



Withering of the Word; the Word of the Loss

An interview and conversation with Oya Baydar

Hande Ögüt – Oya Baydar

ABSTRACT

Hande Ögüt converses with Oya Baydar on her novel, *The Lost Word*.

KEYWORDS

The Lost Word, Hande Ögüt, Oya Baydar, Women's literature, Turkey



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INTRODUCTIONS

Hande Ögüt

We all probably know Oya Baydar. Following her *Kedi Mektupları* and *Elveda Alyoşa, Hiçbir Yere Dönüş (Return To Nowhere)*, published in 1998 impressed me the most. For me, the book promised nobody and no place to return to. I felt the same satisfaction as the one I had when reading Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*; it was as if Godot, too, was the one who would not come, the one who was nothing. Such a feeling of impasse... Oya Baydar published her next book, *Sıcak Külleri Kaldı* two years after *Hiçbir Yere Dönüş*. This was followed by *Erguvan Kapısı*, and finally we have *Kayıp Söz*. Oya Baydar is a writer, activist, exile, mother and woman. In her novels, she reflects all these identities of hers into fictionalized contexts in transformed or refined forms. We observe the getaway before and after September 12. She vividly pictures mostly the way revolutionists and leftists relate to the present as well as their disappointments. *Lost Word* is different from all her other novels; it embraces all of them; it offers to come to terms with all of the books: coming to terms with everything that withered away; the meaning, word, ideals and ideologies, and love that withered away... Now, we will have a conversation about this novel.

Oya Baydar

Hi, I am happy to be here and to talk about *Kayıp Söz (The Loss of Word)*... I hope this turns out to be a pleasant conversation for everyone here..

Interview – In search of one's words

H.Ö.: The hero of your novel is Ömer Eren... We read the whole reckoning process through him. Withering away, as the withering away of the word, as the word turns into a metaphor - I think - and I see this as the withering away of the truth. But perhaps, here we can discuss what the truth is. In his book, *The Fall of the Word*, Jacques Ellul describes the withering of the word as the withering of the truth. Ömer Eren is a writer who loses his own words and he is very uncomfortable with this. Hence he starts his journey to the East. He goes to East as he loses his word; but at the same time he suffers from losing his own fairy tale. The (genre of) story belongs to the Eastern culture and oral tradition. Novel is, on the other hand, mostly in a written language and belongs to the West. But Ömer Eren's journey is neither mystical nor sufistic. Why does he travel to the East? Some critics argue that this tends toward Orientalism - which I do not agree with. What would you say?

O.B.: I am prepared for this! The hero frequently says, "Is it possible that this is the new orientalism?" Thus, I asked before! Joke aside, it is certainly orientalism. Everything is, in fact, a look at the other, too. Why do we call something that was once very fashionable as orientalism? Why do we call (some) orientalist, as a degraded term? For we look at the other from the outside, and most of the time such a gaze confirms the one that is looked at. We see some niceties that are not there in reality. We rewrite the other, the other world in our minds. In this respect, orientalism is a bit mainstream. Hence in the novel: "Depending on where you are, everywhere is the East." Wherever you are, where the sun rises is the East. But of

course, we can discuss whether the critiques are only about the issue of the gaze.

H.Ö.: "Everywhere is East," you say. At one point in the novel, Zelal says: "Even if you are the storyteller, you are the storyteller of other places; you cannot write our story." On the one hand, there is a novel, and this novel tells the story of many people. But on the other hand, Zelal's words imply that there is a story that cannot be written. Does Ömer Eren write this story?

O.B.: On the one hand, he tries to write it. We say this, assuming that everybody has read the novel, but there must be people who have not read it, yet... Ömer Eren is from the western part of the country; he is around 50 - 60 years of age; from the '68 generation, a writer with a leftist past. But his life changed; he turned into a 'bestseller' writer. He is famous and surrounded by crowds... In this new life of his, he signs his books and earns a lot. He is detached from what had made him Ömer Eren, from all the hopes he once held, his hope and struggle for a better world. As a writer, he feels the abyss inside as a result of having left all these behind. He wants to find the things he lost; but has a hard time in this. I started the novel with a coincidence, but that scene of entry was totally real.

H.Ö.: Would you please talk about that scene?

O.B.: In the very beginning, I wrote: "I was searching for a word, I heard a sound." Ömer Eren is searching for his word. He hears a sound in Kurdish: "They killed the child!". The sound of pain. One day, I was returning from Ankara to Marmara Island, thus I was going to take the night bus to Bandırma. I was waiting at Ankara Bus Terminal. You know there; when it is midnight, darkness sets in; lights appear to be weird; sorrow settles; there is noise, a weird noise. As I was walking to the platform from where the bus would leave I saw a lady. She was around 70 years of age. Just a typical passenger to Bodrum, like those retired women, or those wives of retired men, who travel to Bodrum on night-time buses; they have such hats, and in bermuda shorts. A bit chubby; nothing surprising about her... She was as if talking to someone; I looked around, there was no one. She was talking to herself. She was uttering, literally the following words: "Did the bride take the candle holders as she was fleeing from Budapest over the Danube?" Here is Danube, Budapest, escape, the bride, candle holders, a lost child; there is the worry about whether the child was returned or not. The woman was really talking about these. If I had not seen that woman in that position, perhaps, I could not write this novel in the way it is now or at least not with such an introduction. I, too, have some knowledge on this subject. During the 1954 uprising in Hungary, the cadres of all the foreign communist parties - including the communist party of Turkey - were sent from Budapest. For instance, the woman might have been talking about this. Each of us carry so much luggages inside. People see us, but what we carry inside is not apparent. And that woman, too, who knows what kind of a past she had. Well, the story starts as such... In the meantime, there is an (informal) enlistment ceremony (soldier farewell ceremony). People open fire (for celebration); a pregnant woman is wounded - I made up this part. This pregnant woman is Zelal. Her husband is a guerilla. He

returns from the mountains; for they are in the bus terminal, going somewhere. Afterward, Ömer Eren wants to help the woman, but Zelal does not trust anyone. We might re-address the first question: I, indeed, wanted to tell the disconnect and distrust between the Turks and Kurds, the Easterners and the Westerners. Zelal knows Turkish; she had attended the school for some time. Besides, she is a very intelligent woman. She mostly speaks Kurdish. At one point she tells the writer: "Now that you are a storyteller; tell me a good story. But you shall not tell our story." As we had mentioned the critiques... But her story cannot be told if and when I write. This is not possible. We talked about looking from outside and otherization. And right, when I happen to tell the story of Zelal, I can only do so through my gaze. o from my viewpoint. I try to tell it as sincerely as possible, but I cannot tell it through her gaze. There is a novel written by Ömer Eren or Oya Baydar. But Zelal had not written that novel. Can a novel, not written by Zelal be one looking as if written by her? I think it is really difficult for it to be so. For example, if we do this do we become someone like Dostoyveski??

H.Ö.: I feel as if this can be managed by a metafiction method? She approaches Oya Baydar, tells her story and Oya Baydar tells the story that Zelal writes.

O.B.: But again, it is the writer who tells the story by citing Zelal and it is impossible to evade this, to make the story that is not told by Zelal as if it was told by Zelal. More correctly, I could not find a way to do so. For example, in *Erguvan Kapısı*, I told the story from the viewpoints of four different people. Among these three were good; one was not that good. So it seems I did not feel him/her; s/he was so far away from me. This, you might not be able to do.

H.Ö.: You have many different characters... A Kurdish woman, a writer who lost his word, a child, a guerilla... And as you said it is very difficult to find the vocabulary for each character. I have been working with the concept of 'polyphony', noted by Bakhtin. How is it possible to differentiate these voices? As the writer has just one reason and will, how can the different heroes get free of talking in the writer's mind?

O.B.: I do not say that I do this perfectly but I do not do it badly either. I mean, I am not being humble here, but I also know my limits. The more I can open my heart to that theme, that person, that environment, that pain or that joy the better it turns out to be. I certainly encounter from time to time the limits of not knowing a place well enough, not being aware of certain things, missing something, and not loving in the real sense of the term. I mean you cannot always create heroes whose environment you know well, whom you know well, who you love. Such times prove to be not good. These are the times when I cannot make the heroes speak as they are, where I find it difficult to create that polyphony. Now, I would like to ask a question: Don't we all face the same limitations when we ask the questions and direct our criticisms? For instance, I read the critiques of the novel of mine, and see how they turned out to be the ones that I expected...A critic who used to praise me in the past lingered in this book. S/he said that the fiction is very good, and the style is that much good but the political message seems to have

come forward. For, this critic has a distance to the Kurdish question and the question of peace; s/he approaches the state of affairs from a nationalist perspective. On the other hand, a critic who ignores me, who does not like me at all commented favorably on my new novel. Again the reason is the Kurdish issue. So, the point where we look also affects the critique.

H.Ö.: I just read a critique on the Kurdish question, and the fact that the writer sees that from where s/he looks, the extent to which s/he is into the issue that s/he is talking about. I would like to briefly cite what Semra Çelik says: "The novel always gives a sense of pain in conscience as it is written by the gaze and language of a Turkish intellectual. It is disturbing that violence is fictionalized through generalization. *Kayıp Söz* gives the impression that Kurdish issue is reduced to a psychological problem. A woman of letters looking at the Kurdish question, her attempt to understand the region, her effort to narrate the pain, worries there. Read the book by Oya Baydar, who generalizes the violence, who approaches the killing of rats in the laboratories and the killings in the war in the east of the East as the products of the same violence as the novel of a writer in search of her voice."

O.B. : At least she recommends that it be read. (Smiles)

H.Ö.: This is a critique that is directed at you; they say that you are an elitist.

O.B.: I think they have points in this critique: that "the novel is written from the perspective and in the language of the Turkish intellectual." Yes, I have no Kurdish background. But aside from that, I have many things: Circassian identity, a bit of Jewishness, Crimean identity. After all, I do not know what the term Turk means. But it represents one thing: Dominant nation. And this is, all the time, what causes pain in conscience for me. In that sense, I am not a Turk. I might be a part of the dominant nation but I do not behave as if I am the dominant nation. Of course, it is clear that the novel was not written by the gaze of a Kurd! I tried to represent the heroes in the novel, on the other hand, as Kurds if they are Kurds, and as Norwegians if they are Norwegians - but to the extent possible. It could not be written from the perspective of a Kurd, in any case. But we are still waiting for that literature to emerge; certainly, if we let them develop their language. There is something else in between the lines of this critique - deriving from the issue of generalizing the violence. There is this idea that "You stay at a distance to our struggle." I generalize violence because for me there is no single form of violence. Here we are again stuck with the Kurdish question; but *Kayıp Söz* is a novel on violence that encompasses the world. When you turn on the radio, TV wherever you are the only thing that you see is blood. Tock, tock, tock, violence in Lebanon, Palestine, Israel, Afghanistan, Africa, the Southeast of Turkey, and Iraq. And we shall not restrict violence to war. Where does violence start? Yes, it starts when we cut the mice. For example, a friend of mine was cutting cat brains for interpreting dreams. I tried to ask this question: Why do they cut the experimental animals in laboratories? Yes, it is really bad. And here we have this huge but; because there will be a contribution to science, a medicine for humanity from this point on. At that point, I

am hesitant. Shouldn't it be done? There is this ethical problem. I underlined the 'but' here because there is a 'but' when you are cutting the experimental animals in the laboratories. It is bad but beneficial. There is also a 'but' to making war; the Turkish army goes there and bombs and this is bad - no matter which officer you ask s/he does not say that we are doing good. But s/he says, "what else can we do; the patria is in danger, we will prevent its destruction." On the other hand, the Kurdish armed movement is also killing and this also has a 'but'. Of course, none of them says that this is good, and it should be done. S/he says, it is bad but "We need to do so to claim our rights, but for our independence, for our demands." I used violence as the common cement of the book. For, I was interested in the 'but' of that very same violence. This might reside in the Kurdish question, in the indivisible unity of the state; this might be for humanity to formulate a medicine. It does not have an end, and it is always with a 'but'. Once you say 'but' you have to tolerate any and every form of violence. Hence, violence against women unfolds by a religious motivation. It says, "it is bad to beat women, but...".

The critique reads, "It always gives a sense of pain in conscience". Frankly, I see injustice here; because I wrote this novel for the mere fact that it was on my conscience. I mean this is a novel of conscience. I also believe that we can find the word only in conscience. But this pain in conscience was not about looking down on someone. I wrote because I could not make sense of the state of the world and my existence in that world, because it was on my conscience. Besides, as I found the word in my own way my pain in conscience increased. I wrote a scene of a Kurdish child - and that was real. His father died, he does not know Turkish... When he sees Ömer Eren he starts to be around him since he is a child seeking for his father. He collects flowers, brings them to him... But he does not speak Turkish, he speaks only Kurdish. Ömer Eren, in turn, wants to thank him; but he does not know his language, either. I had experienced this scene, I felt the pain deep down. If there is a pain in conscience it is here..

Conversation – how to search for our words?

In *Kayıp Söz* and your previous novels there was always a disconnect, a failure in intellectuals' relations to their children.

♀ I think your narration focuses mostly on the mother - child relationship. This is symbolic violence... The mother's expectations from her child span the whole life... I heard your voice mostly in that relation and wondered...

H.Ö.: Ece Temelkuran, too, spared one of her texts totally to this relation. Kurdish question, violence, etc., she noted that there is a brutal mother and this should be read on the basis of the relationship between the mothers and the sons.

O.B.: In general, the critique unfolded through the Kurdish question. The most poignant point was that this was the most 'forthcoming' political issue in the male gaze. But as you said, in that book there is also the theme of mother-child relation. Actually, the relation between the family and the child... But it is the mother who feels the pain most. I do not know whether this is valid for all the leftists in our

generation. We lived adventurous lives. I mean we experienced March 12, and then September 12... We all fell apart... Some of us were in exile; they had kids... There are so many things that would seem exaggerated if written down... I used self-censorship at many points. For if I account for those it would seem exaggerated, but all that was lived was totally real. My generation experienced such real pain that caused its reality to be doubted. And their children got their share from those pains - whether you like it or not. There were children who could not go and live with their mothers and fathers; there were children who could reunite with their families through the moderation of the UN... There were children who were left alone; who happened to have drug addiction - alas they were truly loved... It was as if our generation was burdened with the mission of saving humanity. I thought about it afterward... In the meantime, we forgot our own children. We ignored our lives and perhaps the lives of our children for those grand ideals. If you wish for a more solid saying, I, too, have a son... Deniz, in *Kayıp Söz*, is *not* my son. But there is a feeling deep down when you are writing. In those very-well written parts even if the case is not the same as the reality it is those parts that you feel the most. We did not beat our children, we did not insult them. We always told them, "do whatever you'd like to do", "think however you'd like to think". It was as if we let them be as free as possible. For example, I did not want to teach anything about the Left - that was a very conscious tendency. Some teach (Communist) International to their children; on my part, I wanted him to stay out of these, make his choices himself and explore himself. On the one hand, there is such an agenda, on the other, there is this fight, this reckoning that you happen to get involved with yourself... I realized that I always imposed something on him. In *Kayıp Söz*, the child, Deniz, is forced to be like [Deniz Gezmiş and his friends](#), although nothing about such imposition is expressed clearly to him. Even the criteria to become a successful person were ours. In the book, for example, they tell the child to "go to Iraq, since you could not succeed in any sphere; we have acquaintances there. Become a photographer." Just think about it, s/he sent her/his own child to the war zone so that s/he could achieve something. Such deeds are real; I know it. I have seen examples in my circle. It is sufficient to think about the things we do to the children during the prep exams. The fact that we impose our own values on them is quite widespread in our generation - be it on the left or the right. As we considered our values perfect, when they did not conform with our standards of success we destroyed them and ourselves alike.

H.Ö.: This is also the case, in the movie, *La Faute à Fidel!*. This movie shot by Julie Gavras - the daughter of Costa Gavras takes place in the 1970s. The mother is a feminist researcher on abortion, the father is a Chilean activist. In time they become aware of their bourgeois lives and decide to leave that life behind. They start to live in a smaller house and get rid of their luxuries. Their nine-year-old daughter attends a convent school. They want to disenroll her. But they cannot do so since she resists their decision. She wants to attend that school; her friends are there; she feels good there. Thus, they make her quit religious courses and the child is left alone once they do so. Communal life starts in this family's house; meetings all around; they smoke joints all night until dawn; many talks and Anna continues her resistance as she tries to understand this process of change. The mother and the father try to teach her the spirit of collectivity. One day, Anna turns out to be the only student who knows the answer of a question asked in the classroom. But as she sees that all the other students raise their fingers for the wrong

answer she does the same and when the teacher says, "you are all wrong" she feels sorry. She tells her mother and father: "You talked about the spirit of collectivity, and I gave the wrong answer. Have you not been wrong, ever?" Has your son asked you such a question?

O.B.: No. He already thinks that we were totally wrong (smiles). Once we had this encounter that really hurt me: It was 1989; the Berlin Wall was demolished. Since we could not yet return from Frankfurt (like exile) we were still there. Our home was some kind of a center. People come; conversations are held. Besides, we continuously have discussions on the October Revolution. My son's name is Ekim (October). We start with the names, all the time. He was nine years old. He came and said: "So what will my name be, now?" I felt so bad! Then I tried to write a text, titled "You have a beautiful name Ekim"; as I noticed that it would be too emotional I quitted.

♀ I think there are two types of otherness in this book. I observed this in the relation with the child, and the relationship that the writer forms with the East and the east of the East. The book could lay down the East without humiliating it, with all its magic, because it is far enough. But the otherness that her son represents is quite familiar. Mothers and fathers whom we cannot love without the pain in conscience, who do not have any magic in themselves since they are in the world of political utopias in which we exist, who lock the movement of one society to another's, to the criteria of some other society will see their sons, who they already casted aside from the perspective of that society. They will see them as a residue. If there is a 'residue', which cannot be turned into dreams and which cannot have its own epic, if there is the other... for me there this was the son and his wife, Norwegian villager - not the Norwegian who talks about the writer, "how nice that she came from the East, and talks and explains." The Norwegian who cannot even say that because that someone on whom the power that derives from knowledge; I mean that someone who is the West, but regardless, who is also the East. There is also the mother's telling of her own body, and those of her son and daughter-in-law. On the one hand, her pretty, thin body, on the other hand, those chubby, fat bodies. In my reading, I had pain in my conscience in these parts.

O.B.: Seriously, how nice you put it.

♀ The conversation unfolds in general through conscience. This is a concept that we deeply need. I also have significant observations in the East, but they look too primitive now... If there are people who cannot yet express themselves freely [in the region], and in the other part [of the country] there are people who can quite freely criticize, produce films, who can dance, and write I believe that this also should be a matter of patience.

O.B.: So, shouldn't they do any of these?

♀ To be honest, I haven't read your book. But I think that we, I mean the intellectuals of semi-developed countries have [a tendency for] a

'touristic literature'. I shall say that I find this superficial since this literature is produced with the gaze of a traveler without any identification, without any experience there, spiritually and in terms of life standards.

O.B.: Then, I would ask that you read the book; for exactly the same sentences are there. Mine is not a 'traveler's literature'. And it is not possible to refrain from it in this way. Intellectuals, academics, and artists go to the East due to their concern for the Kurdish question and in the final analysis for the human beings, for the fact that they take this as a matter of conscience. And there is not that much benefit in this. Some of my Kurdish friends call this "Eastern tourism" or "Kurdish tourism". Such times I am always in-between; because I know they go there with good intentions, to do something. They say, "you are not alone, we are with you". But on the other hand, what you say is true: they are about to say "we do not want anyone to come here". But pushing away the ones who go there and saying "stay where you are" does not seem ok, either...

H.Ö.: Aside from the 'traveler's literature', we can note 'benefit seeking'. I am exempting everyone here. Ayşe Kulin - a writer who horrifies me and whom I criticized a lot - says, "I am glad that Leyla Zana did not accept to meet me, for I wrote her as I wish to do". I do not relate this state of doing however one wants and 'traveler's literature' to Oya Baydar's work.

♀ Movies offer more natural and direct venues for telling the stories of the others. Realities talk, people from relevant groups take the scene, minimal acting, and the like. This can also be pursued in literature. The writer might compensate for the loss here by emphasizing the actual existing dialogues. We shall also consider the conscience of the writer, her own self, her subjectivity - that's for sure. For this is at the same time somewhat the shared conscience of the society. Certainly, it enables the writer to aestheticize and send the message to the hearts of the audience. For, we, too, read what these writers write.

O.B.: The basics of the problem are not the dialogues; it rather concerns hearing the other as it sounds. I am talking about something that goes beyond empathy; hearing what the other says as the other hears it.

♀ For me putting weight on the dialogues means trusting the reader... I mean we shall not look down on the human skill of empathizing.

♀ I did not read the book as a novel of the East, as if Oya Baydar told about the East. Someone said earlier, Norway hosted the most impressive part. In fact, I considered the account as the direct reckoning of characters with themselves. I saw Ömer Eren's questioning, his gaze, places he went and also the people around him. In this book, we observe the loss of meaning and real goals of one in different life spheres, in various spheres of social relations, in the mother-child, father, job, profession, in the struggle for

freedom...People get involved in the struggle for freedom for the sake of happiness. But in time the aim in the beginning is forgotten in the rhythm of everyday life...One experiences alienation and the meaning is lost. I also considered the narration of Deniz's anti-hero attitude: rejecting to shoot, just fishing. Perhaps, I might have done differently. But I think we lose the meaning in such instances as our denials lifelong and such points when we cannot find as our relations with the society.,

O.B. One starts to ask the question, "What is the meaning of life" after a certain point...I wanted to write this instance especially in my book, *Kedi Mektupları (Cat Letters)*, and as cats would tell the story. In fact, it does not have a meaning, we fill it in., there is no meaning; it is us who fill in the gap, left behind. Why should there be one? Some seek after-death worlds and beliefs. None of the creatures ask questions about the meaning of life; only humans do so. The others just live. In *Kedi Mektupları* all the heroes are cats. They are curious about their owners: "What is the matter with them?", they ask. "What is the matter with our owners who continuously speak and who are up to something all the time?" The owners seek the meaning of life. All of us take place somewhere. In the early 1960s, I took my place in the leftist movement in Turkey. The dynamics of that period did not let you step outside that place. However, I had prepared myself to be a novelist; I wrote a novel when I was 18 years old and that made me face the risk of being dismissed from school. I had written another novel, which I long forgot ... Thereafter, after 1962, I got so much involved in the movement that I had forgotten all of this and became a 'professional' revolutionary. We used to see ourselves as such, our occupation, our life is the revolution, and we will always do this. It was as such with its rights and wrongs. I mean, you make your life meaningful at that moment. You make your life meaningful through the working class. You make your life meaningful through the Kurdish question. Again, you make your life meaningful through religion, through the headscarf struggle, through flag waving and the rhetoric of secularism, the fatherland, and the nation you make your life meaningful. I, too, did such. Why does Ömer Eren lose his word? Because when you lose the meaning in your life you lose your word. Ömer Eren seeks ways to re-make the meaning of his life - the meaning that withered away - through the East. Embracing new values as we lose the values that make our lives meaningful... This is what he does. Thus, it is not mere 'tourism'. We are happy if and when we find ourselves meaningful; we are thus happy even in the midst of our pains. I was happier when I was tortured or when I was forced to live abroad under dire conditions than the latter years. If we define happiness as the feeling of being content I felt more content in those days. Then as I got disillusioned I turned out to be unhappy.

Why did I start writing again? The wall had fallen down; there was chaos and everything on which we had built our identities withered away. My generation's reaction to this was twofold: A group tried to behave as if nothing had happened. "What is happening is merely accidental, in fact nothing happened; let's keep on doing what we have been doing." For them, this was a matter of not losing the meaning. Another group was in total denial: "All was wrong; we were made to go wrong." Whoever had done so... Some in this group tended to a life that contradicted their values; as Ömer Eren does. I do not want to judge anyone. If you ask me what I have learned for so many years, I would say, "honestly, I learned not to judge anyone".

And some stayed as I have. Ours was a harder task; for if you do not tend to two routes it is always hard to continue. On the one hand, questioning turned out to be more fertile. We questioned the meanings we embraced, we questioned ourselves. We sought serenity, if not happiness. In essence, we make our lives meaningful; that meaning pervades all throughout our identities; we become whatever we are, and when we lose it (in the novel I used the phrase losing the word) we are unhappy.

♀ I am not sure I agree with you. This loss of meaning sounds egoistic to me. I would like to share an instance that I experienced during the earthquake: An elderly woman was trapped under the wreckage... No one was approaching her, because everyone wanted to be around the ones they knew. The woman was crying out for "Water!", and people were behaving as if she was not there. My conscience did not let it go; I went by her. I stayed with her, putting my life in danger. I waited until the rescue team came; I let everyone know about her whereabouts and rescued her. My father is a physician but he did not help anyone because he was scared. He said: "You saved that elderly woman for yourself; to make your life meaningful". I do not think everything we do is merely for making our lives meaningful. Being accused of this...

O.B.: Oh no! We are at a very fragile point where there might be a big misunderstanding.

♀ This is important because many people died, and I do not think they died just to make their own lives meaningful.

O.B.: It is not an egoistic attitude for a person to tend to make her/his/their life meaningful. It is very natural. What is important is the basis on which s/he/they build that meaning.

♀ I am not a nihilist. It is not a correct assumption to say that life is meaningless and that it is only us who make it meaningful.

O.B.: It is you who specify the meaning.

H.Ö.: And the meaning determines your stance.

O.B.: You are the one specifying the meaning, and then it determines all about you. For example, you put a note with a view to conscience. One day, a very intelligent woman, around 30 - 32 years of age, interviewed me. After we were done with the interview, she said: "I think that all your heroes are sick, all psychiatric cases; for we cannot understand what it means to work, and act for others".

♀ There is this part of life in which we live, the fictional one; and there is also that part, which we face at times of danger, as in the case of earthquake. The idea of making life meaningful does not tell anything about that second part.

O.B.: I think you have already made your life meaningful... You would feel bad if you had not done so. You criticize your father.

♀ I told him; "dad, you did not do that; you did not do that for yourself, either".

O.B.: Making life meaningful is not a bad endeavor; if you do not do this, you stay in a vacuum. But what is important is how s/he does it. I also asked the interviewer, "then, how would you like it to be?" She mentioned promotion, buying a new car, having a world tour and the like; and added, "you were happier, we are in a vacuum". This evinces that she could not make it. Thus, she has not made her life meaningful.

H.Ö.: Deniz, in turn, cannot shoot his war photos since he thinks that he would be a party to the violence. But he is there and he can shoot. He makes his own choice, saying "I do not accept the meaning that was put on me by my mother and father".

O.B.: He says, "My own meaning is here, in not being a party to this".

♀ The ways we build our own lives are also the mechanisms through which we make our lives meaningful. But are all the efforts to make our lives meaningful and moral at the same level? You noted a disposition of not judging. Yes, correct, but is it not meaningful itself that I tend to find meaning in this way and not the other way? Is there a moral difference to the fact that one builds the search for meaning with those other than herself? I believe there is.

O.B.: We look at the others and evaluate from within the mirrors or prisms of the meanings that we ourselves have found. What right do we have to do so? This is we have as the mother-son relation in the book. The meaning that the son puts is not well received by the mother; does she have the right to do so? We cannot resolve this question. But on a simpler plane, all we do is in order to keep ourselves alive as human beings. For me, making [life] meaningful is 'being able to live', making this possible. So long as we like and prefer our own meanings we can all act through them. Working for the working class, or for others is the most meaningful act for me. For my young friend, the most meaningful thing to do is to act with her conscience and rescue people during the earthquake. For others, other things count as the most meaningful acts... Not all are equal for me; but what will we do with that? There is no answer to this. A drug addict who lives without doing nothing has constituted her/his/their life accordingly.

♀ Here I tend to agree with the previous commentator. For, if we happen to progress to a totally nihilistic point we might well face a chaotic situation. I think we might be able to define certain facts more clearly if we take the archetypes as our references.

♀ I look at your comments from within a context that overlaps with another concept: 'Awareness'. Being aware that life is a biological living that unfolds between birth and death. This consciousness brings in conscience. We have a conscience in accordance with the awareness we have.

O.B.: The main issue is about how to fill your life, following awareness. This is a very critical awareness. For such awareness might lead some to say, "I will drink ceaselessly, I will never be awake".

♀ Then, the woman who is aware of her gender and that who is not aware, I mean, the woman who perceives herself as a human being and that who is aware that she is a human girl differentiate along consciousness. She either accepts the system as it is and uses its language as a part of this system (we have such writers) or she does not accept it at all, and this is to do with our conscience. I think awareness is the first step in this respect.

O.B.: Giving meaning to life does not happen all at once! You do not wake up and design a goal for your life. This takes place on its own. A man who approaches life with a more material gaze might find your deeds as nonsense; however, you pursue many 'meaningful' deeds without being aware of them and with the education and culture that you have been accumulating since your childhood. When I was in my 30's, a man asked me "why do you act like this?" I had not thought about it until then. After giving some thought, I responded: "to make my life meaningful".

♀ Do we need to be interested in politics to become writers? Dostoyevski or Balzac were not too involved in politics. If we talk about fiction, if we consider literature, the novel as a matter of writing then someone who does not think as you do might write in the same taste, with the same reality. What are the limits to this? For instance, I cannot understand when someone says "you can never write as a Kurdish woman because you are not like her". For I doubt that this correspondence is necessary for literature. Is it necessary to be a Kurdish woman in order to write about her? What are the limits of literature in this respect?

O.B.: This is a matter of political novel discussion. I claim that I do not write political novels, I just write about human beings. But I write about human beings not in the abstract but in a certain society, in a certain period, and within the scope of certain events. I tried to write about Turkish, Kurdish Norwegian human beings. Whether I succeeded or not is a matter of another line of critique. There is never a condition for coming from within a political movement. This is a real handicap, especially in Turkey, and perhaps throughout the world. I am considered a novelist only very recently; from the very start, I was perceived as that militant communist woman. Words fail me! My favorite works are the stories in *Elveda Alyoşa* and *Hiçbir Yere Dönüş*. These are examples of purer literature, but I started to be taken seriously as a writer only after *Erguvan Kapısı*. Certainly, we all tell stories through the environments, events, and people, which we are more familiar with. Our tellings are more about the feelings we feel inside, if not the ones that we tell this directly. I come from within leftist politics. "You did not have to tackle writing

novels, hey woman". But I want to do this, and I do not think that I am bad at it. And there is a good novel and a bad novel. For example, I do not like socialist realism in literature; I did not like those books even in my most communist times. These do not constitute good literature; they are the literature, trying to say something. I want to talk about human beings, regardless of doing this; the human beings with a view to the feelings that I know, the environments that I know, and the events that I know. Otherwise, there is no such necessity for sure.

H.Ö.: Now, we come together here - so many women... We are in a feminist bookstore... When we talk about literature we never add men as a prefix to the term writer - we never say 'male writer'; for we see them everywhere we go! Moreover, we see this place as a rebel zone. Women are supposed to be present in the realm of literature as well as preserve their powers... Thus we have two hard tasks at hand.

O.B.: Women and men have different dispositions and looks for thousands of years. I have been very foreign to women's issues for a long time; for us, as socialists, we had believed that revolution would come about and everything would be resolved. When I first visited the Soviet Union and stayed there for a while, I said, "Revolution was accomplished, but many things have not been resolved". Well, I knew that I was not going to see heaven; but many issues that I expected to have been resolved in everyday life were still awaiting solutions...I was very much impressed by the issue of power that we encountered in the discussions after the collapse of the socialist system. Every time I write I try to deconstruct the power. If we connect the issue of men - women to this point we might start from sexual power and end up in political power. In the final analysis, I came to understand that all is about power and the power is male. I cannot know whether the next centuries will host different relations but I do not claim women's power, either. I do not know whether it is possible for the power to wither away, to extinguish. There is a male power that expands this culture to women, too. I try to look at our political polarities, and today's headscarf issue from this perspective. The god is male, the prophet is male, those who convey the prophet's verses and surahs are male, those who interpret them are male, and religious power is male. And then there is the discussion on women wearing or not wearing headscarves. Once we could voice our demands together with women with headscarves, saying that "you cannot decide which part of our body will cover and which part uncover"... If we can do this for once some would be shattered.

H.Ö.: Writers have long been male. Pen(cil) was already a phallographic image. Moreover, there are women who speak in the language of power and oppressed women might tend to talk in the male language. I, sometimes, realize that I talk in that language - for this male language is so much internalized. French deconstructionists talk about creating a new women's language; they note that this language is the body itself, and writing the body [is a task at hand]. How to create the new women's language? Mass media, for example, uses totally male and heterosexual language.

O.B.: In recent years we started to talk about language. And I named my novel *Kayıp Söz (Lost Word)*. It is difficult to talk about the problems until they reach a certain level of maturity. In Turkey, a word that has not been in use emerges all at once and extends - and this can sometimes be called 'the fashion of the literati'. We say the language of peace, we think a lot about women's language, a language that is oriented toward life. I think we will be able to find one by taking small steps.

♀ Politics is in our lives. I do not think that a novel without these would be appealing. As a reader, I do not think that I would like a novel that does not contain any political aspect.

O.B.: My favorite text is *The Little Prince*. And there is no politics in that sense, but it is so full of human beings and life...

♀ There is no life without politics; for I think these are integrated.

O.B.: Certainly, politics in its general or broader sense is there in the background; but the novel or the text does not have to write it. Ferit Edgü's book, *Yaralı Zaman (Wounded Time)*, was published at the same time with my book, which does not talk about politics in any sense of the term but it tells about the same pain in a different style. Of course, all of them have a social, and political past, but the story can nevertheless be understood with no reference to this background. This is partly to do with the readers' taste. I, for example, expect warmth in novels; I like it very much when human beings are told about in their richest forms. Certainly, this is my preference. Many heroes of whom I find very important have not left marks in my and others' memories, but people know even the names of every hero in my novels - I am really glad about this. Different styles, different expectations of the readers.

H.Ö.: We can never separate the novel from politics regardless of whether it is written on a political or historical issue or not. This is because there are women and male heroes and these are historical subjects.

♀ And the private sphere is political!

♀ I was most taken by *Sıcak Külleri Kaldı (Warm Ashes Remain)*. I am sure that you talk as all the heroes talk. Your ideas and feelings orient them. I thought quite a bit about the following sentence: "At the expense of fooling oneself, one has to hold on to bits of hope before the ashes cool down". We have social expectations. We have the hope of achieving peace. We still have hope for the actual practice of equality between women and men. We have hope that the state will not become a sharia state. I wonder if we shall continue with the hopes even in small crumbs? Or, as it is said here, do we keep these hopes at the expense of fooling ourselves?

O.B.: Probably, when the hopes are not maintained life ends. There the pessimism of the hero at that moment also worths attention.

Perhaps, I was such a pessimist in those days. One feels the need to hold onto life even when s/he feels very bad, much ruined. Moreover, this s/he does at the expense of fooling her/himself!

H.Ö: In *Kayıp Söz* and your other novels there is a quest; politics is present, but love and sexuality feature, too. According to Helene Cioux, writing is a woman's body. Shortly before we were talking about women's language. Cioux says: "The transformation of all direct and indirect exchange systems that rely on the male economics, which occupy the conversation, would be realized by women's discovery of their own registers. Women's writing about their eroticism, universe, and their own cultures is a process that starts from the body." Of course, body politics is a wide subject; here, I want to touch on women's sexuality and the way women experience sexuality. For some time you had drawn quite a lot of criticism when you wrote about your sexuality, and this was because you were a 'professional revolutionary'. This is due to the 'sisters' (*bacı*) then who were not supposed to experience sexuality. Revolutionism is transformed by a country's values and after some time it turns out to be some kind of imperialism. No sexuality; all are sisters! This also degrades women...You, too, were accused of deviation, especially after *Erguvan Kapısı*.

O.B.: I had to encounter very obscene phrases. If I talk about life, I have to write about every aspect of it. Sexuality, too, in all its forms is part of life. All male writers, with no exceptions, criticized me for writing sexuality. This struck my attention a lot. About my latest novel, those who asked the question, "Ok, it is all good but why did Ömer and Jiyan have sex?" were all men. My response, in my usual style, was as follows: "If you had seen Jiyan you would have done the same thing". There is also the problem of concentrating solely on sexuality for having a text read or sold. I think the limits to writing on sexuality are not yet clearly drawn in literature. A woman who always talks about sexuality might be criticized to an extent. I am 67 years old. The 'sister' thing comes after our generation; I mean we were more comfortable in our experiences. We descended from existentialism; were involved in an urban movement; had tavern

nights in our past. Our generation had lived through sexual experiences. It was a more elite movement. The ruralization of the movement, following us, its independence from the elites and expansion brought in a new value system. It was then that the sister-ing started.

♀ Nothing as such among the elite?

O.B.: Well, not like that. But they had quite a different lifestyle. Afterward, it turned out to be as follows: "the revolutionary does not eat, drink, make love." Just as it is claimed for the military. For both the revolution and revolutionism were transformed into a military structure. I could not continue because of the military nature of our organizations. There was such humor as "entry is without a fee, departure has a cost"; but I did it, I quitted. For it was frustrating; nothing bearable. Traditional values - and these values are masculine - permeated our movement, too. Thenceforth the issue of sexuality was considered accordingly.

♀ Did you draw the women characters as they are or as they should be?

O.B.: I never talk about what ought to be. In any case, if I talk about what ought to be then the text does not make a novel.

Hande Öğüt

Writer

Oya Baydar

Writer

Simten Coşar (trans.)