

Opening speech by Murathan Mungan

Hello, I want to begin by welcoming you all and thanking the organization and individuals who worked to put on this festival. And I want to say I am proud to make the opening speech at such a festival.

Ahmet Yıldız was a student in the Physics Department of Marmara University. He was a gay activist. His family, maintaining that he had stained their name and profaned their honor by his homosexual identity, held a meeting and came to a decision on which Ahmet's parents particularly insisted. He was killed by five bullets shot into him by his own father. The court case has been going on for ten years. His father escaped with the help of family and friends after the murder and still has not been apprehended, although INTERPOL has had a Red Notice out for him all this time. Ahmet Yıldız had filed an official complaint with the court before he was killed, saying he had been threatened by his family.

With your permission I would like to dedicate this speech I will make here to the memory in the person of Ahmet Yıldız of all those victimized by homophobia and hate crimes committed everywhere in the world.

The first topic that came to my mind when I thought about what can be said under the heading of queer literature was "language." Whatever else, every way of being brings with it the search for a language. It requires a means of expression. As writers gathered here, we may be from different countries and speak different languages, but we have a common language that brings us together. I believe that it why we are here.

There is one third person singular pronoun used in Turkish, "o." "O" resembles a zero and makes one think of a point of departure, a neutral territory where there are no minuses or pluses. It does not specify gender as the she, he, lui, lei, er, sie in Western languages do. When you refer to a third person as "0," it is not understood whether you refer to a male or female. In the same way the possessive "onun" used in the place of her, his, ihr, sein, does not tell us the gender of the person mentioned. In Turkish, when we say, "I miss onun scent," or, "I am in love ona," it remains unclear whether the person we love, or whose scent we miss, is female or male. This feature of Turkish has made it easy for gay poets and writers living in various periods to hide behind a screen in their texts. Several of our great

writers, like Sait Faik, Nahit Sırrı Örik and especially Bilge Karasu, in some of their works opened up a space behind the emptiness created by the gender indeterminacy of "o" by employing its potential for raising doubt in the reader's mind, for seducing the unconscious by suggestion and implying certain things. A grey area. If we were to use this example from grammar as a metaphor, in our literary history homosexual identity has been less an "I" or a "you" and more an "o."

To imply, to speak allusively, has of old had an important place in our literature. Recourse is often had to implication and allusion not only as writerly play or figurative speech but as a precaution against the possible dangers of speech in an oppressive society.

A significant number of Ottoman padishahs wrote poetry with noms de plume known in Turkish as *mahlas*. In a poem by the padishah who used the *mahlas* "Avnî," for example, the word *zünnar* in the line, "May my life be dragged along behind you by your *zünnar* belt," makes one think that the person addressed in the poem is male. For the boy assistants of Ottoman rabbis wore sashes called *zünnar* tied around their waists in such a way that the ends trailed on the ground. By investigating such leads we understand that the beloveds spoken of in many poems written in the Ottoman centuries were male. Many books and articles containing rich examples from various poets have been written on this subject. Just as there are poems that make do with such roundabout indication and implication, there are poems that take up the subject openly, even to the point of obscenity. Some of the poems by divan poets like Sümbülzade Vehbi, Veysî, and Enderunlu Fâzıl Bey come first to mind in this regard. I follow the track of this vein in traditional divan poetry in my first book of poems, *Tales of the Ottomans (Osmanlı'ya dair Hikâyat)*.

Lesbians at hamams in Ottoman times would make themselves known to one another by tying their *yemeni* scarves around their necks with a special kind of knot; that is how they recognized those of their own species who shared the same pleasures. There is a rich genre of quatrains called *mâni* in our language, which they sang to arouse one another in such environments women alone shared. I have a number of examples of these *mâni* quatrains in my novel *Hamam Book (Hamamnâme)*, which I worked on for years. In Istanbul of the 1940s and 50s gay men would put red carnations in the lapel of their jackets, and those a bit bolder would wear red socks. In crowded places they would hike up a pant leg slightly to show the red of their socks so those who interested them could see. In my country,

as in many other countries around the world, homosexuals have been condemned to lead double lives akin to those of spies, and naturally they developed their own subculture and underground language of signs, passwords and codes. In language as in daily life a system of signs and signifiers becomes established. It can be no coincidence that the gay slang that has come down to us, used by homosexuals used in their daily lives, is made up of words from Gypsy language. The solidarity of being otherized brought the two groups together in language as well. The necessity to use a sign language, come of a life lived underground, brings *The Thousand and One Nights* to mind. Women shut in behind screened windows in those tales used men who passed by in the street to convey messages to women shut up in other houses. They had the men memorize messages in a sign language something like the alphabet used by the deaf in our day. It was a language of symbols and passwords. The men who conveyed the messages would not know what the signs meant, but the messages they carried from one window to another were received and understood. I like to characterize this as "literature in action." I think queer literature has of old been a secret literature that speaks a language of signs, hidden in books of various kinds. Before it came out into the light from underground it was spoken in shadows at the level of a subtext. Queer identity has tried, in order to make its existence known, to express itself, to describe its experiences and its thoughts, to open a space for itself inside the network of social relations bound together by heterosexual norms; it has tried to free itself from muteness, from speaking in signs, from a veiled, stuttering language. Although LGBT individuals have come a long way as a result of their struggles of many years all over the world, we can easily say that those who want to live their own stories, both in their lives and their writings, still experience problems of significant dimension in many countries where they are oppressed and ostracized and their love is against the law.

All over the world patriarchal power fears "to name" homosexuality. To name something is to recognize its existence; to name something is different from labeling it with a demeaning term or curse word or calling it a sin or a disease. For to speak of something, to give it verbal expression, brings along the problems of accepting the other. In the Ottoman Empire the passive gays who worked in hamams were stamped with special seals by branding on the hips with hot irons. Words and language, too, are tattooed. In many languages in the world the words used for "homosexual" convey the burden of judgment on their backs, the burden of the social

judgment passed upon human beings. In many languages the same terms are also used to mean "back-stabber," "traitor" and "turncoat." Even the word "homosexual," put forth as a requirement of medical terminology, was invented several centuries later. The Kurdish translator of my book of poems, *In the East of my Heart (Kalbimin Doğusunda)*, called to ask me to explain the word "valley" (*vadi*), because in Kurdish there are seventeen different words for "valley" depending on shape and type. But the real problem was how to translate the word "homosexual," for Kurdish had only a demeaning word used as a curse.

The history of homosexual struggle is also the history of finding a name in every language.

And let's take a look at the history of stories about homosexuality: Although sometimes described under the guise of a teacher-student relationship in Ancient Greek texts, or a profound friendship or camaraderie, we know that love between men has been given verbal expression in myths like those of Patroklos and Achilles or Karpos and Kalamos. And there are the passionate girls on the Island of Lesbos who appear in the poetry of Sappho. Among our classics there are historians who claim that Şeyh Galib's *Beauty and Love (Hüsn-ü Aşk)* was actually written for a man. In the same way *Mem and Zin*, the Kurdish epic of Ahmede Hane, is also said to have really been written to a man. The poem "Mem and Mem" in my book, *Divan for Men*, may be considered a reference back to a history to be based on that claim. However much one tries to account for Mevlana Rumi's profound obsession with Shams of Tabriz by the Sufi science concept of divine love, it does not explain why Mevlana saw God not in the face of a woman but that of a man.

There are similar examples in various periods of history, centuries and worlds apart: It is said for example that Tennessee Williams, who lived an openly gay life in America, first wrote the role of Blanche DuBos in "Streetcar Named Desire" for a man. But no theater would stage it in those years, and could only get the play put on by changing the male character to female.

Gay writers from the literary history of many countries have had to describe their experiences, feelings and love affairs transposed into a framework of male-female relationships. Just as in the past, today also there are gay writers in many places in the world who are forced to continue in this way. To be sure, a writer can write about any kind of relationship, but here I am talking about those who are forced, whether by censorship or auto-censorship, to describe homosexual relationships by

changing the gender and circumstances of the characters, transposing them into the framework of a male-female relationship. When we look at it that way, the homosexual world has created a virtually translated literature; a shadow literature...

On the other hand, there have been many writers who have had the courage to write stories about homosexuality but not the courage to have them published. That the novel *Maurice*, by an author so important in English literature as E. M. Forster, for example, could only be published after his death--according to the author's wishes--is in my opinion a wound in literary history. We will never know if it was the forbidding laws of England at the time or the author's own Puritanism that played the major role in his decision.

Another example is Patricia Highsmith's first novel, *The Price of Salt*; reluctant to have it published under her own name, she used a pseudonym; the courage to have it printed under her own name with the title *Carol* came later.

Certainly there are important differences; writers of the 1940s-50s and writers of the 90s-2000s worked under different conditions and wrote about different things. We are talking here about conditions that vary according both to country and era. The literature of recent times speaks in spaces of new freedom that have been opened up by the rights earned over the years.

Let us recall the now classic 1895 novel, *Bom Crioulo*, by the Brazilian author Adolfo Caminha. Caminha's hero may be considered a kind of Othello. And the writings of Reinaldo Arenas, living proof of the oppression practiced upon the homosexuals of Castro's Cuba. Let us bring before our eyes the atmosphere of Hell of flowers that the French author Jean Genet created in the face of the darkness in which he lived. The difficulties these authors experienced, the wrongs and oppression they suffered, were bound to give those books a thick air of sadness and gloom. The works of gay Black Americans like Langston Hughes and James Baldwin have the dark texture intensified by the double ostracization of being both black and homosexual. It would have been a bit difficult for gay writers in the social atmosphere of those times to produce a pink literature. Their characters usually have the air of suffering martyrs. The new spaces of freedom opened up by rights earned through struggle over time lightened the tone of literature as well, drawing a gradually softening curve from James Baldwin to the colorful, entertaining world of Armistead Maupin. A new generation of writers tells us that to be an LGBT individual is not merely to suffer as a martyr, oppressed and alone; they point to the importance

of resistance, solidarity and organizing, and inform us that we have come to live in a world that has all the colors of the rainbow.

Gay and lesbian writers all over the world adopt different stances when dealing with subjects having to do with homosexuality. The attitude of some writers who favor closed form and a misty narrative style can be summed up as, "Those who understand, understand, and the others will read the rest of the story." Some do so because they think it will be hard to bear the reactions they might face if they speak openly, and others because they find that obscure stance more appropriate to their writerly style. For myself, when reflecting the violent expression of sexual tension between the men I brought face to face in my book *War Stories*, where I tried to interrogate the nature of violence, I took particular care to achieve a closed type of narrative relying upon suggestion. The select posture of Bilgi Karasu, one of our most important authors, always leaves the reader some digging to do.

Having come to the subject of texts that require digging, I'd like to move over to a neighboring topic: I think the search field of queer literature, whether one looks back to the past or considers our own day, should not be limited to the works of authors with open LGBTI identities. I believe one should make use of the term "latent homosexuality" to broaden the range. Sexuality is without doubt an extremely complex area of human nature; it is both volcano and iceberg. To understand its visible and invisible aspects takes a lifetime. So there is need to take another look through the pages of books that are open to interpretation, analyze their lower layers and find what they keep hid at their core, read between the lines, conduct a radar scan.

Another characteristic of Turkish is that many personal names can be used for both women and men. Ümit is the name of the main character of "Avare and Rapunzel with her Tears of Love" (*Aşkın Gözyaşları ile Rapunzel ile Avare*) a story in one of my first books, *Forty Rooms (Kırk Oda)*. "Ümit" means "hoffnung" in German and "hope" in English. Here I want to remind you of the gender ambiguity of the Turkish third person singular, which I mentioned at the beginning of this talk. "Avare and Rapunzel" is a moving love story written in a fantastic mode. As the love between the characters develops and grows stronger, no clue whatsoever is given to Ümit's gender; it is left entirely to the reader to decide. In fact I used the potential Turkish offers to set a trap for heterosexist perception. A trap depending on the assumption that the average reader would read the love affair as male-female from

the start. The story reserves its surprise until the end, after the reader has been pulled into the love affair, adopted and even identified with the characters, and let him or herself go with the flow of that love. Some readers reacted strongly to the ending, where it becomes clear that Ümit is really a man, not a woman. They felt they had been duped, tricked. They wanted you tell them only about Romeo and Juliet, not Romeo-Romeo or Juliet-Juliet. One of the judges of a competition I entered in those years said he read the story to the end with great excitement and was even brought to tears, but the surprise at the end enraged him; he tried very hard to stop the others from giving the award to me. Even though he was himself a good writer, a leftist and member of the opposition; when it comes to homosexuality there is no left or right about it--as I think the other participants here know from their experience in their own countries. Yes, perhaps many things have changed since the 1980s; people no longer object to "Romeo and Romeo" stories as much as they used to, but I am among those who saw how viewers who went to see "Brokeback Mountain" expecting a cowboy film emptied the theater afterwards. We must see the things in the world that change and those that don't with the same clarity.

The problem of seeing and being seen... From the point of view of queer politics, to name is as important as to be named. I will give another example from my country, but on a different subject. Armenians and Rum Greeks worked as technical crew in Turkish cinema from the 1940s to the end of the 70s, though their numbers decreased as time went along. In the titles of almost every film there would definitely be a few Armenian or Rum Greek names among the cameramen, sound and lighting technicians and film editors. They worked behind the camera, in the studio shadows. Their faces were not shown. Their bodies were far from the viewer. Their names meant nothing to us, but any Armenian or Rum actor in front of the camera would definitely use a Turkish name and surname. Because they had a face. They were visible. Viewers year after year had no idea they were Armenian. One of these artists begged a journalist who learned his identity, "Please, write that I was Armenian after I'm dead." My point in giving this example is to recall how important it is for LGBT individuals to be visible and seen in social life.

Another thing no one wants to see is the love affairs of gay and lesbian writers. While the love affairs of heterosexual writers gain a mythic significance of universal literary proportions, and become epic as time goes by, people push gay and lesbian loves aside and pretend not to see them, as if their affairs were a private

matter of interest only to them. Readers behave as if only their works are worth paying attention to, but not their private lives. The star of Hüseyin Rahmi Gürpınar, one of our popular novelists, began to rise in the early 1900s. For 40 years he lived with the man he loved, a retired military officer, on Heybeli Island in Istanbul. When his lover died, Hüseyin Rahmi buried him in a graveyard near their house on the island. He would get up early every morning, shave and dress, go to his lover's grave and sit there until evening. Before long Hüseyin Rahmi died also, and he was buried next to his beloved. If this love had been heterosexual it would have become a legend in the literary world, but it went unremembered and is only bashfully alluded to in a few sources.

For a long time, when the reasons for homosexuality were discussed in Turkey, it was explained as something men in closed Eastern societies did because they were left alone without women. They would get accustomed to it in jail, at boarding schools, and sometimes during military service. It would go away when they married like a sickness that passed with a good sleep and a nice rest. If one asked well all right then, it's like that in the East, but homosexuality exists in the West too, why is that, then people would say there were plenty of women there and it was easy to have relations with them so men got tired of it tried out having sex with each other. The varieties of denial are endless, as you know. Here today we see many writers from East and West. Just as we no doubt have points in common, we have different problems as well. We have stories to tell one another. We know that queer literature is not a closed literature with stories of interest only to LGBTI individuals, but a part of the universal inheritance of humanity. We know that good literature speaks to those whose ears that are open to everyone's stories, without discrimination against language, religion, race, nation, gender or sexual preference.

As the first writer in Turkish literature to "come out," it has been good to be with you here today. May you have many stories and much light. May you see the days when your dreams are realized. I greet you all in friendship, in brotherhood and sisterhood.