

Listening to a beating heart

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Turkmen author **Ak Welsapar** was forced to leave his native country after being declared an enemy of the people and having his books burnt. **Aimée Hamilton** introduces one of his short stories, Love History, a dark and shocking folk tale published for the first time by Index

“**A**FTER A YEAR under house arrest, I was dismissed from the Union of Writers and Union of Journalists,” said Ak Welsapar. “My books were removed from libraries and bookshops and burnt.” Welsapar clandestinely left Turkmenistan in 1993 and has been in exile ever since.

Formerly the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic, Turkmenistan gained independence in 1991 after the fall of the Soviet Union. Welsapar, who now lives in Sweden, believes he was the first writer to be officially banned in the independent country.

He explained that at Turkmen bookshops only the Ruhnama (The Book of the Soul) by the late President Saparmurat Niyazov and books written by President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov are given the best positions available. Only a few other books are on sale. “Every year one or two books by unctuous writers are also published, but they are not allowed to show their names on the cover.”

Before turning his hand to fiction, Welsapar was an investigative journalist, and one of the major topics he covered was child mortality: “In the 1980s this issue was quite striking. Infectious diseases were widespread

in the country. This had to do with the monoculture of cotton, excessive use of chemicals in agriculture and the shortage of food. Due to the cotton plan established by the Kremlin, the land in central Asia was not usable, and the Aral Sea dried before our eyes.”

Welsapar suffered persecution both before and after independence, and the state branded him a “public enemy” because of his investigations, but he refused to be silenced. “Although I left the country, as a journalist, I have not stopped writing about Turkmenistan,” he said. “I would not have stopped writing even if I had stayed in the country. The reason for my leaving the country was my struggle to avoid an unjust imprisonment.”

Although censorship was present when Turkmenistan was part of the Soviet Union, Welsapar said the restrictions were not as oppressive as they became following independence. “In Soviet censorship there were written rules and the list of prohibited themes and facts,” he said. “According to those rules, if the parts in the text that could be interpreted in two ways could be proved that they were not harmful, they were solved to benefit the author. For this reason, despite



censorship, great writers came about and great books were published at the Soviet period. However, this is not possible in the independent Turkmenistan, because in Turkmen national censorship neither the list of prohibited themes and facts, nor the written rules exist.”

Having now lived and worked as a writer outside of Turkmenistan for a substantial period, Welsapar talks about how the platform for having his work published and read has changed. “Immigration had a great impact on my writing life. This has both positive and negative sides. In Europe I learned the delicate secrets of European literature and this was a great school for me,” he said.

“However, when a writer leaves his country, he would lose not only his readers, but also his publishers with whom he had always had good relations. I suffered this problem, too. I needed to spend 10 years to have my-

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self accepted as a writer. Now my books are published in Swedish. My books, which are published in Turkmen in Europe, are smuggled into Turkmenistan.” He said interest in electronic books in Turkmenistan has increased, but only 7-10 % of the population have internet access.

Welsapar wrote Love History in Sweden, and was inspired by a folk story his aunt told him when he was a child. “Akgozel [his aunt] could not read and write, but she knew →

ABOVE: Turkmen author Ak Welsapar, pictured in Sweden, has been declared an enemy of the people in his homeland



→ many folk stories. She had a very good memory. In the mid-1960s there was no television in Turkmen villages. For this reason storytelling was a means of entertainment." He said he had a superficial understanding of the story when he was young, seeing it as a simple love story. Years later, he came to understand the story in a different way: "To put it briefly, it could be said that the story is about people listening to each other. Love, here, stays only in the background."

He explained: "Most of the problems in

the world come about due to the fact that people do not hear each other. If people of various ages, different nationalities and religions, and those who follow different beliefs listened to each other, human beings could be relieved of many problems. Not hearing the voice of each other and ignoring other people's opinions create fear among people. And fear could lead people to egotism and taking unexpected steps. In Love History, I attempted to show how indispensable a nuance of freedom of expression is."

Love History

IN A LITTLE village next to the forest on a mountain's foothills, there once lived a mother and her child. Her husband had fallen from a cliff while chasing a mountain deer, so the bereaved woman devoted all her attention to the boy, on whom she doted night and day. When he cried, she pressed him to her bosom, and if he fell as he skipped and played, she rushed to gather him up in her arms, asking: "Oh, my little one! Have you hurt yourself anywhere?"

The mother had a strong feeling that she would overcome her difficulties and happy days would return to her home. With such overwhelming hope, how could she not succeed in protecting her son against any dangers that might loom over him?

The mother made every effort to bring up her child without making him feel the loss of his father or leaving him hungry and miserable. To earn her living she served the well-to-do people in their houses – she wove rugs and carpets for some of them and took up cleaning in other houses.

The boy lived up to his mother's expectations. He was tough and brave. He was growing up fast. Caught up in hard work, the mother did not even notice her son come of age, until one day she saw he was suddenly a young man and that in a couple of years his moustache would grow. The mother was somewhat relieved when she saw her son grab the best silk kerchiefs in jumping contests, and receive the highest prizes for wrestling at weddings. She heaved a sigh of relief, saying: "May the hard days be a thing of the past!" Then, with the money she had earned with the sweat of her brow, she bought her son a steed whose beauty was unrivalled in the village. She placed a *kindjal* with a white handle at the waist of her son, who rode his steed wearing silk clothes, and was becoming a well-known figure around the village.

"Take this, my son, it is a keepsake from your father! The blade is from the steel of Merv,

the handle is elephant bone and the silver is from Urgench. If you use it for a good cause, it is said that it will do you no harm. Your late father cut out the heart of a deer with it and brought it to me to eat while it was still beating.”

How could the girls not stare at this attractive young man wearing a hand-made red robe with a sash around his waist and a pair of elegant, traditional trousers, and riding a steed? When the mother saw the village girls biting their sleeves and sighing as they looked at her son passing by, her heart would beat swiftly with happiness.

The young man, though, showed no interest in any of the girls. He sensed the breeze on the tips of the horse’s ears, and delighted in the peace of the countryside and the speed of his horse. He enjoyed hunting in the valleys, traversing the mountain paths like a falcon. The beauty of his village, which lay in a crease in the landscape where the countryside met the high mountains, was a source of overwhelming joy to him; he could not even imagine that any other joy could exist.

As he galloped with his secret, his sole confidant was the storm, which shook the trees, rolled the rocks, dug the earth and sifted the world

Then the outlook of the young man on the thoroughbred gradually widened, and he began to notice the beauty of the neighbouring villages too. And in one of these villages, one day in the late afternoon, near a mountain spring, he came across a beautiful girl, the like of whom he had never seen. It was love at first sight – it happened as soon as they noticed each other. Those who saw them meeting alone thought them a comely pair, a pretty girl and a good-looking young man: God, what an elegant couple! They might have been made for each other!

Travelling frequently to meet the girl he had chosen, the young man turned the road to the neighbouring village into a pilgrim’s way. When the lovers were well-known in the villages, the mother, who was living on the threshold of different, happy days, listened to the sweet beating of her heart and waited for the days when her son and the girl would agree to unite their fates. She took pride in this situation: now she would send a message to the parents of the girl, the two families would become extended families and after that they would hold the greatest wedding ceremony ever! Of course, everything was ready for the wedding. Then she would tie her foot to the cradle and rock her grandchildren for the remainder of her life ...

However, for some reason their bond of love did not mature. The girl loved the boy, but was in no rush to marry him. Whenever the boy asked the reason for this, she would →

→ always say: "If I knew you loved me sincerely, I would marry you" and leave him in suspense. Finally, one day in the late afternoon, they met at the usual place, and the young man stood before the girl and asked:

"Why this uncertainty? How long are you going to make me suffer? When will you say what you think?"

The girl shot him a deep glance:

"I have one condition, if you fulfil that, we will see ..." "

"Tell me your condition, I will definitely fulfil it, but do not hurt me more than this!"

The beautiful voice of the girl came out extremely hoarse:

"No, you cannot fulfil it ... The condition I am making is too difficult for any human being to fulfil ..." "

The young man earnestly entreated:

"Tell me. Someone else might not be able to do it, but I will! If I cannot do it, spit in my face and say 'Shame on you!'"

The girl fixed her attractive eyes on the young man's eyes.

The young man was knocked senseless. He was confused and could not find any answer to what he had heard

"My love is different from other people's. For this reason, it will be matchless."

"What kind of a condition is that?"

"The condition is different, you know ..." "

"Tell me, let me hear it! Around here, there is no one who could push me into the dust in a horse race, make me fall while wrestling and beat me at sharp-shooting. So who else apart from me could fulfil your condition?"

"You know I can do all that too, you know that well ..." "

"Then, tell me your condition!"

She began: "If I say ..." then held back a little before continuing. "No one in the world should have any right over you other than me! No one would or could love you more than me, even your mother who gave birth to you. However, you always attach more importance to your mother than me, you never stop talking about her!"

The young man was knocked senseless. He was confused and could not find any answer to what he had heard. Because it was a fact that he loved his mother; he did not even attempt to conceal this. So although he said, "No, I do not prefer her to you!" his response was also hesitant. "She is my mother and you are my beloved. You occupy a special place in my →

PICTURED:
Portraits of
former leader of
Turkmenistan,
Saparmurat
Niyazov adorn
watches sold
in a market in
the early 2000s.
Watches with
a grey-haired
Niyazov later
became illegal



→ heart, there is room for both of you!"

The girl frowned, clouding her brow that was like the wings of a swallow:

"No, that is a lie! There cannot be room for two women in a man's heart! You have to choose: either me or your mother! I do not want a husband who is his mother's baby! If you really love me, stand by your promise and prove that you really love me. If you cannot do this, you will have yourself to blame ..."

The young man interrupted anxiously.

"True! True! True! But how can I convince you? Would you believe me if I tore open my chest and put my heart in your hand?"

The beautiful voice of the girl echoed him.

"No, let your heart stay in your chest!"

The young man, who could not grasp what the girl was saying, asked a second time, more forcefully:

"What do you need then?"

"Just look at this man in love! Do you still not understand what I'm saying?"

"No I don't, keep talking, I want to hear!"

"If you want to hear ...," the girl hesitated. "If you want to hear ... If you really love me, go and bring me the heart of your mother!"

In the twinkling of an eye the young man, whose hand had reached for the handle of his dagger, sighed deeply and gave a groan that shook the mountains. The sound made the colour of the moon fade; it oppressed the mountain rocks, making them hunch their shoulders.

Cursing the girl and the terrible condition she had set, the young man returned to his village, his head lowered. He did not eat for a few days, did not come out of the house and shrank into his bed. His mother watched with distress as her son grew paler and paler, and shared his pain. But how could she help her son, who burned with agony in the fire of love?

After a few days, the young man realised that lying in bed would not alleviate his suffering, and so once again took the mountain path to the neighbouring village. He confronted the girl and begged her:

"Change your condition! I will do whatever you want me to do!"

The girl stood firm. After that, the poor lover kept travelling the distance that separated him from his beloved: there and back, there and back ... One evening, he went to the girl and knelt before her.

"Have mercy, set a condition that I could fulfil! Ask me to chop off my finger, I would chop off the one you showed me! Ask me to cut off my arm, I would do that! But do not meet my love with cruelty – unheard-of cruelty!"

The girl's response was firm.

"No! Be a man, keep your word, you said to me earlier: 'If only you would tell me'. I put my condition to you, what are you talking about?! When my desire comes true, I am yours.

Before that I don't exist. You should know that no woman other than me in the world could have anything to do with you! You would be only mine! Why should I share you with someone? Go and bring your mother's heart. I don't care about anything else. If you cannot cope with my condition, you should blame yourself!"

The young man once again went back home. The girl shouted after him, as he moved away, his head hung low.

"Bring it when it is beating! Otherwise I won't accept it ..."

Knowing that he would never be able to fulfil this condition, the young man decided to throw himself off a cliff. He whipped his horse on towards the precipice. Then, remembering that his mother's tears would flow like a flood, he held his horse back. He took to the mountains, and lived in the mountains and the countryside. Then he returned home and slept, no longer eating or drinking. He languished day and night, lost his appetite and could not sleep, distancing himself from the joy of life. He gave up on the world, and turned away from it. Yet his suffering did not go away, his love for the girl did not diminish, on the contrary, it grew

He gave up on the world, and turned away from it. Yet his suffering did not go away, his love for the girl did not diminish, on the contrary, it grew stronger

stronger. He sent a message to the girl that he would not be able to live without her: wait for me at the usual place at midnight, this evening ...

Although she could not take away the pain of her son, who suffered the agonies of love, the mother suffered with him. She worried about her son, looked anxiously at his pale face, ate her meal without much appetite and, hoping for better the following day, settled quietly in her bed.

The mother, overwhelmed with fatigue after the day's hard work, slept as soon as her head hit the pillow. Although worried about her young son, the tired mother slept deeply. Even a heavy storm in the middle of the night did not disturb her. Despite the heavy lightning and thunder, she slept peacefully and felt safe with the knowledge that her son was nearby. And so, when the *kindjal* with the white handle pierced her chest to the hilt, the mother could neither scream nor shout. When her son removed her heart and began to walk away from her, she could only stretch out her arm after him ...

The young man had no time to waste, he had to give his mother's heart to his beloved while it was still beating. Nor did he have time to take a look at the body of his mother left behind. He jumped on the horse, which was waiting at the door with the bit between →

→ its teeth. He travelled on, following the mountain paths through the dark of night. The hooves of the horse resounded in time with the thunder, rousing the valleys buried in darkness and the cliffs with their heads hidden in the obscurity. As he galloped with his secret, his sole confidant was the storm, which shook the trees, rolled the rocks, dug the earth and sifted the world. He was in a great hurry, kicking his horse to run faster: go, go, go!

His horse seemed to understand everything and ran like a mad thing, carrying this young man, who held in his hand the heaviest of gifts as a token of love. The moon in the sky showed itself occasionally, trying to throw glances of light on to the mountain cliffs before hiding behind the clouds.

Half of the dark path was behind him ... And then the speeding horse tripped over a tree root, which had been left bare by the rain, and rolled over. The young man fell from the horse and was thrown among the rocks. His mother's heart, released from his hand, flew through the air like a shot bird, and fell down to the path ...

The young man jumped up in panic, ran over and picked up the heart. The heart was not beating. Believing all his efforts had been in vain, he moaned with fear. But the mother's heart had not died ... When the thunder stopped and the surroundings fell suddenly quiet, the warm heart began to beat once again in the palm of the son's hand. Then a weak voice came from the bleeding heart:

“Oh, my little one ... Have you hurt yourself anywhere?” X

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Translated by Youssef Azemoun

Ak Welsapar is a writer from Turkmenistan, living in exile in Sweden. He has published more than 20 books. The first novel to be translated in to English, *The Tale of Aypi*, is due to be released later in 2015. See www.welsapar.com for updates