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Mutiplied Beauty and Transcending Victimhood

An interview with Turkish writer Ece Temelkuran.

[Jan Garden Castro & Anthony Alessandrini](#)

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Turkish writer Ece Temelkuran

In 2018, Turkish writer Ece Temelkuran is working on a book on populism to be published by Fourth Estate Publishing House and will be giving the keynote speech in @re-publica festival in Berlin on the topic. She is also a jurist for the One World Media Awards. In May, her book tour for *The Time of Mute Swans* moves from the East Coast (where she appeared during the winter of 2017) to Stanford, UCLA, and other western venues.

Temelkuran's 16 books span the genres of journalism, the novel, poetry, and non-fiction. Those that have been translated into English include the novels *Women Who Blow on Knots* (2013) and *The Time of Mute Swans* (2017); the poetry collection *Book of the Edge* (2007); and the non-fiction works *Deep Mountain: Across the Turkish-Armenian Divide* (2008) and *Turkey: The Insane and the Melancholy* (2015). Other books include the short-story collection *Bütün Kadınların Kafası Karışiktır* (*Women Are All Confused*, 1996); the novel *Muz Sesleri* (*Banana Sounds*, 2010); *Oğlum Kızım Devletim-Evlerden Sokaklara Tutuklu Anneleri* (*My Son, My Daughter, My State: The Mothers of Political Detainees, from Their Houses to the Streets*, 1997); *Ne Anlatayım Ben Sana!* (*What I Am Going to Tell You!*, 2006), an account of hunger strikes by Turkish political prisoners; and *Biz Burada Devrim Yapıyoruz Sinyorita!* (*We Are Making a Revolution Here, Señorita!*, 2006), dealing with the Venezuelan Revolution. Her books have been published in 16 countries and have won awards including the 2017 Edinburgh First Book Award.

Temekuran has been a featured speaker and panelist at the Women in the World Summit 2017, a Visiting Fellow at Oxford University, on BBC, CNN, and TED talks, and a writer of op-eds and

articles for the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, *Literary Hub*, and *Bookforum*. You may visit her site at ecetemelkuran.com.

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Castro: *The Time of Mute Swans* involves multiple narrators and points of view, but much of the novel is told through two children's eyes and perspectives. Why did this seem important or useful to you as a way to tell this story?

Temelkuran: When telling stories of complicated countries like mine, you need certain clarity. The two children's perspectives—sometimes class-based and sometimes going beyond their class differences—provided me with clarity in the prose. Where you are talking about evil and surrendering to evil or the fundamental human need and capacity for beauty, resisting through beauty, children are the people you turn to. It is of course incredibly difficult sometimes to tell a political story through children's language and to be consistent and convincing. That was my literary challenge in *The Time of Mute Swans*.

Castro: The boy Ali rarely talks, but we understand from reading his thoughts that his mother was tortured by the Fascist militia and the boy himself was hung upside down. In *Deep Mountain*, your nonfiction examination of the reasons why Hrant Dink, a journalist trying to bridge the Armenian/Turkish conflict, was murdered, you mention early on that your mother was tortured as a Turkish dissident. In both instances, do you leave out the gory details in the interests of the larger story you are telling? Can you say more about the violence in the region during the coups of July 2016 and September 1980?

Temelkuran: I believe that as a writer if you visit the evil, you cannot come back from it untainted. Personally, I find it unnecessary to torture myself by writing about the particularities of evil but also I see this intentional silence as an ethical duty as well. If I elaborate on evil, I feel like I multiply it even further whereas art and writing in particular, seemingly the least abstract form of art, should be about multiplying beauty. I did journalism in several horrible places in the world and I have seen evil, pure evil probably too many times and have written about it. What is humane about writing the details of a rape story of a baby or a tortured 6-year-old child? I believe that I am writing to remind people about beauty and their capacity to create, to produce beauty, to be more humane. That is why I skip the details which, according to my experience, only shrink the reader's soul and cause the retreat of the human soul instead of creating resistance to evil.

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Castro: Can you talk about your mother and the roles of women in Turkey's political/cultural life?

Temelkuran: It is interesting that you ask about my mother. She probably is the main thread in my writing. *The Time of Mute Swans*, in particular, was written because of her I guess. My mother taught me about good and evil, beauty and ugliness, right and wrong. Her stories constructed my world and my world perspective. It does not matter how much academic reading you do afterward; that cannot touch you as deeply as your mother touches you in the beginning. And the stories she told me were mostly about injustice, unfairness, victimhood and, ironically, about traveling and telling stories. And even her most personal stories were intertwined with country and politics. So these three things, mother, country, politics are somehow merged in my head. We, in our part of the world, grow up with an abstract burden of debt; a political debt for the country but more importantly a debt to the former generation that joined the political struggle. In *The Time Of Mute Swans*, I paid my debt to my mother and to my country. As for the political role of women in Turkey, I guess it is no different than anywhere else. They carry the burden of the political struggle, yet they are expected—as soon as they are not needed anymore—to forget how they suffered and what they learned as a result.

Castro: At your CUNY Graduate Center talk in New York, you spoke without emotion about Erdogan treating you like a major enemy. *Deep Mountain* was written when the Turkish law that makes it a crime to criticize the state went into effect, and, as I understand it, you were forced out of your job as a popular columnist. You told a CNN reporter that you do not want to be seen as a victim. How are you balancing your love for Turkey (which you refer to as the lover who doesn't return your love) and your need to speak out against what is happening there?

Temelkuran: Oppressive regimes target basic human dignity, and people like me struggle against this attack. Therefore embracing the role of victimhood would be entirely inconsistent with our original standpoint, because being put in a victim role seizes away the dignity as much as oppression, maybe even more so. Besides, to tell the truth, it makes me feel funny if I am put in the victim role. It really feels like I am a panda, or an endangered species waiting to be adopted through a website. Also, it feels as miserable as a singer who can only sing one whining song, “They did this to me. Oh! They did that to me!” Besides, it is definitely not sustainable.

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Castro: In New York, you hinted that the same kind of repression could be spreading to other countries, including the United States. Care to elaborate?

Temelkuran: Well, I definitely care to elaborate. Some of the American intelligentsia believe that such a similarity cannot be drawn because the United States is a stronger country with stronger institutions. I would advise them not to depend on the institutions as much as we did once. They are like paper tigers and once you realize that fact it is usually too late. I am now writing a book about the mechanisms of populism and how it operates to paralyze the basic human rationale and the state apparatus—everything that we stand upon. It is not only the United States that is going through such a maddening process but the entire Western world is experiencing a similar political transformation. The good thing is they have a case study to

consult because what they are living now has already been experienced in Turkey 15 years ago. The same hesitations, same shock, same sentiment of helplessness and the awkward feeling of “Is this a joke?” I will be coming to the United States in May for the second part of my book tour for *The Time of Mute Swans* to speak at Stanford, UCLA, and other venues. And the title of the tour will be “Remembering as a cure for our times.” Hopefully, American intellectuals will be quick to grasp the pattern of populism because the world needs their stamina. We are quite exhausted, you see. Imagine living under Trump for 15 years; yes, we are that exhausted.

Alessandrini: When you set out to write about a particular set of issues, feelings, or experiences, how do you decide what genre you will be working in—that is, how do you know that a particular book will be a novel, or non-fiction/reportage, or poetry, or some other genre? Do you think or work differently as a writer when you are in one or another of these genres

Temelkuran: It is not that I take the question lightly, but the main difference is that I write fiction very early in the morning, like a child who wakes up and reaches for her crayons to prolong her dream in colors, on paper. For non-fiction, I work in more adult hours, at night. My life and personality is based on dualities, home/road, poetry/journalism, writing in English/Turkish, being an introvert writer and imitating being an extrovert to do journalism. I guess I divide the day for my Jekyll-and-Hyde life as well. On the other hand, everything I write in non-fiction travels in a more abstract way in my fiction work. As a matter of fact, it would good for a literature Ph.D. student to study this maze when I am dead.

Alessandrini: Could you talk a bit about the sort of new internationalism that you have sometimes referred to as “Andalusia Reloaded,” and how a commitment to these ideas is part of your work as a writer?

Temelkuran: *Turkey: The Insane and the Melancholy* is a book where I tried to *translate* Turkey as an example of how right-wing populism can take over the entire country. “Andalusia Reloaded” was my response to this global political sickness. Very roughly put, I proposed that all the political experience that accumulated in resistance movements of the last decade, from Occupy to Tahrir Square, should be brought together in a new international to articulate the new terms for the global progressive movement. The reason I called it “Andalusia Reloaded” is because Andalusia was one geographical point where the East touched the West in Southern Spain and the word Reloaded gave it a *The Matrix Reloaded* twist, a hip touch so to speak.

Alessandrini: In your essay “We Want Our Refugees and Exiles to Be Victims,” you write movingly about going from being a journalist who interviews refugees to a political exile yourself. Certainly your previous work has been that of someone who has described herself as “wandering the world and collecting stories.” But has the condition of literal exile changed your perspective as a writer? How do you think that the state of exile that has been imposed on so many Turkish intellectual and academics might change the nature of Turkish writing in the future?

Temelkuran: I still don’t call myself an exile for several reasons, the most important ones being the rejection of victimhood that the concept drags with itself and also because emotionally it is quite difficult to admit the exile. I see or rather try to see this period of my life as a part of a

bigger journey. And I am not really sure if there is a real exile for a writer. My homeland is my mother tongue; it is not a piece of soil on planet Earth.

The diseases of diaspora are several and probably it will affect the Turkish language and Turkish literature soon. That may be the most important reason I am trying to distance myself from being defined as an exile. I don't want to be part of those understandable yet soul-diminishing diseases of diaspora. The act of writing has two physical results on my body. One, it makes you bend your spine to turn you into an embryo, an introvert organism who is connecting to the world with words. And the second physical outcome is that it carries this body through countries. For each book I have written I have traveled and lived in other countries; therefore, I don't find it extraordinary now to be outside home since I am again writing a book.

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Alessandrini: One of your books that has not yet been translated into English is *Biz Burada Devrim Yapıyoruz Sinyorita!* (*We Are Making a Revolution Here, Señorita!*). What led you to write about the Venezuelan Revolution, and are you still closely following events there? Do you find yourself writing differently about political events outside versus inside Turkey? Is “solidarity” a key concept for your writing?

Temelkuran: I do write differently, but the difference is not in terms of politics or ethics. The difference comes from the emotional baggage. Turkey, understandably, has emotional baggage for me, which I am content to carry on my back. Other countries are easier to write about only because the emotional baggage is less heavy. Although at some level, writing about a country means being part of that country's destiny, penetrating her heart while welcoming her in yours as well.

Castro: Our mutual Turkish friend Selma Karaca told me that your novel *Banana Sounds* is quite funny. Can you tell me a bit of the story as I await its translation?

Temelkuran: *Banana Sounds* is translated into English by an extraordinary translator Deniz Perin but not yet published in translation. It takes place in Oxford, Paris and Beirut. In the core of the novel stand three stories; Palestinian Dr. Hamza's letter to her daughter from Sabra Shatilla Camp in 1980; a Turkish academic Deniz traveling from Oxford to Beirut; and the love between a Syrian janitor and a young Philipina maid in Beirut in 2006. There are always funny, insane stories in my books, but the heart of the story is about why people become addicted to war or assumed to be addicted to war. The name sounds ridiculous in English; however, I wanted to keep it that way to surprise the reader with the tragic real story behind it. When bananas grow, in August, if there is no sound around, you can hear their sounds at night, chuck, chuck, chuck ... The bananas separate from each other as they grow, so they make such a sound. The question of the book is, “What if there wasn't so much noise in Middle East? What would we hear besides the banana sounds?”

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Anthony Alessandrini contributed to this interview and introduced Temelkuran when she spoke at the CUNY Graduate Center, New York in November 2017. He is the author of *Frantz Fanon and the Future of Cultural Politics: Finding Something Different*; the editor of *Frantz Fanon: Critical Perspectives*; and the co-editor of “*Resistance Everywhere*”: *The Gezi Protests and Dissident Visions of Turkey*. He is a Co-Editor of *Jadaliyya E-Zine*. Jan Garden Castro is author of *The Art & Life of Georgia O’Keeffe*, *Sonia Delaunay: La Moderne*, two poetry books, and co-editor of two literature anthologies. Her published essays include seventeen cover stories for *Sculpture Magazine* and her monthly art blog: <https://blog.sculpture.org/tag/jan-garden-castro/>. She won awards as executive director of River Styx, whose archive, as well as her own, is in Washington University Special Collections. See also <http://www.jancastro.com>.

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