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On Exile, Migration, and Hybrid Identity: An Interview with Abdelhamid El Beyuki

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ABSTRACT

This interview offers an in-depth reflection on the intersections of exile, identity, and literary resistance in the work and life of Moroccan novelist Abdelhamid El Beyuki. Through an exploration of his creative vision, El Beyuki examines exile not only as a geographical displacement but as an enduring psychological and ontological condition. Writing becomes a site of resistance, remembrance, and reconstruction, where fragmented autobiographical experience is reassembled through fiction. He discusses how language and narrative serve as tools to preserve marginalized memory, challenge hegemonic discourses, and resist both political erasure and cultural essentialism. Migration, in his view, emerges simultaneously as a symptom of despair and a mode of defiant re-rooting. The conversation also engages with the role of love, ethics, and plurality in reshaping identity, highlighting literature's capacity to offer more humane representations of migration, belonging, and hybridity. Ultimately, El Beyuki presents writing as a space for ethical imagination and cultural continuity that transcends borders.

KEYWORDS

Migration

Exile

Morocco

Identity

Resistance

Note: The following interview was originally conducted in Arabic. It has been translated into English by the authors.

Mariam Bouaoud: Who is Abdelhamid El Beyuki?

Abdelhamid El Beyuki: Abdelhamid El Beyuki is a Moroccan citizen whose personal and intellectual journey has, since youth, been closely tied to urgent questions of freedom, justice, and democracy—or at least, what I believed was my mission as an engaged human being: to dream of change, to expose injustice, to reduce class inequality, and to defend human rights, social justice, and equality.

These hopes intensified when I was forced to leave Morocco in 1984 after the uprising in the north. The journey of forced exile, following a 30-year prison sentence in absentia, did not truly end even after I returned in 2000. My path has moved through political, unionist, and human rights activism, and eventually into literature and fiction. The latter emerged directly from lived experience and has continued as a form of resistance against injustice, hatred, and racism.

My life has been marked by a constant questioning of the self, of identity, and of its continuous transformation. I often feel that I do not have a conventional biography. I don't see myself as someone with a single life story to tell. Perhaps I am the sum of the characters I imagined, created, or inhabited throughout my exile and travels—characters in my novels, in my thoughts, in my realities.

What could be called my "autobiography" is only a fragmented mosaic of broken experiences. It follows no precise chronology; rather, it reflects a state of overlapping moments and inner

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tensions, as though I had lived several lives in different places and times—between Tangier and Madrid, between fiction and reality, between politics and literature. Writing is the only way I can grasp the shape of my identity.

Writing has never been a luxury or aesthetic exercise. It is, and has always been, a way to reconstruct the self—not as a stable entity, but as a process of constant breakdown and rebuilding. Fiction has allowed me to confront my fears and, at times, served as a weapon against forgetting. Each character is a face of exile, and each narrative is a delayed confession or a cry unheard of in its time.

That is why, when I'm asked to present a biography, I often feel unable to do so—not because of a lack of facts, but because facts alone cannot express what I have lived. My experience is not a timeline; it is a state, a question, one that touches on meaning, existence, and destiny.

So instead of a biography, I offer fragments, reflections, and testimonies, perhaps broken mirrors that I leave to the reader to arrange, if they wish.

I am not my name, my past, or even my books. I am the echo of the marginal, the exiled, the oppressed, the dreamer, the broken. I am a project of identity still forming—unfinished except through writing, and complete only when the pen falls silent.

MB: Your first novel appeared only in 2013, more than a decade after your return from exile. Was this delay intentional, or were there earlier attempts that were not published?
AE: I was indeed late in publishing my first novel. *Eyes of Exile "ʿuyūn al-manfā"* was not the first novel I wrote, but the first one I published. Before that, I had written several manuscripts that were never published, as well as short stories in Spanish that appeared in newspapers and magazines in Spain.

Still, publishing my first novel in Arabic after returning from exile felt like a confession—a recognition that exile doesn't truly end, and that the person in exile never fully returns. Exile becomes a lasting condition, marked by conflicted and persistent feelings around identity and belonging—feelings that are no longer the same as those we carried when we left, or when we returned, or even what we imagined return would be.

Alongside fiction, I have also published other works in Spanish in fields beyond the novel.

MB: How did migration impact your creative vision and literary journey?
AE: Migration has shaped my creative vision and the core themes of almost all my novels. It is the source of many of the issues I witnessed firsthand as a social activist in Spain and also experienced personally. Still, migration is not my only reason for writing. Forced exile and the ongoing feeling of uprootedness and existential confusion also played a significant role.

For me, writing can be seen as both a refuge and a continuous search for identity, belonging, and connection with others, with places, with time, and even with existence itself. That is why I see fiction as both a shelter and a space for addressing various humanitarian concerns, especially those related to human rights and human suffering.

MB: In your novels—and even in their titles—you frequently use the term exile. Exile is commonly defined as the place of residence for someone who has been expelled from their homeland, and it often carries negative connotations. How, then, can a place marked by such characteristics become the site of a new beginning?
AE: I believe that writing in exile—or exile literature—is a genre of its own, not in the traditional sense of literary classification, but as a practice that emerges from a liminal space, where language serves a dual purpose: preserving the memory of exile while also expressing a constantly evolving new reality. This influences literary writing by encouraging new narrative forms and by reshaping how identity, belonging, and language are approached.

If Camus sought to create a "non-style" or "zero-degree" writing, then the exiled writer is similarly driven to break away from conventional literary forms. They are compelled to find a language that can express the experience of alienation and uprootedness while still remaining authentic. In this sense, exile literature becomes one of the most human forms of writing, as it expresses life between two worlds and the ongoing search for a language that transcends borders, carrying both suffering and hope simultaneously.

MB: In a previous interview, you stated: "The literary achievement is an achievement of exile… and the writer was exiled… and perhaps is still, despite his return to his homeland." Could you elaborate on that? How can exile continue to affect a person even after their physical return?
AE: In my view, and based on my own experience, exile brings about a profound transformation in the writer's language and style. It confronts them with questions of identity and belonging, pushing them to reshape their expressive tools. Exile literature often reflects this through its distinct language, marked by experimentation and openness to nontraditional narrative forms. The exiled writer frequently blends the real and the dreamlike to express inner fragmentation and alienation.

Such texts also tend to exhibit linguistic hybridity, where words from different languages blend, reflecting diverse cultural influences and lending the writing a cosmopolitan tone. At the same time, language becomes a means of evoking the original place, charged with nostalgia and memories that strive to counteract forgetting, thereby maintaining a connection with the homeland despite the distance.

Exile literature is more than a branch of migration literature. It's a creative space that resists borders, where language becomes a kind of homeland, and the meaning of belonging is redefined. If Camus sought a zero-degree writing style, exile literature moves between the intense need to express and the impossibility of recovering the lost homeland, except through the act of writing. For me, exile does not end with physical return. In many ways, return itself becomes a new form of exile.

MB: Through your works, the reader can detect a tone of defiance and resistance. Would it be accurate to say that you approach writing as an act of resistance? And if so, what exactly are you resisting?
AE: For me, writing—especially fiction—remains suspended between freedom and commitment, between the personal and the collective, and between writing as resistance and writing as a cultural product shaped by market forces and audience reception. Perhaps, in the end, the answer lies in continuing to write—not as an act of certainty, but as a constant search for meaning in a contradictory world.

From my perspective, writing is more than just a literary activity. It is a practice shaped by linguistic and cultural tension between the self and the other, between the lost homeland and the new place. In this way, it echoes Barthes' idea that the language of writing should reflect the writer's reality. In exile, however, that reality is fragmented, shaped by memory and displacement.

MB: Do you believe that literature can change the European, or more broadly, Western perspective on migration, particularly on irregular migration?
AE: Yes, I believe literature can play a crucial role in reshaping the European—and more broadly Western—perspective on migration, including irregular migration. Literature doesn't present statistics or brief messages of solidarity; it powerfully presents human experiences, allowing readers to see the world from the migrant's point of view and, at times, to see themselves through that same lens.

Through novels, short stories, and literary testimonies, literature reveals suffering, injustice, and the true motivations behind migration. It helps challenge the harsh, dehumanizing stereotypes often spread by the media.

For example, when a European reader encounters the story of a father who lost his children at sea, or a young man who risked his life to flee war or poverty, it can spark a personal or historical reflection, as is often the case in Spain. This can shift the image of the migrant from that of a threat or burden to something more human and familiar. Literature fosters empathy, opens the door to understanding, and encourages a more humane and just view of migration.

MB: Your novels consistently engage with the theme of religion, distinguishing between genuine faith and the commodification of religion. To what extent do you believe religion is instrumentalized for political and personal interests, whether in the context of Islam or Christianity, as portrayed in your works?

AE: The misuse of religion for political and personal purposes is a deeply rooted historical issue, and many thinkers have addressed it. While I can't go into full theoretical detail here, these ideas have certainly influenced my writing. For example, Michel Foucault's analysis of power and knowledge is particularly relevant to how religion can be instrumentalized, even though he didn't focus specifically on Islam. Foucault suggests that "religious discourse" can become a tool of power when it is used to create a version of truth that controls individuals and shapes their behavior.

In this sense, religion shifts from being a spiritual system to becoming a means of political and social domination. This issue is strongly present in my novels, especially in *Stories of Exile "ḥikāyāt al-manfā"*, where I explore the complexity of religious freedom and the difficulty of distinguishing between sincere faith and the commodification of religion. I also highlight the utilitarian exploitation of religion, while reasserting its human and ethical value, free from political misuse or sanctification.

MB: In your novel *The Hybrid "al-janīs*", you illustrate through the suffering of Saida's family that irregular migration is not a decision, but an inevitable outcome of an oppressive reality. In this context, do you view migration as an act of resistance or as an expression of despair and loss of hope?

AE: I believe irregular migration involves more than just crossing borders. Beyond describing the tragedy of the journey itself, I am more concerned with the human dimension of migration. In my novel, this is reflected in the characters' dialogues, where they express feelings of fragmentation and ask, "Who are we?" or "Where do we belong?" These questions are answered by Siham, who says:

"We are all from here and elsewhere. Those who claim the purity of race, blood, or belonging are themselves products of migration, displacement, expulsion, and religious fanaticism. We are all forced to live in a world that no longer resembles our original homeland—if it ever existed. Many left their countries, while many others remained. Yet, they can no longer recognize it. The essence of the homeland is the human being, and the essence of identity is plurality and difference. These are the foundation of human development." (*The Hybrid* "*al-janīs*", p. 146)

Within this context, migration is indeed an act of resistance and a means of asserting belonging, even though it often stems from despair and a loss of hope.

MB: In *Walking on the Wind "al-mashī ʿalā al-rīḥ"* , you write: "How can a person be clandestine? What does it mean to classify human beings as legal or illegal? Aren't they both

human?" Is this meant as a critique of immigration laws? And how, in your view, can such laws be unjust or dehumanizing?

AE: My novel, *Walking on the Wind* "*al-mashī ʿalā al-rīḥ*", leads the reader into a world somewhat different from that of my earlier works, as it focuses on the experiences of African migrants during their journey toward the northern shore. It portrays their lives from multiple perspectives—their suffering and moments of joy, the abuse they face, and the solidarity they sometimes encounter—not only after reaching Europe, but also while in Morocco, and even earlier in their journey.

The novel also offers a critical perspective on racialized Western laws that govern migration and migrants, often based on political or economic interests, which frequently contradict the dominant discourse that claims to uphold human rights, solidarity, and other hollow slogans.

MB: In *The Bridegroom of Death*, you enter the realm of historical fiction for the first time. How did you experience this transition? What makes it unique? And can the novel be considered a form of documenting a forgotten historical period?

AE: According to Paul Ricoeur's concept of "narrative temporality," the novel is not a mirror of history or a direct form of historiography, but a reconstruction of time through imagination. The story produces what Ricoeur calls "the time of meaning"—a kind of time shaped by collective consciousness rather than neutral, physical time. In this way, the novel becomes a tool for shaping collective memory and even constructing cultural identity.

This is the narrative approach I have followed. I draw on historical events from both shores, without abandoning the themes that define my literary project: identity, belonging, and cultural and religious diversity. In this sense, the novel is an open space, not restricted by the rules of history, but capable of reshaping it each time the story is retold.

What, then, gives the novel its particular strength in times of crisis and global transformation? In my view, the historical novel expresses what official history often cannot. It offers an alternative form of history—one that captures the complexity of human experience through the micro-histories of individuals.

With these characteristics, *The Bridegroom of Death* may be classified as a historical novel, though I don't consider it historical in the conventional sense of traditional historical fiction.

MB: Your literary work and life experience reflect a profound belief in the idea of a shared human identity. How can an individual have or acquire a hybrid identity?

AE: Identity is, by nature, hybrid. It is formed through layers of cultural accumulation, in which migration and exile play a central role. As Juan Goytisolo argues, identity is "bastard" or illegitimate—not in a negative sense, but to emphasize its mixed, non-pure cultural and racial character.

Take James Joyce, for example. Although his exile was voluntary and self-imposed, his works—especially Ulysses—show a strong concern with Irish identity and alienation. His language reflects both a nostalgic attachment to his homeland and a form of linguistic experimentation that breaks through traditional barriers.

MB: Many thinkers and literary figures consider love not only as an individual emotion, but as a human force that transforms the individual, becoming both an ethical stance toward the world and a means of healing the self and reality. In a world increasingly harsh and fractured by wars and explosions, love becomes a form of resistance. Hannah Arendt notes: "Love cannot be politicized. Still, it stands as a force that opposes naked power." That is, it does not operate within systems of power, but re-centers the human being as a sensitive and ethical being. Thus, love becomes a means of healing wounds, especially in societies marked by a violent past.

AE: Love has the power to dismantle stereotypes surrounding identity, religion, and class. As Judith Butler argues, identity is not fixed, but shaped through relationships. In this sense, love enables individuals to transcend cultural and social constraints, as it integrates the other into the self in an intimate and non-coercive manner.

As Roland Barthes wrote in *A Lover's Discourse: Fragment*s, the lover is the one who tries to speak the unspeakable. Love reveals our true selves—not the versions shaped by dogma, class, or inherited memory—but the self that emerges in a rare moment of honesty, opening the door to new dimensions of thought and feeling.

Similarly, love can be a profound entry point for rebuilding the self in a way that is free, reconciled, and transformative. It is not a magical solution, but an intimate space that reconnects us to our essential humanity, where encountering the other becomes not a confrontation, but an opportunity for complementarity and renewal.

MB: In light of this, how do you define the role of the novelist or the intellectual?
AE: In my view, the role of the intellectual or novelist goes beyond producing knowledge or crafting narratives. It is rooted in ethical responsibility and functions as an act of resistance.

Edward Said defines the intellectual as someone who lives in a state of exile—one who refuses to submit to power or ideology, and instead stands as a critical voice from the margins, witnessing injustice and defending the truth, even when that truth is uncomfortable.

Gramsci, on the other hand, sees the intellectual as a shaper of historical consciousness, not as someone isolated in an ivory tower, but as an active participant in the struggle over hegemony and power, with the goal of challenging dominant discourses and contributing to the formation of a new historical bloc.

Meanwhile, Sartre emphasizes that the engaged intellectual or novelist has a duty not to write for pleasure or approval, but to write in order to provoke change, because, in his view, the word is an action, and silence is a form of complicity.

Based on these perspectives, I believe that the intellectual is not merely a mirror of reality, but someone who deconstructs it in order to reconfigure it. The intellectual or novelist does not simply tell a story, but frames their consciousness.

MB: Your novels often reference major events that have profoundly impacted society, like the Mohcine Fikri case, the shooting of Hayat, the Years of Lead, and forced conscription during the Spanish Civil War. Would you say that the inclusion of these events functions as a form of literary archiving?
AE: From my perspective, the novel serves as a kind of archive of events, as it remains a vast space for imagination, even when it draws on real-life facts. Still, the novelist should not be seen as a historian. What the novelist recounts is often a form of microhistory—one that escapes the scope of historians and formal academic research.

The novel is told with the freedom fiction allows, yet the events it draws upon remain deeply resonant for the reader. They endure not only in academic discourse but also in collective imagination, especially when adapted into cinema, theater, or visual arts. For example, Benito Pérez Galdós's novel *Aita Tetuán* conveys much more about the war in Tetouan than many historical accounts. Likewise, Picasso's Guernica tells us more about the Spanish Civil War than most research papers. This, of course, does not mean that the novel replaces historical writing, but rather, that it complements it.

In this context, I included the case of Mohcine Fikri in my novel *The Hybrid "al-janīs"*, though the fictional protagonist is from Casablanca rather than the Rif. This suggests that the book portrays a particular behavior or societal pattern, rather than recounting a specific event with all its real-life details.

MB: How do you view the translations of your literary works? Do they preserve the identity you envisioned for them even after translation?
AE: I believe that translating literary texts requires more than just fluency in two languages—it demands creative ability and deep engagement with all the nuances of the original work. To be honest, the French translations of my first novel *Eyes of Exile* "*ʿuyūn al-manfā*" as well as the forthcoming translation of *Walking on the Wind* "*al-mashī ʿalā al-rīḥ*" have been highly successful.

However, I see a good literary translation as the creation of a new text—one that shares the same title, but carries its own tone, emotional texture, and interpretive layers. In many ways, these belong more to the translator than to the original author. This was precisely how I felt while reviewing both translations. It showed me how crucial the translator's role is in capturing and conveying not just the words, but the spirit and depth of the text.

In short, I believe the task of evaluating a creative literary translation belongs to the reader, not the author, since authors are rarely objective when assessing translations of their own work.

MB: Do you have any upcoming novels scheduled for publication soon?
AE: In addition to my recent novel *The Strangers' Whispering* "*hasīs al-ghurabā*'", which was released during the National Book Fair in April, I've recently completed a collection of travel literature that is expected to be published by the end of 2025. The theme of travel in this collection goes beyond geography and also explores the dimension of time.

I'm also currently working on a new novel with a historical touch. I use the phrase "historical touch" deliberately, as it is not a historical novel in the traditional sense.

MB: Will your future works explore other forms of migration besides irregular migration? And do you intend to remain faithful to the themes of migration and identity throughout your literary career?
AE: Undoubtedly, migration takes many forms beyond irregular or clandestine movement, just as exile can be either forced or voluntary. My previous novels were never limited to irregular migration or the kind of forced exile I experienced. Instead, they reflect broader aspects of life across both shores and through different periods.

My novels are not purely tragic or somber; they also portray moments of joy, love, and human connection. In short, I intend to remain committed to exploring the themes of hybrid identity and cultural coexistence, rather than focusing solely on a single theme.

As literary history shows us—and as the Spanish writer Juan Goytisolo constantly reminds us—the pursuit of a pure, authentic, nationalist past often reduces it to caricature, leading to its distortion and impoverishment.

MB: How do you see the future of Moroccan literature in exile?
AE: I believe the future of Moroccan literature in exile is promising, both in terms of the volume of work being produced and the diversity of its themes, whether written in the languages of host countries or the language of origin, such as Arabic.

I hope that Moroccan literature, which transcends borders, including the work of writers of Moroccan origin, will continue to engage with questions of identity and plural belonging.
MB: One last word to the new generation of bilingual and bicultural young writers.
AE: I have always approached advice with some hesitation. It often feels like a blunt gesture, primarily when directed at a promising young generation stepping into life with such potential. Still, I offer these thoughts as a way of sharing experience, not prescribing rules.

To emerging bilingual and bicultural writers, I would say: do not see this duality as a burden or contradiction, but as a unique creative opportunity. In this context, literary writing can serve as a bridge between two worlds—a free space in which to construct a flexible, hybrid identity.

Do not be afraid to write in your mother tongues, even those that may not belong to any official dictionary or conform to the grammar of a single language. These are the languages of experience, of contact, of reflection.

From my own experience, I've come to see cultural and linguistic plurality not as superficial difference, but as a narrative and symbolic reservoir—one that allows the writer to explore the complexities of the self and the world more deeply. This plurality enables you to challenge stereotypes and express what others cannot—or will not—say.

As for ambition, don't limit it to awards or external recognition. Let your literary project be a space to understand yourself and to shape your existential questions. The world is full of voices today, but the true reader still seeks one thing: a voice that is honest, real, and resonant.