



# Den norske Forfatterforening

## **Words are becoming more and more void**

interview with Aslı Erdoğan

recipient of The Norwegian Authors' Union's Freedom of Expression Prize 2017

**When did you receive the message that you were awarded the price, and how did you react?**

I was very happy and honored as this is the most important prize I have ever received in Norway! Norwegian is one of the few languages into which almost all my literary work has been translated, but unfortunately my books so far haven't received the attention they would have received if I were a male writer from dominating, "popular" languages. For a long time, I have held on to the belief that if I ever get a fair chance, it can only be in Scandinavian countries.

The year 2019 was a pivotal one in my exiled life as my bowel got blocked for the first time and after receiving two surgeries, I learned that I have an incurable auto immune disease. Honestly, the prize has helped me to hold onto not only literature but also life itself.

**Has the price influenced your work or situation, and in that case, how?**

I have been in exile for more than six years. During these years, I have faced court cases, smear campaigns, major surgeries and a brain hemorrhage. In June, one meter of my bowel was removed and replaced with a silicon tube. Clearly, I have paid a heavy price for my writing! It is a wonderful change that once in a while my writing is prized rather than punished.

I would also like to remind you that I have been on trial with the prosecution demanding aggravated life sentence, and the only reason I haven't received this horrendous punishment is the recognition of my

literature by international audiences, thanks to the support and solidarity of writers and publishers.

**How has the situation for writers in your country developed since the time you received the price?**

Unfortunately, the situation in Turkey with respect to freedom of speech and thought has sharply deteriorated in the last years, and there seems to be no end to the tunnel.

The last traces of democracy and secularism have been erased one by one and I am in apprehension that Turkey is now at the crossroads of a totalitarian regime. Journalists and writers were the first to be silenced, and now almost everyone is either “in” (in prison) or “out” (in exile)!

Our community of exiles in Berlin is rather large, consisting of writers, journalists, artists, musicians, film directors, academicians etc. This gives a clue of how widespread the persecution of intellectuals by the Erdogan regime is.

Personally, my books were taken out of public libraries in 2018 and one of my books *Not Even the Silence Belongs to You Anymore*, has recently been banned on the grounds of smearing Turkish military and nation along with terrorist propaganda. I can be sentenced up to thirteen years for these “crimes”. And the worst is that I am no longer able to prolong my health insurance in Germany and without health insurance I cannot prolong my living permit. In short, I can be sent back to Turkey at any time.

**Would you like to share some of what you are currently working on?**

Currently, I am working, or rather trying to put myself together to work on two books. *Requiem for a Lost Sea* is the continuation of my last book which has been recently published in Sweden, *Requiem for a Lost City*, and it is intended to be a requiem for everything we have already lost and are doomed to lose.

The second is a tragic prison story: *Esmeralda in Bakirkoy Prison*. I am recreating the story of Esmeralda and the Hunchback of Notre Dame in a dirty isolation cell through the memory of a Russian inmate who was once

a ballet dancer (just like myself). It is a suicide ballet set to the “music” of a female prison.

But I have to confess: Writing is my only and last homeland; however, words are becoming more and more void faced with the tragic reality of my life, a fatal disease, enormous physical pain and anxiety, precarious status in a non-welcoming country and the unbearable sadness of watching Turkey from afar, like watching a ship sink into the ocean.

**If you were to award the next price, who would you like to give it to?**

I feel that the world is entering into a kind of an ice-age, an age devoid of empathy, truth and meaning. It is the self-induced mission of writers to give back the words their lost meanings, starting or perhaps ending with the least understood of them all, “the human being”.

I am absolutely no authority in judging writers or literature, but I firmly believe that prizes should serve the purpose of reminding all of us, both writers and readers, our responsibilities to one another, and keeping our belief in literature alive. Our hope and belief in literature as resistance and resurrection!