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Living and Writing as an Author in Exile

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My native country is Bosnia and Herzegovina. I did not want to leave my land. In 1992, Serbs carried out their genocidal action called “ethnic cleaning” in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Many Muslims had to leave, or they would be destroyed and executed. I immigrated with my family to Germany. Although it was an unknown culture for me, I was happy to be in a free country, where I could work and, at the same time, learn. German became my second language through which I developed my writing.

My first phase in Germany was from 1992 to 1995; it was a refugee’s agony. During the day, I was burdened with work: I worked in several households as a cleaner, took care of both the household and the family, and then I ran to the classroom of a public school to learn German for a few hours. At the same time, the painful war in Bosnia and Herzegovina with the killing, dying, hunger and misery of my compatriots was constantly in my head. The war was present in all the media. Bosnia’s tragedy was broadcast live every day to living rooms around the world. Many Germans become engaged and collected humanitarian aid for people in Bosnia. These people needed someone to inform them first hand, someone who had just come from Bosnia. By helping with this humanitarian work, I realized how important knowledge of the German language was. I felt much better when I could use a word at the same level as other collaborators and hosts.

Literature from Bosnia was in high demand, but not the literature I wrote . The so-called “mainstream” tried to show the German public the cosmopolitanism of Sarajevo and the best sides of Tito’s socialism, in which cultures and religions lived together in harmony with positive attitudes toward one another. I did not have a novel that had a multicultural fairy tale about my homeland as its theme. One editor liked my storytelling style, and she wanted to order a love novel. “But I do not write love novels. I am writing about Bosnian women who have been exploited and exploited in the name of love, even in their own families,” I said. “No, we do not need these types of stories now. A love story between a Serbian boy and a Muslim girl at this time would sell well.” I could never write a novel with an imposed content, and so I stuck to my job as a cleaner. A few years leter, a small publisher wanted to publish works from “endangered cultures” such as the Bosnian culture with Islamic roots, and he published my books.

With the first publications, my refugee phase between 1996 and 1997 in Germany

ended. After that, I was both a cleaner and an author in exile. In 1997, with the efforts of my publisher, I was invited to the symposium "Publishing in Exile" to talk about my living and working between cultures: Islamic, Slavic, and European, and my exile in Germany. There was a lot of discussion about the writer's situation in someone else's culture. The sentence of a clerk from Munich impressed me deeply, and I remembered it well: "Women in exile are the best cleaners in Germany. Most of them are well educated." I was a cleaner but an author as well.

In 1997 and 1998, I was extremely happy because I received several work scholarships. For a couple of years without financial problems, with a good knowledge of German, I was able to react faster to my environment, gather information, speak up, and understand the problems of migration. At the same time, I could not understand why political and cultural authorities dealt superficially with immigration problems. A diagnosis of the problems was constantly being put forth. Integration, however, was going in the wrong direction, namely, nothing was done to prevent the emergence of parallel societies in German cities.

Women in exile were doomed not only to work mostly as cleaners, but also to preserve the traditions and customs of their forsaken lands. They had to endure the cruelties arising from this circumstance. Those who spoke out, who wanted to start discussions about the problems of immigrants, especially migrant women, were most often alone and could not count on the support of German political and cultural structures.

In 1998, at the Village of Artists Foundation, from which I received a work scholarship, I met a fellow migrant from Iraq, Sargon Boulus. He was Assyrian and a Christian from the Orient. I was Bosnian and a Muslim from Europe. His situation "without home and homeland" touched me; his knowledge of the Middle East thrilled me. Through the exchange of our experiences that came in the constant transition from one culture to another, we developed a mosaic-book "Legends and Dust – on Christian-Islamic Paths of the Heart." We finished the book in Bosnian and German. At that time, however, publishers did not show much interest in a Christian-Islamic dialogue manuscript. "You can kick out the part by your colleague and deepen your own story, highlighting your problems as a Muslim woman," I was told. "We will give you two months for that, but we can make a contract now." While that publisher was generous in terms of fees, I could not ruin a heartfelt book of understanding. The manuscript remained in my drawer for a long time.

Fortunately, word of mouth worked a lot for me, and my readers gained a completely different opinion from the editors and proofreaders. They thought my writing was new, refreshing, significant in terms of content. With the earnings from my work as a cleaner and my readings and literary performances, I could somehow survive and help my daughter finish her studies. Independence always comes at a high price.

The terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 in New York shook and changed the world. After the painful event, the public had to address the problem of "Islam in Europe." Politicians and the media, however, forgot to be constructive. The topic was treated either wither extreme hostility or with every measure of political correctness. Advocates of this latter approach were careful for the sake of God's will not to anger the fundamentalists in the Islamic community. Newsrooms competed over who would

offer the alleged experts on the Koran more space to present their views. The same speakers were always invited to media discussions, the same authors were given entire pages in newspapers, where they explained how the Holy Book was to be applied. Once an elegantly dressed woman who wore a lot of make-up taught us how to dress in accordance with the rules of Islam. A man preached that the realization of a woman's own desires was a great sin because Islamic women should live only for the good of their family. A young covered woman, engaged in the social work field, admitted that there was a lot of violence against women in immigrant families. She, for her part, which she considered to be her great merit, tried to persuade the imam of her mosque to warn the violent men in her congregation: "You must not beat your sister or wife because the Prophet never did that." I wondered, where does this Muslim woman live! In a strictly Islamic country, where Sharia law rules, or in a European state, where all the laws for the legal protection of the individual are available?

The media pointed out only the negative events from parallel societies: forced marriage, honor killings, radicalized young men, and schools that did not work because of the vandalism of students from immigrant families. Many publishers followed suit, as books dealing with the topic of "abused Muslim daughters" would generate good sales. Again, I had no manuscripts that could meet such criteria for either the politically correct or the hostile editors. For the first group, my way of thinking and writing was too European; for the second group, I was suppose to emphasize my unfortunate destiny as a Muslim. I am going to share with you a cynical anecdote: one editor joked when he commented my text: "A portrait of a Muslim woman who was not covered, who was not raped or abused, and who did not flee to a home for vulnerable women. My opinion is that such stories do not interest our readers. "

I do not know when, but I hope that such editors will soon realize how wrong they are. I have had the honor and the pleasure to meet many Germans who expect the media to show the diversity of views and differences within the Islamic community and show Muslims who live and work according to their Islamic beliefs and think and treat others without dogma and prejudice. There is something else that gives me hope: the voices of Muslims who want to live in Europe and to be part of that culture and reject any violence in the name of religion are growing louder. We can only hope that these voices will not be silenced either by the politically correct or by the religious fundamentalists.

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