making him one of the most controversial and offensive Arab poets to have ever lived. Nevertheless, his ingenious and revolutionary works have had much success among forward-thinking Middle Eastern readers and intellectuals, and he is considered today as the “Arab world’s greatest living poet.”⁶ In order to achieve his full potential as an outspoken artist, Adonis moved to Lebanon in 1956 to take advantage of the greater level of freedom of speech and more progressive circles that cosmopolitan Beirut offered in comparison to neighboring Arab countries. He eventually became a Lebanese citizen, and after several decades in Beirut moved to Paris, where he still resides at the age of 87.

Adonis has adopted different political ideologies throughout his life, reflecting his willingness to embrace ideological fluidity, with his views evolving along with his personal development. His most important works, however, have always supported a pluralistic Middle Eastern identity. *Identité Inachevée* forcefully advocates for the concept of “unfinished identities”: the idea that one’s personal identity is forever changing and should not be fixed according to certain pre-conceived norms. Adonis’s vision resembles Ernest Renan’s liberal view of *identité électorale* (“elective identity”), a philosophy that calls for individuals to construct their own identities rather than accept them from above.

Identity, for Adonis, is not inherent. Contrarily to certain nationalist beliefs; it is fluid, composed of a plethora of elements, influenced by many factors,

and cannot be imposed on an individual. Throughout their lifetimes, men and women need to create their own identity based on their personal background, experiences, and opinions. Every identity is “open,” “a creation,” and differs from person to person.⁷ Following this logic, Adonis claims that he was “born three times: in Syria, in Lebanon and in France.”⁸ Although he has very deep links to every one of these places, he finds it impossible to tie himself to a single one of them. Refusing to solely identify as ‘Syrian’, ‘Lebanese’ or ‘French’, he rather decides to adopt all of these cultural backgrounds to define the most authentic image of himself. Adonis is a strong believer in creating bridges between different lifestyles and cultures, as he is convinced that an identity should not be confined by artificial territorial lines. In his works, he often calls for a hybridization of Middle Eastern and European culture, which could potentially heal the divide between the Orient and the West:

“I began realizing that “me”, “the self”, would be unable to understand or comprehend itself if it did not



The Lebanese author Amin Maalouf. Wikimedia Commons 2013.

“Adonis grew up removed from normative Islamic and Arab culture, in a land under foreign European mandate teeming with both religious and ethnic diversity.”

attempt to understand ‘the other.’ By the same token, I could not understand the East without attempting to understand the West—just as the West itself remains untrue to itself without attempting to understand the East. Cultural identity is like love; it is a continuous dialogue, and alliance between the “self” and the “other”. For the “other” is not only an expression of a need for dialogue; rather, the “other” is a fundamental component of the “self.” A tongue that communicates in many tongues.”

Maalouf is one of the most celebrated Lebanese francophone writers of the modern era, and is a very respected author both in Lebanon and abroad, especially in France, where he was elected to the prestigious *Académie Française* in 2012. Born in 1949 into a Melkite family, he received a French education in Jesuit missionary schools. When the Lebanese Civil War broke out in 1975, he fled to Paris where he continues to live and work. Straddling two distinct countries and traditions, his novels, poetry, essays, journalism, and works of history focus on multifaceted identities and the understanding between distinct cultures, especially between the East and the West. Although he mostly writes in French, most of his novels take place in the Levant and recount stories of people like him; Maalouf’s characters “range across the Mediterranean and the old world of the Levant that’s vanished since the first world war when Greek and Italian mingled with Arabic and Turkish, and Druze rubbed shoulders with Christians, Jews and Sunni Muslims.”¹⁰

Maalouf’s works are an ode to Levantinism, an ideology that advocates for multiplicity, diversity, movement, and mutual respect between the people of the Levant and beyond. Posed between Lebanon

and France, the East and the West, Maalouf routinely deals with this intercultural exchange not only within his own social circles, but also within himself. In his famous essay “*Identités Meutrières*” (translated “In the Name of Identity,” 1998), Maalouf speaks of the importance of embracing one’s individual identity instead of an identity enforced by a superior entity in order to achieve a tolerant society. A person’s given identity is composed of multiple facets, similar to a mosaic, and we must not ignore any of them if we want to be true to ourselves. The mosaic can include pieces adopted by choice as well as those inherited from the geopolitical environment. Maalouf therefore considers both his Lebanese and French backgrounds to be integral to his personal identity, and refuses to sacrifice any part of it in order to fit into a specific mold. In the opening pages of *Identités Meutrières*, he addresses his personal dilemma of being Franco-Lebanese and exposes his philosophy of identity:

“How many times, since I left Lebanon in 1976 to live in France, have people asked me, with the best intentions in the world, whether I felt “more French” or “more Lebanese”? And I always give the same answer: “Both!” I say that not in the interests of fairness or balance, but because any other answer would be a lie. What makes me myself rather than anyone else is the very fact that I am poised between two countries, two or three languages and several cultural traditions. It is precisely this that defines my identity. Would I exist more authentically if I cut off a part of myself? [...] So am I half French and half Lebanese? Of course not. Identity can’t be compartmentalised. You can’t divide it up into halves or thirds or any other separate segments. I haven’t got several identities: I’ve got just one, made up of many components in a mixture that is unique to me, just as other people’s identity is unique to them as individuals.”¹¹

For Maalouf, embracing multiple facets of his identity, whether religious, ethnic, or professional, creates multiple bridges that can be shared with people all around the world, not only with one specific limiting group. For example, he states that, as a Christian, he is able to connect with to the two billion Christians spanning all continents, while his ability to speak Arabic creates bonds with all in the Arab and Islamic worlds: “There are many things in which I differ from every Christian, every Arab, and every Muslim, but between me and each of them there is also an undeniable kinship, in one case religious and intellectual and in the other linguistic and cultural.”¹² This multiple identity, he concludes, makes him a unique individual whom no institutional or social group should chastise.¹³ Maalouf, and those who support his philosophy, pride themselves in building bridges with others, creating a world of tolerance rather than a world of sectarianism.

Like most of his novels, *Les Échelles du Levant* (translated *Ports of Call*, 1996) speaks to the importance and the challenges of adopting multifaceted identities. Although societal standards surrounding religion and ethnicity restrict relationships between individuals from different social backgrounds, the protagonists of *Les Échelles du Levant*, the Turkish-Armenian Muslim Ossyane and the Austro-Jewish Clara, find a way to break through those boundaries. The idea of a Muslim man and a Jewish woman together, especially since the start of the Arab-Israeli War, seems almost inconceivable to us, and Ossyane and Clara’s story expresses the possibility of reconciliation between the two antagonistic camps. Maalouf proves that understanding can be achieved once humans break through their pre-conceived notions of the other and embrace their personal and collective diversity. He also addresses the difficulties of their unusual

relationship. Society separated this couple from one another following the creation of Israel in 1948, an event that gave birth to a never ending conflict creating intense animosity between the Jewish and the Muslim-Arab worlds. Nonetheless, Clara and Ossyane’s daughter, a hybrid between Muslim and Jewish cultures, is an example of how cultural open-mindedness can bring many benefits to both individuals and society.

Adonis and Maalouf, among other Middle Eastern intellectuals, represent the essence of cosmopolitanism. Although both of these writers have very different backgrounds, one being a Syrian Alawite and the other a Lebanese Melkite Catholic, they are able to connect with one another and with others through open-mindedness and acceptance; they have very similar ideologies calling on people of their own group and other groups to look beyond artificial boundaries and to celebrate individual distinctiveness instead of a group’s constructed homogeneity. Their embrace of Levantinism, in different iterations, allows them to connect with various people across the Mediterranean and to be open to other forms of identification. By creating bonds with different social, religious and ethnic circles, these intellectuals are able to build connections with others who do not share the same identity, making them enlightened global citizens instead of chauvinistic nationalists. Cosmopolitanism therefore helps people connect with the other culturally, linguistically, ritually and religiously.

In contrast with the progressive ideologies espoused by Middle Eastern intellectuals, many Arabs do not agree with the tenets of cosmopolitanism. By adopting elitist ideologies, such as many strictly Arabist Muslim or Western-oriented Christians circles have done in Lebanon, the possibility to

“There are many things in which I differ from every Christian, every Arab, and every Muslim, but between me and each of them there is also an undeniable kinship.”

connect with other different people is lost; this was clearly demonstrated in the tragic Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) which caused great destruction and death on all sides. This antagonism, however, was not strictly theological. The strong sectarianism in Lebanon was due to the different image each group has of what Lebanon is and should be, and continues to rattle Lebanon today. One illustration of this disagreement is the presence of competing languages in the country, since “the coexistence in Lebanon of the Arabic and French languages presents itself as an immediate conflict that engages the personality of the Lebanese and divides their opinion.”¹⁴ The two dominant religions in Lebanon identify with two distinct conceptions of civilization and mankind, the Christian being Western-oriented and the Muslim being Arab-oriented, as reflected by the usage of different languages by different groups of people: Lebanese Christians are usually the defenders of the French language, whereas Lebanese Muslims tend to identify more with the Arabic language.¹⁵ Citizens of Lebanon are therefore faced with the challenge of incorporating “parallel but politically incompatible varieties of ethnolinguistic identification,” a phenomenon Tristan Mabry refers to as “dinationalism.”¹⁶ Since incorporating both is somewhat difficult or unnatural, the Lebanese often ended up identifying strictly with one or the other.

Arab Nationalism, in particular, did not leave much room for multi-faceted identities. This ideology emulates the German romantic conception of identity: an individual is an Arab because he or she was born an Arab, and has absolutely no say in the matter. This ideology stands in perfect contrast with Adonis’ and Maalouf’s intersectional views of identity. Whereas Arab Nationalism prides itself in separating “us” from “them” by making a clear distinction between Eastern and Western values, cosmopolitan thinkers embrace the multiple cultures they are confronted with and integrate them into their



Adonis in Krakow, Poland for the Milosz literary festival. Wikimedia Images 2011.

personal identity. As Hannah Arendt states in the *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arab Nationalism is a form of “tribal nationalism,” one that “always insists that its own people is surrounded by a ‘world of enemies,’ ‘one against all,’ that a fundamental difference exists between a people and all others. It claims its people to be unique, individual, incompatible with all others, and denies theoretically the very possibility of a common mankind long before it is used to destroy the humanity of man.”¹⁷ This very famous passage by Sati’ al Husri, one of the main intellectuals of Arab Nationalism, is a perfect illustration of the somewhat violent and imposing rhetoric employed by Arab nationalists in order to convey their chauvinistic and universalist agenda:

“Every Arab-speaking people is an Arab people. Every individual belonging to one of these Arabic-speaking peoples is an Arab. And if he does not recognize this, and if he is not proud of his Arabism, then we must look for the reasons that have made him take this stand. It may be an expression of ignorance; in that case we must teach him the truth. It may spring from an indifference or false consciousness; in that case we must enlighten him and lead him to the right path. It may result from extreme egoism; in that case we must limit his egoism. But under no circumstances,

should we say: 'As long as he does not wish to be an Arab, and as long as he is disdainful of his Arabness, then he is not an Arab.' He is an Arab regardless of his own wishes. Whether ignorant, indifferent, undutiful, or disloyal, he is an Arab, but an Arab without consciousness or feeling, and perhaps even without conscience."¹⁸

In this context, Adonis, who feels very strongly about individual and self-created identities, was a very vocal critique of Pan-Arabism; he believed Arab Nationalism to be a "conceited, narcissistic self-love pathology, represented by the Baath Party, which elevated Arabness to the level of a metaphysical postulate bordering on an alternate theology second only to Islam; a theology whereby the non-Arab 'other' would amount to nothing more than depravity and evil."¹⁹ As he argued in *Identité Inachevée*, Arab culture has become meaningless and obsolete as it refused to keep up with the tides of modernity and lacked the fluidity necessary to be truly genuine. The Middle Eastern individual is "diluted, watered-down and hidden in an overwhelming whole,"²⁰ a victim of the overarching face of Arabness that Pan-Arabism has adopted. As a result, Adonis mostly advocates for the spread of freedom and flexibility in order "to create a new Arab culture and a new Arab identity; one open to the concept of a free elective identity."²¹ It is for this reason that he opposes all forms of blind nationalistic identification (not only Arab Nationalism but also other anti-Arab nationalist movements), arguing that they lead to blind patriotism, paternalism and authoritarianism.

In parallel, Maalouf has also always been very critical of such movements. He laments that "Lebanon is addicted to confessionalism. It is subversive, a poison destroying the state, a drug to which the whole country is addicted.' He advocates for removing mention of religious identity from all records."²² He blames the persisting "tribal" human instincts for the blind violence in the world, and believes that holding on to these meaningless forms of identification will lead to bloodshed in the future. According to

Maalouf, the reason why the Middle East fails to live up to its beauty today is that men and women continue to cling to blind forms of nationalism, such as Arabism, Zionism or Islamism, movements that do not let humans be their true, tolerant selves:

"If the men of all countries, of all conditions and faiths can so easily be transformed into butchers, if fanatics of all kinds manage so easily to pass themselves off as defenders of identity, it's because the 'tribal' concept of identity still prevalent all over the world facilitates such a distortion. It's a concept inherited from the conflicts of the past, and many of us would reject it if we examined it more closely. But we cling to it through habit, from lack of imagination or resignation, thus inadvertently contributing to the tragedies by which, tomorrow, we shall be genuinely shocked."²³

Despite their frustrations with Middle Eastern society and politics, it would be wrong to suggest that Adonis and Maalouf are anti-Arab or anti-Muslim. Adonis's literary works are not attacks on Arab individuals, but rather attacks on Arab institutions and traditional structures that do not allow Arabs to achieve their potential and express their individuality through 'cultural fluidity.' According to Adonis, it is crucial for any culture, whether Oriental or Western, to be able to criticize itself in order to ensure that it continues to grow and stay relevant within the norms of the times as well as in relation to other cultures. In effect, he starts off his *Identité Inachevée* with a strong call for introspection: "Allow me to criticize the Arabs, to criticize myself! Criticism is warranted and legitimate, so long as it is fair and just."²⁴ Maalouf, for his part, strongly criticizes current tides of Islamophobia taking over the West, insinuating that they only lead to a greater cycle of violence:

"What I am fighting against, and always will, is the idea that on the one hand there's a religion Christianity - destined for ever to act as a vector for modernism, freedom, tolerance and democracy, and on the other hand another religion - Islam - doomed

from the outset to despotism and obscurantism. Such a notion is both wrong and dangerous, and throws a cloud over the future of a large part of the human race.”²⁵

What was Arab Nationalism in the 20th century slowly turned into Islamism in today's context. With the symbolic fall of the Arab Nationalist movement the day of the Arab defeat against Israel in 1967, people who still felt strong antagonism towards the West used the religious factor, Islam, instead of the linguistic factor, Arabic, as a means of acquiring militant and fundamentalist political power.²⁶ This in turn has led to great suffering for Middle Eastern populations forced to live under undemocratic and abusive forms of government. This paternalistic and authoritarian ideology, similarly to Arab Nationalism, is dangerous according to Middle Eastern intellectuals such as Adonis and Maalouf, and is in complete opposition with the cosmopolitan ideology. “I am unmoved by the utterances of radical Islamists,” Maalouf states, “not only because as a Christian I feel excluded, but also because I cannot accept that any religious faction, even if it is in the majority, has the right to lay down the law for the population as a whole.”²⁷

Recent years have seen not only a rise in fundamentalism and violence in the Middle East, but also an increase of populism and chauvinism in Western institutions, leading to anti-establishment and extreme-right phenomena such as Brexit or the election of Donald Trump. This can be attributed to the fact that people's local identities feel threatened in the face of inter-cultural exchange, since, as Maalouf puts it, “the ever-increasing speed

of globalisation undoubtedly reinforces, by way of reaction, people's need for identity.”²⁸ In this grim context, is cosmopolitanism really achievable?

After decades of moving towards globalisation and cultural exchange, a large part of the world seems to be heading in the opposition direction, one that goes completely against the cosmopolitan ideology. In both the East and the West, this new trend gave birth to blind nationalism and paternalism, and a rising perception of ‘the other’ in a much more negative and dangerous light. Both these ideologies believe that the East and the West, the worlds of Islam and Christianity, are completely incompatible, and both perceive difference and diversity as a threat rather than a blessing.



Amin Maalouf at a book signing in Barcelona for the Sant Jordi festival. Wikimedia Commons 2013

Several in the Middle East, however, actively continue to hold on to and to promote this cosmopolitan dream today. The documentary *Héritages* (translated *Heritages*, 2014) by director Philippe Aractingi is one of the only sources that addresses the issue of ‘wars of identity’ in modern-day Lebanon. It covers Aractingi’s family history of mobility as well as his personal story once he is forced to flee from Lebanon to France with his family during the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War. The director acknowledges that this lifestyle leads to an identity crisis due to the constant contact with multiple cultures; in the documentary, he struggles with the urge to leave a place that has no future in hopes of a better life, while always looking back to his native land with the desire to reconnect with his Middle Eastern roots. Nonetheless, Aractingi and his family celebrate a Franco-Lebanese identity and embrace the diversity and fluidity of Levantinism. They are depicted celebrating their multicultural and polyglot identity at the end of the film, refusing to let their rich cultural background bring them down.

Due to the strong sectarianism and lack of ethno-religious cohesion in Lebanon, there are no official educational history books covering Lebanese history after 1943, as there is no agreement between the various groups as to how the post-independence era should be covered. Instead, Aractingi’s documentary is used in some classrooms to relate modern Lebanese history. Although it was at first intended to be purely an autobiographical story, Aractingi eventually realized that many outside Lebanon identified with his documentary, especially those feeling uprooted or who have lived through violent conflicts. Through Aractingi’s work, many Lebanese have felt compelled to learn about their own family history and to also accept the history of those from other ethno-religious groups as legitimate. Aractingi sees Lebanon’s diversity as a blessing rather than as a flaw, and wishes others can adopt this philosophy of tolerance to stop the trend of extremism and fear in both the Christian and Muslim societies. In a Lebanon with rising fanaticism and division between Maronites, Sunnis

and Shia, and in a world dominated by leaders such as Trump and Le Pen, Aractingi believes in the need to educate children at a young age about the virtues of acceptance over hatred.²⁹ Aractingi, like many other activists, embodies Levantine cosmopolitanism, proving that it still has a relevant place in modern Lebanese and Middle Eastern society.

Although a broad sense of negativity and pessimism is often associated with the Middle East, many important figures and intellectuals have made great strides through the arts to convey a message of tolerance and multi-faceted identities through their works. Their goal is to break the greatest divide that exists today and that will likely plague humanity for the rest of the 21st century: the ideological war between the East and the West that makes the two civilizations ‘incompatible,’ as one is seen as barbaric and the other as imperialist and hypocritical. In Maalouf’s acceptance speech to the prestigious *Académie Française*, he admits that “a wall is rising in the Mediterranean between the cultural universes I belong to.” He then leaves the *Académie* with these inspiring words: “I do not have the intention to step over this wall to go from one bank to the other. This wall of hate – between Europeans and Africans, between the West and Islam, between the Jews and the Arabs – my ambition is to destroy it, and to continue to demolish it. This was always my reason for living, my reason for writing.”³⁰

The cosmopolitan ideology is very difficult to realize within official local, national and international institutions. Although the Middle East has a great potential for cosmopolitanism, the example of Lebanon in recent years illustrates how challenging its implementation can be. However, cosmopolitanism can succeed if and when divorced from its most utopian pretensions. Through early education, and attention to artworks and narratives that emphasize the multiplicity of individual identities, Middle Easterners of all backgrounds can become accustomed to accepting and respecting one other. Because of this, the cosmopolitan

philosophies of Adonis and Maalouf forcefully argue that the Middle East and other regions around the world must leave behind their outdated chauvinism, embrace free-flowing forms of identification, and give individuals of all ethno-religious and socio-economic backgrounds the freedom and respect they deserve. ♦

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