



Resisting in Exile

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ABSTRACT

This text accounts for a woman's exile experience from Turkey to Germany. A woman's narrative filled with pessimism, insecurity and hope.

KEYWORDS

Exile, resistance, refugee, migration, women's narratives



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May 28, 2009... I had no clue that this date would be a crossroads that would totally change the way my life unfolded in the last decade. In the dusk of that Friday morning the door bell rang at a time that did not seem to be mistaken. As we jumped out of our bed with my husband, and opened the door we faced with ten-something gendarmarie with the headsman standing on our doorstep. They showed the court's verdict and notified me about the decision for my custody.

I was among the 36 public workers, with KESK and Eğitim Sen Central Office Women's Secretaries who were taken into custody. Our Kurdish identity was targeted; crime was manufactured out of our union activities within the scope of KESK.

As the judicial process started after six months it was good that my detention was terminated. Alas, the local court's verdict read as follows: "Although there is no finding that the defendant is a member of the [terror] organization, it is contended that she was involved in crime in the name of the organization, despite that she is not its member, and thus the verdict is for her punishment."

After I was released I continued to involve in union activities. In 2014 I was offered position by Siirt Municipality as Vice Co-chair responsible for Women, Culture, Public Relations and Press works.

I had knowledge of the women's problems in the region. In addition to the stark implications of the war and forced migration for women, women were facing with male violence; and I could be functional in this respect. I had self-confidence in this respect. Now, I would be dealing with not only the problems of women public workers but the experiences of all women living in the region.

In the early days of my work at Siirt Municipality, on August 3, 2014 Yazidi Kurds in Şengal (Syria) were faced with genocide, which they call 73rd Decree. The genocide was carried out by ISIL. Those who survived found themselves on migration paths. Kurdish provinces in Turkey were among the places, receiving extensive migration. More than three thousand migrants, majority of whom were women and children, arrived Siirt.

The survivors were in dire condition. The expression in their eyes and their spiritual fall were so devastating that at times I was not sure whether they existed at all. This state of affairs also led to questioning of what it really means to have fled death. Right, we could say that the survivors who came from Şengal were the lucky ones. But reality was far from that. Women, children, young and old, almost all were present, but only in bodily form. They had left their deep-cut spirits behind, where they came from. For these people who could save their lives from the 73rd Decree their past was deep down in the dark, and the future is not unclear.

There was mobilization in Siirt. The people were led by the Municipality and demonstrated extraordinary compassion with the survivors. The houses which had been built for those whose houses were damaged by the dam construction were allocated to the migrants from Şengal with no charge.

I was responsible for the camp, established for the migrants from Şengal. It was important to meet the material needs of migrant-survivors. But trauma-related and other health works were urgent, too. We immediately started health monitoring and trauma works with the coordination of SES Siirt Branch within our reach. Our works were

followed and supported by national and foreign volunteer organization. In a short time we established a sewing workshop, a laundry and a kindergarten. We sold women's handicraft in the bazaars we organized, and gave the income back to them. Of course, our works could not cure the traumas of the genocide survivors; but they could at least alleviate some of their pain.

I was also continuing with my routine works. My responsibilities were extensive. Priority is given to the migrants from Şengal; I had to conduct women's works on a multi-dimensional basis. For a well-designed work that would bear outcomes we had to determine women's problems and priorities. Hence I first designed a women's profile survey. A second line of these works was to form a Local Women's Platform. We organized training, seminars, actions and cultural activities for consciousness and awareness raising about gender inequality. The women in the region were very sensitive; young and old women participated in the activities and demonstrations; they were truly motivating. In a short time we published a women's journal where women could express themselves. Besides, in the Women's Consulting Center I was also conducting activities related to women who were subject to male violence.

In this period, Turkey witnessed the most optimistic atmosphere in the past four decades due to the democratic approach to Kurdish issue. All social groups had a strong hope and belief in the possibility of permanent peace. However, just when optimism reached its climax, bombs exploded in Ankara, Suruç, Diyarbakır killing dozens of people. And as we were approaching the June 7 general elections (2015) the tension increased. The region faced with a severe wave of violence.

Soon, we got the news about urban armed conflicts in Sur, Cizre, Nusaybin and many other places; thus the dark winter of hopelessness started. We stepped into a period when humane and moral values were relentlessly violated. The cities were blockaded and destroyed; women and children were killed; funerals were attacked; right to burial was denied. All these reached to climax by the cruel practices that were registered in history as Cizre cellars where 177 people were killed according to human rights organizations' reports.

By the urban armed conflicts Siirt witnessed a second migration wave. Around ten thousand people from the vicinity of Cizre, İdil and Şirnak sought refuge in Siirt. They lost everything; the light has gone out from the eyes of children and women; their cheek were sunken; their mental state reflected the degree of violence they had to endure. The children were wrestling with illnesses.

This second wave of migration caused almost paralyzed the municipal works. Migrant-survivors did not apply to other public institutions; they tried to resolve all their problems through the municipality. The people once more mobilized for support; they welcomed the new-comers in their homes. Health teams carried out intensive activities. The aids extended to migrants from Şengal now directed to the new domestic migrations victims. Under these conditions my responsibilities increased; my work extended beyond limits.

2016 proved to be a new turning point on my part. The country was ruled by decrees in the force of law (*kanun hükmünde kararname*, KHK) under State of Emergency (*Olağanüstü Hal*, OHAL) regime. Hundreds of academics, signed the Peace Statement were fired from their positions; they were arrested; more than one hundred thousand public workers were displaced. In the regions, trustees were appointed to all the municipalities in the region, including Siirt. Co-chairs were

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arrested; municipal assemblies were dissolved. An extensive wave of arrests were started.

In the meantime I was also fired within the scope of a KHK. I had to go to Ankara, rushing. Here too, anxiety and uncertainty ruled.

Our case was concluded at the Court of Appeals in Spring 2017. I was sentenced to imprisonment for five years. On the other hand, I was also sued in two different cases in Siirt. I could not take the risk of imprisonment. I had only one option: going abroad.

In the recent years Mediterranean and Aegean Sea turned into a graveyard for those fleeing from civil wars. This danger was waiting for me and my friends. I was aware of this; but I had to take the risk. But this necessity was a problem that caused a split in my/selfhood. Not only in terms of the place that I would leave and the place that I would go but a split that I experienced much more deeply. I was hurting inside; for a part of me was falling apart. Everything that made my/self would be left behind. I would also take my sorrows, my sadness and loneliness with me...

As we, a group of seven friends, were considering the ways to go to Greece we were shocked with the sight that layed ahead of us by the Aegean coasts. Every inch of the coasts were turned into migrant market, divided among human traffickers and migrants mafia. We offered ourselves to sale in this market.

After a difficult travel under the star lights, by the side of a rubber boat that hardly headed forward in the dark waters we could finally arrive in Greece.

Now I took my first step into my life in exile; I left my country, my beloved behind. Spiritual hardships aside, I was surprised to see that physically departing from the country was easier than staying there. But my departure from Greece was no easier at all. As I was trying to fly to Germany I was detained by the police in Thessaloniki. I had to endure naked search under detention. As I had nervous breakdown due to maltreatment they had to direct me to the hospital and then I was released.

I arrived Germany in a mentally and bodily devastated state. I could not put into words what I felt inside. I could only express the stark contrast between my spirit and my feelings.

Since we entered the country illegally we had surrendered the police on our own. They located us in a camp in Darmstadt. There were refugees from Turkey, Syria, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Somalia. And I was starting my new life with refugee identity.

My knowledge of German language gave me great advantages. In a short time I could develop dialogue with the camp administration. I gave language lessons to refugees; also involved in translation works. Supporting the other refugees took me back to Siirt. I would recall my intense work there – how we mobilized to support the migrant-survivors to overcome their traumas. Now, I was in their position. Now I was aN Asyl.

Now I am trying to connect life as a fish searching for water. Returning back does not leave me alone; it is somewhat obsessive. Sometimes I see that I struggle with myself. My feelings and mind are in a great conflict; they take me to unknown places. My feelings float in the past waters; my reason is trying to shape my new life.

Sometimes, I am startled to sense that my natural self is blurred in the midst of this conflict. As I struggle between the past and the present, the uncertainty of the future gripes my soul. For a moment everything becomes meaningless. A dim semi-blankness... This foreign world turns my soul upside down, drowns me with all its differences.

As my feelings persist to win, my reason tells me to shut out the pessimism and insecurity that surround my soul. Thus I resist with all my strength, and yield to hold onto my new life. This is the only way that I can free my soul, moving in the cycle of uncertainty. If I can do so, then, I can overcome the split inside.

And sometimes, I cannot understand why I stumble this much. Here everything is so tranquil and serene. People, nature... Life unfolds in accordance with the rules. Nobody steps into the other's sphere of life. Even in such tranquility my experiences happen to pervade my soul, my body as a nightmare. The new life turns out to be narrow for me. Of course, it is not possible that my new life can fill in the void, created by my loss. How is it possible to create a new identity at this age?

Even as such, I am not desperate. My family lives in Germany. During my childhood I had lived here for a short time. I am familiar with the culture.

I registered with the German Educational Sciences Union (GEW); I take part in its demonstrations and activities. I comment on the political process in the country and the gendered discrimination that women experience.

Besides I take part in the works of a civil society organization; I try to write in a newspaper regularly. I continue with my works relayed to the refugees in the camp that I stayed when I arrived Germany. This makes me feel content to a certain extent.

But the traces of my past are inscribed in my subconscious, and they are alive in my soul. At this stage my mental and sentimental bonds with my country are still very much alive. I do not know what awaits me in the long run. But I am aware of the reasons why I am on the move, why I am forced into a life in exile; I know what this means. This knowledge leads me to re-create myself. Perhaps, this what really matters.

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German Educational Sciences Union

Simten Coşar (trans.)

Feminist Asylum