Literature in Exile

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The publisher knows up close how mentally and existentially challenging everyday life is for an author. The work of the author and the artist takes place in solitude, with empathy and concentration, in a search for imaginative imagery to create everything from harmony to agitation. Through reasoning, the author can bring understanding and create stories that could trigger associations, which develop into a renewed imaginary world, yes, even giving inspiration and understanding to people in our contemporary world. Regardless of how hopeless and never-ending the task might seem…the author cannot help himself: it is an eternal and all-consuming passion.

Norwegian writers are generally well taken care of, and they have become rather productive. Their circumstances have changed over the years and so has their way of living. It´s ironic to observe that Norwegian writers have developed an almost ascetic behavior, often as disciplined as the top athletes, in contrast to when this publisher started in the business, when bohemian life was the rule. Come to think of it, top athletes were also fond of celebrating in those earlier days. As a former colleague stated the other day: “The yearly meeting of the Authors Association has gotten as colorless as a collection of bureaucrats in a Business bank.” Well, one can ponder, what happened?

Likenesses and Differences

Without doubt, the contrast in the standard of living among writers in different countries is often enormous. While working for PEN, the freedom of expression organization, we get to know exiled writers through ICORN (International Cities of Refuge Network). They are the most exposed because they have been able to escape bloody persecution in their own countries. Many authors, artists, and journalists get killed, imprisoned for years and tortured, although ICORN does save many. However, lately the need for rescue has increased tremendously, but unfortunately, the capacity is much too small. In Norway we have 16 cities which altogether have invited more than 85 writers to stay. It is not enough.

These refugee authors have had experiences that are horrible. There is simply no way to compare their experiences to Norwegian authors. However, what is really interesting, in the grand scope, is what authors and artists all over the world have in common. Most often, the primary drive is to search for an existential understanding of human beings and the world we inhabit. This search becomes the force behind creating. The motivation for the ICORN writers is therefore quite clear. To write is a necessity if the meaning of life is to be maintained. This commitment to writing and searching is valued ahead of surviving. The fact that they are writing should warn us as well as give us insight, assuming we pay attention to what´s going on.

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Humanistic Paradigm Shift

The quintessential example of an author "in exile" must be Salman Rushdie. However, he was not a refugee. He arrived at Cambridge to study, and in truth he became a "refugee" only after his controversial *Satanic Verses* was published. The book was banned in Muslim countries. He has never been able to return to his homeland, India. Indeed, through his isolation after the Khomeini fatwa, he experienced what living in exile really meant. In this way, as the head of the American PEN, he had the perfect background to start the precursor to what later became ICORN.

Salman lived for 9 years "in exile," hiding in England since the day the fatwa was announced on the 14th of February 1989. His case, possibly after the end of the cold war, was such an alarming threat towards the freedom of expression of a writer, that several defense committees were organized in many countries. The Rushdie Defense Campaign was run by the organization Article 19 in London in order to get the fatwa death penalty changed. Two impressive women were at the helm, Frances D´Souza and Carmel Bedford, and the campaign had positive consequences. In 1998, after intense negotiations with, among others, the British prime minister, the Iranian foreign minister stated in the UN assembly that the fatwa could never be abolished but that it was no longer a political goal to enforce it. The international pressure on the Iranian religious fascistic regime during all these years had been enormous. Finally, there was relaxation on Salman and his whereabouts. He was able to start a new life in New York and actually be a writer again.

Salman Rushdie had an advantage as an exile-writer: English was his mother tongue. But his disadvantage was that his breeding ground and source as a writer became distant after abandoning his homeland. It is nearly always like this for the writer-in-exile. But Rushdie has been able to complete a life´s work of novels, where the encounter between his growing up in India and Western values has turned into identifiable, fascinating tales. His stories reveal insights about cultures and are important statements of freedom of expression.

Nonetheless, the fatwa against Salman became a kind of starting point for radical Islamism and violence, threatening democratic values – as well as him. What the fatwa against Salman began to symbolize was disastrous.

Salman himself found his peace to write in this new US arena, and he was helped by a worldwide network of agents and publishers as he reoriented his authorship. However, radical Islamism was advancing, and his book, *Satanic Verses,* was exploited politically.

The Norwegian Responsibility

If we want to portray the challenges an author faces in exile, Norway is possibly a somewhat *different* country than most. Here in Norway, the ICORN recipients are given a two-year´s stay fully financed, after which their asylum applications are accepted if they so wish. They have their own coordinator, who works with the local authorities. There are gatherings, seminars, and a support organization to help with daily practical questions.

Nonetheless, all ICORN refugees face the mental shock of having to flee to a foreign country. Of course this is the case for all refugees, but the extraordinary circumstance for the writer, the artist, the freedom fighter – loaded down with the passion, the fight, the dissemination in their profession – is the loss of language and the connection to the culture they had to leave. Is it possible to arrive in a new country and still maintain one´s ability to communicate what one is committed to? Or does one have to capitulate to the circumstances and leave one´s raison d'être behind? Even though one is physically safe and sound, the grief of losing their life's purpose is hard for many to endure.

ICORN and its international office in Stavanger, together with Norwegian PEN, the Arts Council of Norway, plus several of the publishing houses, are trying to assist the exiled writers keep their voices and craft alive in this new environment. Four different anthologies of poetry, prose, and caricatures have been published by Norwegian PEN and Norwegian publishers. This has been appreciated by the authors. They leave something behind, they get to test themselves in their profession, and they become known. Again they become writers, but to make a living this way is hardly possible. Very few can keep up an authorship in their home countries because of political conflicts and persecutions. Publishing by internet is limited in scope and will rarely be satisfactory.

To be comfortable with the Norwegian language is a very demanding process, and the authors in exile must compete with all the other international authors to be translated and published.

There is at least one good example of an ICORN recipient, the Iranian author Soudabeh Alishahi, who writes in Farsi, and is translated into Norwegian and published by Gyldendal, one of Norway´s largest publishing houses.

The editor of this journal, Ahmedur Rashid Chowdhury Tutul, is another astonishing example of someone who is able to succeed on his own. Tutul, the publisher and poet from Bangladesh, a 2016 ICORN recipient, now lives in the Norwegian town of Skien. He started a literary magazine in Bangladesh and published young writers who then later became the core of authors in his publishing house. He was able to pursue the holiest of goals for a publisher, namely, to publish what his heart desired, regardless of personal trepidations. Critical opinions about religion and gender were published in his magazine as well as books, but these actions provoked threats from violent Muslim extremists. They broke into his office and proceeded to attack him with machetes. By a miracle he got away, badly wounded, and made his way via a hospital in Nepal to Norway where he became an ICORN refugee. Tutul refused to give in, and he continued this Journal, Shuddhashar, as an online publication, containing critiques of societies, culture news, and literature. For this endeavor he received the Ossietzky prize in 2018 and other distinctions. This last summer he was invited to become a member of the Editors Association of Norway, a distinguished honor. He is seen and respected in this, his new society. We can truly state that Tutul lives what he believes – to serve Freedom of Speech – and that he´ll never give up!Soudabeh will come out with her second book “En vakker dag”, written in Norway, published in the fall of 2020. It´s a novel about the contrasts between life in the open and in an authoritarian society. Her debut short story collection, “Midtveis,” which caused her arrest, house arrest, travel ban, persecution, and forced her to flee Iran, is also published in Norwegian. Soudabeh is now far away from the everyday happenings in her homeland, but she uses her life experience and Iranian impulses and blends them with her new existence in Norway. It is hoped that she will continue because many writers in exile quiet down. For her, the separation has become an inspiration.

An Extended Norwegian Concept of Exile

Unfortunately, the concept of literature in exile directly involves us as well, right within our own Norwegian boarders. The literature and authors of our own indigenous people, the Sami, have been chiefly ignored until just a year ago. Their market was just their own readers and the libraries in areas where the Sami live. Their books were never translated into Norwegian with public support, were never reviewed in national media, and were never sold in the book chains all over the country. Subsequently, they were never discovered – neither by the Norwegian readers nor the international market.

Finally, someone sounded the alarm. It would have been rather embarrassing if Norway, as the guest of honor at the International Book Fair in Frankfurt 2019, had exposed that it ignored the literature of its indigenous peoples. This “oversight” was corrected in a hurry, and close to 3 million Norwegian kroner was donated for translations of Sami literature into Norwegian. The translations were then placed on equal level with original Norwegian releases. This was a grand victory for Sami culture and their authors.

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To Raise Awareness

It is tempting to say that in the ideal world, the Norwegian public, media, and communicators have their own responsibility for ensuring the diversity of literature and media content. Norway’s reputation in the past has been pretty good in such matters. However, lately things are changing. In this neoliberal era, we are forgetting well-being and community, and we are sacrificing common sense and promoting an almost authoritarian form of ideology. Blaming the Corona pandemic for our indifference to others is an evasion.

In this context, we need to remember that the exiled authors and artists in Norway offer an incredible amount of insight into foreign cultures that can enrich and enlighten us, make attitudes more open, combat racism and xenophobia, and instead create curiosity, tolerance, empathy, and care. These are elements that are healthy for all countries. In learning to embrace the foreign, we learn to be more tolerant and forgiving in our everyday culture. This applies to literature and journalism as well as all aspects of life. No one should remain silent. The Norwegian community – the media, publishers, and general public – has a responsibility to raise awareness about inclusion, equity, compassion, and creativity. Here in Norway, these exiled authors and artists are all resource persons who can help enrich our own everyday life.

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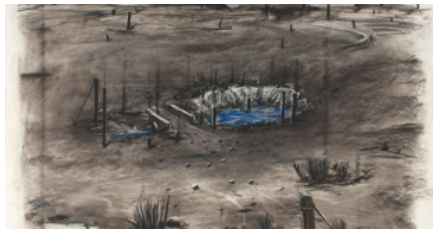

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