

Dortmund, Germany withdraws prestigious award from the author Kamila Shamsie over support for BDS

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12 October 2019

The British-Pakistani author Kamila Shamsie is to be denied the Nelly Sachs Prize, which the city of Dortmund awards every two years, over her criticisms of the state of Israel.

The decision was made in September by the eight-member jury, which had originally nominated Shamsie for the prize, worth €15,000. The author is accused of supporting the goals of the Boycott, Divest & Sanctions (BDS) movement and calling for the economic and cultural boycott of Israel.

The BDS movement, supported by numerous artists and intellectuals, was founded in 2005, after the International Court of Justice ruled that the wall erected by Israel in the West Bank was illegal and should be dismantled “without delay.”

The boycott initiative is based on the model of the anti-apartheid movement of the 1980s, which fought against racial segregation in South Africa. It consists of 171 groups and NGOs, calling for an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, equality for Palestinian citizens in Israel and a right of return for all Palestinian refugees.

Although many BDS supporters are themselves Jews and Israelis, the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is intent on denouncing all support for the goals of BDS as anti-Semitic. This policy has in turn been adopted by many western governments—above all Germany and the US.

The withdrawal of the prize is yet another case of censorship by the German state and local authorities, which, in the name of opposing anti-Semitism, suppress and criminalise any criticism of the Israeli government’s right-wing policies.

The German parliament (Bundestag), the North Rhine-Westphalian state parliament and the anti-Semitism commissioner of the German government, Felix Klein, have all classified the BDS movement as “anti-Semitic.” Peter Schäfer, the director of the Jewish Museum in Berlin and esteemed Talmud scholar was recently forced to resign after he was accused by the Netanyahu government of having links to the BDS movement.

Back in February the city of Dortmund followed other German cities and issued a statement expressing its opposition to BDS and branding it as anti-Semitic.

While the BDS movement is proscribed by the city, far right

extremists have been allowed to spread anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim slanders in Dortmund. On a regular basis the city’s police protect far right parades attended by supporters from across the country from much larger crowds of counter-demonstrators. Meanwhile expressing solidarity with the plight of Palestinians is demonised as anti-Semitic.

A massive hate campaign was launched last year against Stefanie Carp, the director of the Ruhrtriennale festival, because she had dared to invite the Young Fathers to perform, a Scottish band which has publicly supported the aims of the BDS.

The Dortmund jury had nominated Shamsie for the Nelly Sachs Prize in 2019 on the basis of the author’s outstanding literary work. The jury explicitly stated that her books were building bridges between societies. Her latest novel to be translated into German, *Housefire* (*Hausbrand*) takes up the ancient story of Antigone and stresses the importance of preserving and practicing humanitarianism even when this conflicts with official state policy and regulations.

The prize is named after the German-Jewish poet Nelly Sachs and has been awarded by the city of Dortmund since 1961 when Sachs herself was the first prizewinner. She had escaped the Holocaust at the last minute and travelled to Sweden, where she lived in poor circumstances with her mother. Sachs wrote outstanding poetry dealing with the cruel persecution and extermination of the Jews under the Nazis. With the Literature Prize, the city honours those who take a stand for “tolerance, respect and reconciliation” and “work for peaceful coexistence.”

Immediately after the jury’s initial decision to nominate Shamsie, a fierce campaign was launched nationwide to reverse it. The blog *ruhrbarone* and sections of the German press raised massive objections to the jury’s decision.

Die Welt newspaper headlined: “This woman must not get the Nelly Sachs Prize.” The author hates the state of Israel, the paper asserted, because she had described Israeli security measures in the West Bank as “apartheid.” The paper claimed she would not “mention Hamas’ terror, corruption, the oppression of women and gays, nor the marginalisation of

Christians in the Palestinian territories.” To award her the Nelly Sachs Prize was an “obscene decision” the paper frothed.

On September 14, the jury announced its decision to revoke their original vote and took back the award. It declared that, despite undertaking research, the jury members were unaware the author had been involved in the boycott of the Israeli government since 2014. Shamsie’s political stance and her active participation in the cultural boycott against the Israeli government “clearly contradict the goals of the award and the spirit of the Nelly Sachs Prize.”

The city’s published justification also states: “A cultural boycott will not overcome borders, but instead will affect all of Israeli society, regardless of its actual political and cultural heterogeneity. In this manner the work of Kamila Shamsie would also be withheld from the Israeli population. All in all, this conflicts with the requirement of the Nelly Sachs Prize to proclaim and exemplify reconciliation among peoples and cultures. The jury regrets the situation which has arisen in every respect.”

Shamsie commented to the *Guardian* that, in her opinion, the withdrawal of the prize was linked to the recent Israeli elections and the plan announced by Netanyahu to annex up to one third of the West Bank, a demand supported by his election rival, Benny Gantz. She also referred to the killing of two Palestinian youth by Israeli forces, which the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East has described as “unbearable.” She argued for a non-violent boycott of Israel. Shamsie also justified her decision not to publish her books in Israel, saying she knew of no publisher there who was not completely dependent on the government.

Open Letter opposes the withdrawal of the prize

Since the withdrawal of the prize, 250 artists and intellectuals have signed an open letter in support of Shamsie. Drafted by the writers Ahdaf Soueif and Omar Robert Hamilton, co-founder of the Palestine Festival of Literature, the letter was published in the *Guardian*. Signatories include the German filmmaker Alexander Kluge, the linguist Noam Chomsky, the authors Michael Ondaatje and Arundhati Roy and the musician Roger Waters.

In the letter they write: “What is the meaning of a literary award that undermines the right to advocate for human rights, the principles of freedom of conscience and expression, and the freedom to criticise? Without these, art and culture become meaningless luxuries.”

The letter is also accompanied by a statement by Shamsie, which she sent to the Dortmund jury to explain her position. Neither the city of Dortmund nor the German press have published her letter. Shamsie refers to the declaration by Netanyahu, that, should he be re-elected, he would annex up to a third of the West Bank, in yet another clear breach of international law.

She writes: “It is a matter of great sadness to me that a jury should bow to pressure and withdraw a prize from a writer who

is exercising her freedom of conscience and freedom of expression; and it is a matter of outrage that the BDS movement (modelled on the South African boycott) that campaigns against the government of Israel for its acts of discrimination and brutality against Palestinians should be held up as something shameful and unjust.”

The open letter also cites a recent judgment by the Cologne Administrative Court, which instructs the city of Bonn to allow the German-Palestinian Women’s Association to participate in the city’s annual “Diversity!” festival. The city had previously excluded the club because of its support for the BDS movement. According to the court, the city of Bonn has “not even remotely demonstrated” that the exclusion was justified.

The denunciation of BDS supporters as anti-Semitic serves as a vehicle to shift politics to the right throughout society. It plays into the hands of right-wing extremists and fascists—such as Viktor Orbán, Matteo Salvini, Rodrigo Duterte and the Alternative for Germany (AfD)—who have all declared their support for the Israeli government’s racist policies and have been received in Jerusalem as state guests. Artists like Shamsie, on the other hand, who make a stand for humanitarianism and international understanding, are discriminated against because they protest against the oppression of the Palestinians.

Sachs was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1966 along with the Israeli writer Samuel Josef Agnon. Although Agnon and Sachs “write in different languages,” they were “mentally related” and “inspired from the same source,” according to the prize committee. The reference is to the persecution of the Jews and the crimes of the Nazi regime, which ultimately led to the founding of Israel. Whether Sachs would support the current state of Israel and its right-wing government is not a matter for speculation; what is clear is that she would by no means be indifferent to the plight of Palestinians.

The attacks on BDS supporters such as Shamsie flow from the nationalist foundation of Zionism, and not merely the policies of the Netanyahu government. The fight in defense of free speech rights must therefore be linked to a program that addresses the fundamental issues facing the Palestinian masses and the working class in Israel as well. Democratic rights can only be defended on the basis of a socialist program. The road forward is not that of liberal protest and pressure on Israel and its imperialist backers advocated by the BDS movement, but the fight for the unity of Arab and Jewish workers in the struggle against capitalism.



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