



Den norske Forfatterforening

Isolated for thirty years

interview with İlhan Çomak

recipient of The Norwegian Authors' Union's Freedom of Expression Prize 2021

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

I got the news that the award was given to me from my McKenzie friend İpek Özel, who has not left me for years despite all the difficulties, on a cold winter day. She came to my closed visitation. We had limited time. Despite the dirty and thick glass, I saw her entering the viewing booth somehow happily, with an expression of freshness and lightness on her face that always gives me strength. There she was again and we were face to face regardless of the limitations of a cold, dirty closed visitation booth. She said, that I received the award, she was happy.

Innocence is not ashamed of anything, said J. J. Rousseau. The first thing I thought was that my voice went beyond these walls and reached all the way to Norway. While I was learning the details from her fast talking trying to economize our 45 minutes visitation time, my tears of joy were flowing. I was also experiencing the happiness of a child by stripping off all my identities in this land of concrete. Everything was crystal clear. I was innocent, İpek was innocent, my tears waiting to flow were innocent. If it was possible, I would "reach out and kiss my own cheeks"! (*Here he is quoting the legendary Turkish poet Turgut Uyar.*)

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

It is clear that receiving this award does not change my legal situation, that is, the fact of being a prisoner, a political prisoner here. However, this award had a great impact in my work, which I continued with great

determination under all these difficult conditions. Therefore, we can easily say that the award affected my poetry and literature, in a way that it enabled my literary voice and character as a poet to be clearly recognized and accepted by a wide range of audience.

I must also say that being deemed worthy of such a prestigious award has, above all, increased my responsibilities, as the award is also a reference point for me to keep the bar always high and face all the challenges no matter what sort, as is required in every endeavor I am in. I perceived and received this award as an invitation letter to a higher league. In order to be permanent in this league, I must continue my literary efforts more diligently and be determined to hone my skills in this regard.

That is what I am determined to do. Frankly, I see this award as a brand-new milestone in terms of proving and confirming my identity as a poet, a creative person, and a literary artist.

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

Frankly, I do not have enough information to make an accurate assessment on this subject because of my prison conditions. My imprisonment makes it difficult for me to say anything convincing about the extent of the reactions to this issue. Being imprisoned means that all beautiful and valuable things always reach me late and in a very limited way. Nevertheless, what I understand from such a distorted view is that this award helped me prove my maturity. This award has enabled the writers, poets and readers who already know me to turn to my works with greater interest and attention. In addition, I think that readers and writers who have just learned my name and my works because of the award will pay more attention to my works from now on.

It would not be wrong to say that the award gives more credibility to my identity as a poet and a writer. I would also like to draw attention to another aspect of the award that left its mark. In my opinion, my works have proven once again that, no matter where they are written, that literary creativity can be a surprising proof of how a point of resistance can be created against all sorts of authority and hierarchies. This must be once again definitive proof of the founding and creative power of art and literature that transcends walls and resists all kinds of pressure.

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

I have been working on my Kurdish poems and my first Kurdish book for a while. My book has now been published. I am experiencing the obvious excitement of this. I must say that this fresh excitement was accompanied by a bittersweet joy. Because, as a Kurd, I had to prove my identity as a poet in my own language long ago. However, political realities delayed this. Nevertheless, it will always be a great source of happiness for me to compile my poems, which I secretly released with great difficulty, despite the arduous and restrictive conditions of the prison, into a book under the name Çiyayi Girti.

There is only 10 months left until my release. Next year, in 2024, I will be released after 30 continuous years of imprisonment. Nowadays, especially with İpek's insistence, I have been focusing on working on a new book whose main theme is "farewell to prison". After determining the scope and content of this work, I will start writing. I don't know if I'll be able to finish it in the remaining 10 months, but it's clearly something worth working on.

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

Due to long-term, 30-year isolation, it is very difficult for me to properly identify and recommend authors worthy of the award. I am afraid of being unfair to the authors whose names I cannot recommend because I do not know their works, rather than to the authors whose names I recommend. Despite everything, I would say Adania Shibli. In my opinion, she deserves the award, because she is "a voice crying out in the wilderness" (to Jesus), I would like to draw attention to her.