

Moving Poetry Reading to Save Ashraf Fayadh's Life

On January 14, 2016, there were poetry readings all over the world, 121 readings in 43 countries, gatherings to save the life and win the freedom of Ashraf Fayadh, young Palestinian poet and art curator sentenced to death in November last for "apostasy" by the Saudi Arabia repressive judicial system. In Port Louis, in The Book Lover, at the *Ledikasyon pu Travayer* Building, there was a moving poetry reading, even awe-inspiring, as part of this world-wide action. The event in Port Louis, in Kreol, was in an atmosphere sober, calm and committed, and featured readings in three languages: English, French and Kreol. It was organized by LPT, with the support of LALIT and other organizations.

Many of the poems read were from the text that provoked the death sentence: "Instructions Within". A long extract was finely presented in Kreol translation by dramatists, Henri and Marie-France Favory, and was in fact the closing poem for the evening, coming just before some analysis and open discussion amongst the 60 or so people present in the bookshop. Other poems from "Instructions Within" were read, each illustrated by an image, often of Ashraf himself, by Norman Tambanivoul, Vincent Pellegrin, Noor Adam Essack, Vijay Naraidoo, Alain Fanchon, Aqil Gopee and Yusuf Kadel. Some read the English translation from the Arabic, others the French. Each voice was different, making a rich weave.

Umar Timol opened the evening, after Alain Ah-Vee's introduction for LPT when he gave the background to the event, its context, and also recounting how LPT, as publisher of Lindsey Collen's novel, had had, in the past, to stand up to accusations of blasphemy, death threats and censorship. Umar read a beautiful poem of his own, appropriately called "*Les mots*", beginning with how written words appear nothing, just squiggles on paper.... There was also aquation: Pascale Nadal, Helina Hookoomsing, Tania Haberland and Gaston Valayden, all people with theatre experience, read from Ashraf's powerful poem, "Frida Kahlo's Moustache", with an image of Frida Kahlo's self-portrait showing her moustache, projected behind them.

Other poems read included a pair of found poems in Kreol taken from adult literacy students' responses to viewing Picasso's *Guernica*. The two poems were read by four women, Sarah-Jane Naraina, Begum Bedulla, Indranee Canthiram and Anne-Marie Joly. An image of the mural was projected on to the bookshop's wall, reminding us that we are nearing a century of aerial bombing, now characterized by a new kind of death penalty by drone, and with no due process at all.

Poet Sedley Assonne read a Kreol language version of "The Seed" by Palestinian Fawaz Turki, also, interestingly, a victim of Saudi repression. While he read, there was an image projected on to the wall behind him of one of those thousand-year-old olive trees in Palestine.

Dini Lallah read the first paragraphs of Pakistani novelist, Feryal Ali Gauhar's short piece entitled "The Wing of a Lost Bird", written in memory of her Palestinian fiancé, killed in an airplane crash in 1992 when he was piloting Yasser Arafat. She gave copies of the piece to those present after the event. The story begins with a short and touching quotation from the Palestinian poet, Mahmoud Darwish.

After the readings, Lindsey Collen, for LPT, drew out all the issues involved in the world-wide readings: saving Ashraf's life and getting him freed from prison; the importance of artists, poets and art curators to society; the death penalty in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere; the importance of equitable judicial proceedings; free expression and freedom of conscience; the precarity of living life as a refugee, and in particular the waves of literally millions of Palestinian refugees, hounded out by the Israeli army and militia's, and living in countries like Saudi Arabia; and finally the impunity with which the Saudi regime flaunts human rights, supported as it has been and still is by the US and its allies. During discussion, particular emphasis was put on the need to get Saudi Arabia suspended from the UN Human Rights Council, and the importance of stopping the Mauritian Government's setting up an Embassy in Riyadh, as Minister Soodhun has announced it will do.

The people present – men and women, people all ages, all lovers of art and poetry and freedom – then shared cold fruit juice, a cup of tea or coffee, and biscuits.