

Laudatio of Haifa al-Mansour and Ja'far Panahi in celebration of the awarding of the 6th Immanuel Kant World Citizen Award

on 1 October 2016

The choice of this year's awardees of the Kant World Citizen Award could not have been more of a surprise. In the perception of a broad public, not only in Germany, Iran and Saudi Arabia and the entire Middle East are not exactly deemed regions in which the light of Kant's rationality, enlightenment, tolerance and regime of peace burns particularly brightly.

Focussing on Europe's neighbouring countries which, at present, experience a dramatic crisis bears evidence of truly cosmopolitan farsightedness. Many observers compare the Middle East with the times of the Thirty Years' War in Europe. Domestic suppression, belligerent conflicts, instrumentalisation of religion, massive external interference – the victims are the people who flee by the millions.

What an optimism of the jury to search for light in this darkness; we admire their ingenuity to have found it in our awardees. These are lights which make the light at the end of the tunnel at least imaginable.

Ja'far Panahi lives in the Islamic Republic of Iran; Haifa al-Mansour is a citizen of Saudi Arabia. The two countries couldn't be more different even though they are neighbours, separated only by the Gulf. Iran is an ancient country; it has seen diverse cultures and religions; for more than 500 years it has been shaped by Shiite Islam. Saudi Arabia was founded in the second half of the 18th century; from the beginning it was coined by the conservative Sunnite Islam of the Wahhabiyya. The fact that the cities of Mecca and Medina are situated in its territory give the country's leadership and society a special religious character.

The two nations went different ways in the 20th century: Iran went through two revolutions; both had the same objective: to shake off the dominance of the

major Western powers and to establish constitutional, yes, democratic forms of government. The first (1905-1908), after trials and tribulations, ended in the establishment of the rule of the Pahlawi dynasty; the second (1978/79) was the overture to the erection of an Islamic republic. According to the principle of the “Rule of the Recognised Theologian” (Persian: vilayat-e faqih; Arabic: vilayat al-faqih) introduced by Ayatollah Khomeini the leadership in state and society is the responsibility of the religious leader and the high Shiite clergy.

The history of Saudi Arabia proceeded without the ruptures characterising Iran’s history. However, it does not have the wide historic horizon either. Even though the Kingdom was part of the Arab World which went through a period of awakening and upheaval between Iraq in the east and Morocco in the west from its foundation (1932) it isolated itself and the storms raging in the Arab World passed it by. King Abd al-Aziz ibn Sa’ud, the founder of the state, reigned as an absolute ruler until his death (1953); to the present day the Wahhabite theological establishment with its conservative Sunnite interpretation of Islam provides the ideological basis of rulership.

At one point, of course, the fates of the two countries meet: Petroleum – and for some decades also natural gas – are the basis of their economic existence. This fact, however, also determined the political and social space – and that in two respects: Internally, the rulers had and have the means at hand to place their position on a foundation accumulating from the petroleum revenues. “No taxation without representation” is the basic formula of democracy. However, where there is no taxation, where the income of the state originates from petroleum benefits, the citizens cannot raise any claim to participate in the government.

Nevertheless, the question of whether the petroleum has been a blessing or a curse for the societies of the Middle East also arises in a broader perspective. The involvement in global economy included a collision of political and cultural systems from the beginning. Economic development was not available without assimilation. What came up so technocratically under the catchword of “modernisation” was a dramatic collision of ancient order and cultural traditions with the political, social, and cultural “achievements” of the powers determining the market conditions. These “achievements” had a name: “the West”. Did modernisation mean assimilation and self-abandonment? How was

the heritage to be preserved? For societies formed by Islam this was substantially the question for the place of religion. Was modernisation equivalent to secularisation? Would secularisation possibly even imply the disappearance of religion?

An Iranian intellectual, Dschalal Al-e Ahmed, described this collision as „ghargzadegi“, as “being defeated by the West”. This word could also be used as a heading for the state of wide parts of Arab societies in the 20th century. What are the options still available to the defeated: The Kemalist-Turkish devotion to western secular patterns? The Pahlawi dynasty in Iran also took this approach. So did Arab elites in Northern Africa and in the Middle East – albeit in a less radical form. At present, the violent struggle for the divine order on earth, “hakimiyat Allah”, seems to be an option.

In Iran the people initiated a revolution and overthrew a ruler who seemed to be America’ puppet. The outcome is an „Islamic Republic“, a synthesis of a republican, i.e. modern order bound to the will of the people within Shiite-Islamic coordinates obliged to tradition. In Saudi Arabia it is particularly the religious establishment that opposes change. But the conflict between the powers pressing for change and the persisting powers of the old order has begun there too long since and gains dynamics.

These are the backdrops against which we locate our laureates: In their films, “Wadjda” by Haifa al-Mansour and “Taxi Teheran” by Ja’far Panahi. Not big politics is thematised. People with their grievances and hopes are in the focus; but also the ploys by which they seek to escape the limitations of their day-to-day life which are imposed on them by tight traditions or political bullying. No radical protests but expressions of unease; hints in the direction towards transformation.

Like in Europe, protests, changes and transitions found particularly powerful expression in two genres of art and literature in Iran and with the Arab people: narrative prose, i.e. novels and novellas; and – in the 2nd half of the 20th century – films. The centre of literary creativity in the Arab nations after World War I was initially Egypt. After the occupation by the British in 1882, the country was only nominally part of the Ottoman Empire and offered ideas and art forms from Europe relatively broad spaces for unfolding. Therefore it is hardly surprising that the only Arab Nobel Laureate in literature is Egyptian: Naguib

Machfuz in 1988. Since then a literary explosion has shaken the Arab World. In narrative literature it is not the dull space Arab politics make it seem sometimes. Women today expose themselves as authors of a highly critical profile. In their novels taboos are broken which have held society captive for centuries. When bans are imposed means and places are found where a manuscript can be published. Literature in North Africa comes from France, in French, if publication in Arabic is impossible or not desired.

Saudi Arabia is not a place where critical literature is in vogue; which will come as no surprise after what was said before. But outside the country a lot of critical scripts were written. The best-known is probably the multi-volume panorama in which Abd ar-Rahman Munif describes the collapse that was associated with the intrusion of the oil economy in Saudi Arabia. The quote preceding the novel "Cities of Salt" could hardly be met with applause by those in power: "Cities of salt means cities that offer no sustainable existence. When the waters come in, the first waves will dissolve the salt and reduce these great glass cities to dust".

Iran has a long tradition of epic narration. The justness of the ruler is a topic that mattered to the poets. For centuries Iranians lived with their great poets – the lyricists and the epicists. In a history of suppression and tyranny poetry was the light of the people. In the 20th century the novel replaced the epos. Apart from the escape from the world – like with Iran's probably best-known narrator, Sadek Hedayat – the suffering from suppression and alienation has become another major topic of contemporary authors – like with Mahmud Doulatabadi. Like their Arab colleagues, Iranian authors also had to cope with bans. Many critical narratives were circulated secretly or published abroad. The courage and insistence with which a self-confident writer's guild comes forward again and again are a distinct expression of the close attachment of the Iranians to literature. Here, both the freedom of literature and the freedom of the writer from writing bans and prison are at stake.

Nevertheless – literature as an expression of ideas, critique, and the state of mind of the people in their society is only welcomed by a limited audience. Films find a distinctly wider distribution and have a more powerful impact. This applies both to Iran and to numerous other Arab countries – Saudi Arabia, of course, still has a long way to go in this respect. The Iranian public worships its

great film makers like saints. On 7 July of this year Abbas Kiarostami died, one of the most important directors of artistic films in Iran. "Sadness lies on the city's shoulders" was the headline of the daily "Schahrwand" published in Teheran. Several thousand admirers of the film maker took part in the mourning ceremony. The success of Iranian films at numerous international contests abroad filled the Iranian fans with pride. This is one side of the coin.

The other side is reflected in the fact that Ja'far Panahi cannot be present today to personally accept the award. A travel ban was imposed on him. Because to the conservative circles of the political system of the Islamic Republic any film is suspicious. They want a positive message unconditionally supportive of the system. The people's sorrows, the private domain outside the sphere of religion, the escape from the public into the intimate, the distance from the slogans of those in power – all of this seems subversive to them. To them, it seems to be an attempt to undermine the foundations of a system shaped by religion. Also, ideas from the West, particularly from the USA, the "great Satan", could be imported by films. Panahi's films, like his film „Taxi Teheran“, are examples to this end. Censorship, occupational bans, prison, bans on leaving the country are the reaction. This is also the case if the films come in a humorous wrapping – like "Taxi Teheran" or – even funnier – "Offside", a film telling the story of young women who, contrary to bans, attempt to sneak into the stadium to watch the football match Iran against Bahrain. How different perception can be between the film makers and the audience on the one side and the representatives of the regime on the other also became apparent in the case of the film "Taste of Cherry" by Kiarostami which was awarded the Palme d'Or in Cannes. It is about an Iranian intending to commit suicide and searching for someone who will bury his body. From the perspective of the director the film is a song of praise to life; in conservative circles in Iran, in contrast, it was officially interpreted as an encouragement to commit suicide and rejected as harmful. Therefore there was hardly any response to Kiarostami's death among them.

In the Arab world as well films are met with intense public interest. Particularly Egyptian films have a high entertainment value and find distribution everywhere. But the Arab film also knows the critical analysis of society. Saudi Arabia is still an exception; in the country shaped by Wahhabite Islam, films as an art form and as a medium of a critical debate of politics and society are still

not really accepted. There are no public movie theatres; those who wish to go to the cinema have to travel to the neighbouring small Emirates. And yet movie theatres definitely found their way into the country with the development of the land by American petroleum companies starting in the 1930s: However, they were a thorn in the side of the religious establishment from the beginning – like anything that is not in conformity with Koran or with conservative Islamic tradition. The opening process of the country was thorny; and anything from “the West” was met with rejection. The introduction of television required the emphatic persistence of King Faisal. When he was murdered in 1974 and the Great Mosque in Mecca was occupied by Wahhabite fanatics who also accused the royal family of treason and the defection from true Islam in 1979 the state reacted defensively to the pressure exerted by the theologians; the country isolated itself again. Symbolic of this was also a ban on publicly running a movie theatre. The only way to watch films was in the privacy of one’s home.

Haifa al-Mansour accomplished a minor revolution with “Wajda”. With good reason the fact that the film is the first feature film completely produced in Saudi Arabia is emphasised time and again. When in the end of the film the girl Wajda cycles out into the country on the green bicycle she was desirous of for such a long time then it can be expected that women in Saudi Arabia will soon be allowed to drive cars. Wadjda got the money for the bicycle from her mother; a gesture of rebellion against her husband’s, the girl’s father’s, taking a second wife without her consent. And subtle critique of tradition. Like “Taxi Teheran”, “Wadjda” is a socio-critical film.

Despite all differences between the historical, political, social, and cultural background in Iran and Saudi Arabia the two films have many things in common. On the one hand, the sacrifice of the dramatic revolutionary gesture. The message comes along gently; and the great demands for a fundamental change of the regime or the political system are not made. The bitter grief – for example Wadjda’s mother’s about her husband’s second wife – appears almost silent, yet impossible to ignore. And the problems of the taxi’s passengers also have a humorous punchline. Panahis film “Offside” is screamingly funny and yet contains a conclusive and unmistakable argument for the equality of dignity and rights of women and men. Behind it is the conviction that, given the situation, subversive demands are useless, yes, that they play into the hands of the hardliners and would rather cement the systems. Change will, in the end,

come sneaking in. And the prevailing order will not be completely discarded; it also has acceptable features. The protests of the Green Movement in Iran of 2009 which Panahi supported demanded reforms and not a radical change of regime.

Another thing our two laureates have in common is the focus on the role of the women: in both societies, the Saudi Arabian and the Iranian, they face exceptional challenges. They have to hold their ground in environments dominated by men. Therefore it is remarkable that “Wadjda” was made by a woman. (In Iran as well woman play an important role in cinematic art.) “Wadjda” is about issues which are particularly relevant for women: According to the Islamic moral concepts prevailing in Saudi Arabia they may not ride bicycles. This also applies to Iran (where, of course, in contrast to Saudi Arabia, they may drive cars). And it is rebellion that Wadjda’s mother who has to accept that her husband marries a second wife fulfils the girl’s wish and gives her a bicycle as a present. Panahi lets a known campaigner for women’s rights, Nasrin Sotudeh, get into his taxi on her way to a client. She had attempted to watch a volleyball game with friends and is therefore in custody awaiting trial. Actually, many women advocate for the implementation of human rights in Iran and fight battles that place them in danger. Shirin Ebadi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for this reason in 2003. The fact that she didn’t wear a headscarf at the award presentation was met with critique and outrage in Iran. She presently lives in England. And beyond films, a look at Iranian and Arab societies – also the Saudi Arabian – reveals that the women are the pillars of change; ultimately it is them who have more to gain than men. They have long chosen the way through education which is open to them. The realisation of women’s rights is the benchmark for the extent of transition in both societies.

A crucial part of the future of Islamic societies belongs to the women. However, it also belongs to the children (again the female ones among them). In this regard as well, Haifa al-Mansour and Ja’far Panahi are close to each other. Panahi’s niece whom he collects from school by taxi is to make a film as a homework. And while she shoots images from the car, she contemplates about the limitations Islamic morale imposes on film makers. And Wadjda’s mother gives her daughter the “immoral” bicycle as a present while holding the belief that, as a grown-up woman, she will once live in a society in which overcome

moral concepts will no longer be an obstacle to the recognition of the dignity of women – also with regard to polygamy.

There is something else the two laureates have in common: They come from deeply contradictory societies. Yes, it is a fact that the number of executions per year in Iran is the second highest in the world. In Saudi Arabia as well, executions – even public ones – are a daily fare; and people, men as women, who went against a so-called “Islamic moral” get dishonourably whipped. But at the same time transition has begun long ago. Their films would not have been possible without areas of freedom in the political and social domain without which it is impossible to make such films. In Iran the battle for the freedom of the arts is in full swing. While the conservatives attempted to pretend that the death of Kiarostami had never occurred State President Ruhani twittered that Kiarostami had called for peace and friendship in his works. “We will always remember ... his profound and unconventional attitude.” And the Minister of Education, Ali Dschannati, declared the film maker “an avant-gardist with the aspirations of a humanist and moralist”. And therefore we understand the fact that Ja’far Panahi cannot be with us in Freiburg today not as an expression of a verdict of Iranian society against him and his profession, but as part of a continuing struggle for the future of Iran which has taken hold of all areas of public and private life, and particularly also artistic work.

One question appears in the background, is, however, not openly and directly brought up: The question as to the role of religion in society. The answer, though, is important for the future of both societies, both the Iranian and the Saudi Arabian – and above that of wide parts of the entire Islamic world. In Panahi’s film people seem strangely “out of place”. They seem to act like someone they actually aren’t: Starting with the taxi driver himself who is rather a film maker. What is the cause of them becoming misfits? Do they have a problem as citizens in a republic which legitimises itself in a religious dimension? A humorous answer could be seen in the guise of the two women who transport a goldfish bowl and live in the obsession they would have to die if their two fish were not brought to the Ali well until twelve o’clock. And in the centre of the deliberations of the taxi driver’s talkative niece – also Panahi’s own – the incompatibility of a governmentally decreed Islamic moral and a good film is quite naively addressed. Haifa al-Mansoor is bolder: Wadjda’s

desire to own a bicycle is, at best, indecent. However, by giving her a bicycle as a present, her mother violates a dictate derived from religion. And that in protest against her husband's second marriage which is permitted to him by the laws of precisely this religion.

While Frederick II of Prussia discussed the freedom of religion and expression with his friend Voltaire and radically reformed the backward agrarian country in the Europe of Enlightenment serfdom continued to exist in his kingdom, and delinquent soldiers were hunted to death running the gauntlet. While in Saudi Arabia bloggers are still humiliatingly flogged and people are publicly executed tens of thousands of young Saudi Arabians – women like men – study at universities abroad (in Germany there are presently 2,000), women recently actively and passively participated in local elections and have their place in the Advisory Commission (i.e. a kind of parliament). These days the government of Saudi Arabia announced the closure of the King Fahd Academy in Bonn (it had, in previous times, occasionally come under criticism because of questionable teaching contents). As Germany had one of the best educational systems worldwide and Saudi Arabia could learn from it – explained the Saudi Arabian Ambassador – the government in Riyadh did no longer see any need for a Saudi Arabian school in Germany. In particular, the “Empowerment of Women” was also part of the “Vision 2030”, a programme of the most profound transformation of the country.

Within the scope of the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro female athletes from Saudi Arabia participated for the first time. Their delegation was led by Rima Bint Bandar Al Sa'ud, the Vice Minister for Youth and Women's Sports. And today in Freiburg we honour Haifa al-Mansour, the first film maker presenting a feature film completely produced in Saudi Arabia. And it is a critical one too.

With the awarding of the Kant World Citizen Award to Haifa al-Mansour and Ja'far Panahi the Freiburger Kant Foundation was consistent with its self-commitment: the encouragement of courageous and independent, critically enlightening public relations work and of education to the protection of peace, human rights, and democracy. It set an example and made it clear where we stand. More we cannot and should not do. The shaping of the future lies in the hands of the citizens of Iran and Saudi Arabia. They have to decide for

themselves how the elements of enlightenment in Europe and the lines of their own tradition will correlate with a view to the future.

With the awarding of the Kant Award, however, the Foundation has also set an example here in our free Germany, and at the same time imposed an obligation: To look at other societies and cultures with respect, the willingness to differentiate and to fend off stereotypes. Only in this way we will empower ourselves to world citizenship.

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