

Palestinian author Adania Shibli “shut down” at the Frankfurt Book Fair

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18 October 2023

A prominent Palestinian author has been censured and abused at this year’s Frankfurt Book Festival, the world’s largest book fair, which opened its doors on Wednesday. Adania Shibli was due to be honored October 20 with the 2023 LiBeratur Award for her novel *Minor Detail* (*Taf??l ??naw?*). The prize, established in 1987, is given out annually by the Litprom association (the Society for the Promotion of African, Asian and Latin American Literature), to female writers from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Arab-speaking world.

Last Friday, however, Litprom announced it was postponing the award ceremony “due to the war started by Hamas, under which millions of people in Israel and Palestine are suffering.”

The cowardly decision by Litprom to deny a platform to Shibli was reinforced by the director of the Frankfurt Book Fair, Jürgen Boos, who lined up unequivocally behind the ultra-right Israeli regime, which is currently planning to conduct a murderous incursion into the Gaza Strip. In an official statement, Boos, on behalf of the book fair leadership, described the response by Hamas to decades of Israeli terror and oppression as a “barbaric terror war against Israel.”

Declaring that “Terror, however, can never be allowed to win,” Boos asserted that the book fair would make “Jewish and Israeli voices especially visible at the book fair.” Boos went on to state that the book fair had “spontaneously decided to give Israeli and Jewish voices additional time on our stages as well. On the first day of the fair, we are collaborating with PEN Berlin to organise the event ‘Out of Concern for Israel,’ which will take place in the Frankfurt Pavilion, the fair’s cultural and political stage.” Boos’ statement ended with the words, “The Frankfurt Book Fair stands with complete solidarity on the side of Israel.” Boos has refrained from making any criticism of Litprom’s decision to prevent Shibli’s receiving her award at this year’s book fair.

At the opening on Tuesday evening, philosopher Slavoj Žižek, who represented the guest country Slovenia, contradicted the bookfair’s director. He called the decision to cancel the book award ceremony for Shibli a “scandalous decision.” Those who did not fit into the general image of diversity and inclusion would be excluded, he said. “I am therefore not only proud to be here, I am also a little ashamed,” added Žižek, who in his speech acknowledged Israel’s “right to self-defence,” but also addressed the rights of the Palestinians living in Gaza. While he received applause from the vast majority of the audience, several politicians present—including the antisemitism commissioner of the Hessian state government Uwe Becker (CDU)—left the hall.

The decision to provide Israeli authors a major platform at the book fair while denying the same right to a prominent Palestinian writer has led to a storm of protest. An open letter, signed by over 1000 authors, including Nobel prize winners Abdulrazak Gurnah, Annie Ernaux and Olga Tokarczuk, condemned the attack on Shibli. Other signatories include the American-Libyan Pulitzer winner Hisham Matar, the British-Pakistani novelist Kamila Shamsie, Irish author Colm Toibin and the British historian William Dalrymple.

The open letter criticises the decision by Litprom to call off the award ceremony for Shibli, asserting the Frankfurt book fair has “a responsibility to create spaces for Palestinian writers to share their thoughts, feelings, reflections on literature through these terrible, cruel times, not shutting them down.”

In response to the book fair management’s action, a number of Arabic-language publishing houses announced they would withdraw from this year’s event. In a statement on behalf of the Arab Publishers Association, Mohammad Rashad declared that his association wishes “to express its deep regret for your biased and unjust stance toward the tragic events in the region, The

Palestinian people have been living under the longest occupation in modern history, an occupation which has transformed into a system of apartheid that exerts maximum pressure and has made Gaza an open prison for more than 2.2 million people.”

Noting that more than 1,900 Palestinians, ten percent of whom were children, had been killed by the Israeli army in just six days, Rashad concluded: “We denounce any attack on a civilian from any side, but viewing the case from a single angle and accepting this injustice that the Palestinian people have been subjected to for decades is a big mistake.”

Shibli's English publisher, Jacques Testard of Fitzcarraldo, also condemned the stance taken by the book fair declaring: “One of the purposes of literature is to inspire understanding and dialogue between cultures. At a time of such horrific violence and gruesome suffering, the world's largest book fair has a duty to champion literary voices from Palestine and Israel.”

Minor Detail was shortlisted for the 2020 National Book Award for Translated Literature. The novel was also longlisted for the International Booker Prize. It was originally praised by Litprom as a “rigorously composed work of art that tells of the power of borders and what violent conflicts do to and with people.”

Minor Detail, which deserves its own review, treats in fictional form the true story of the rape and murder of a Bedouin girl by an Israeli army unit in 1949. The soldiers were later convicted by an Israeli court. The account of the historical events is juxtaposed to the fictional story of a Palestinian journalist from Ramallah who comes across an article about the case by an Israeli colleague. She drives to the site of the events in the Negev desert, next to the Kibbutz Nirim, where she is shot by Israeli soldiers, after failing to recognise a military barricade.

After initially receiving widespread critical acclaim, *Minor Detail* has come under increasing attack from pro-Israeli media and propagandists, including the German daily *taz* (close to the Green Party), which criticised the novel for depicting Israel soldiers as “rapists and killers” and Palestinians as the “victims of poisoned or trigger-happy occupiers.”

The campaign against Shibli and her book must be seen in light of the unprecedented measures taken by the German government, with the full support of the country's opposition parties, to silence all opposition to the decades-long occupation of Palestine by Israel and the current manoeuvres by the regime in Tel Aviv to carry out a homicidal military offensive against Palestinians in

Gaza.

Following the unanimous agreement by all parties in the German parliament—from the Left Party to the fascist AfD—to support the Netanyahu regime's genocidal siege of Gaza, the German police and judiciary have banned pro-Palestinian protests across the country. Schools are preventing pupils from displaying any signs of solidarity with the Palestinians, while ordinary citizens, including Germans, Arabs and Jews can be arrested for peacefully demonstrating on behalf the beleaguered Palestinians in Gaza. In one recent case, a Jewish woman carrying a placard with the text “As a Jew & Israeli Stop the Genocide in Gaza” was arrested by police when she walked alone across a public square in the Berlin suburb of Neukölln.

The current assault on the basic democratic rights of free expression and assembly takes place against the deafening cacophony by politicians of all stripes and virtually the entire German media asserting that any opposition to the fascistic Israeli government amounts to antisemitism.

Leading politicians, with the Green Party-led foreign and culture ministries to the fore, have launched vicious campaigns in recent months against artists speaking out against Israeli oppression, including rock musician Roger Waters and artists featured in the Documenta Arts Festival. The utter hypocrisy of those in parliament detecting antisemitism everywhere has been exposed by their readiness to ally with Ukrainian fascists and to close ranks with the rabidly antisemitic AfD in order to overturn basic democratic rights and give the judiciary and police a free hand to crush opposition—not only to the government in Tel Aviv but also to the increasingly despised government in Berlin.



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