

WORDS FOR THE SILENCED
MARCH 11 2024
Knapp Gallery Regent's University,

Hosted by: Exiled Writers Ink, Amnesty Westminster & Bayswater, Amnesty Mayfair & Soho and Regent's University, Liberal Arts Department

Introduction: Catherine Davidson & Simone Theiss

UAE

Film about Ahmed Mansoor
About Ahmed Mansoor: Bill Law
Poetry: "Final Choice" read by Melanie Gingell
About Ahmed Mansoor: Drewery Dyke

India

Introduction/About Varavara Rao by Lotika Singha
Poetry: "Yes, He Too is a Man"; "Oh Enemy"
Read by Rajveer Dogra Dogra

Iran

Introduction & Poetry reading: Nazanin Zaghari Radcliffe, Richard Radcliffe
Poetry: Mahvash Sabet, "The Star"; "For Narges" Read by Richard Radcliffe
Golrokh Iraee: "Couples in Prison", "Standing Straight"; "Counting Up, Counting Down"
Read by Clemence Grandmaison, Ali Razzaq & Rajveer Dogra Dogra.
Mahvash Sabet: "The Great Outdoors", "Lights Out" and "Floodgates"
Read by Clemence Grandmaison and Ali Razzaq

Fifteen Minute Break (Letters of Solidarity)

Egypt

Introduction: Simone Theiss
Film: Galal El-Behairy poem performed by Ramy Essam: In My Silence Is My Death
Poem: I Have a Date with Tomorrow read in Arabic and English by Clemence Grandmaison and Will Hassani
About Alaa Abd El-Fattah (video from Alaa's sister, Mona Seif)
Extract from You Have Not Been Defeated, "Half an Hour With Khaled"
Read by Anna Sullivan

Turkey

Introduction: Caroline Stockford on Ilhan Sami Çomak
Poetry: "I Came to You, Life"; "Let Us Not Speak"; "Things That Are Not Here"; "What Good Is Reading Poetry?" Read by: Ali Razzaq, Will Hassani, Clemence Grandmaison

Optional Collective Response/Poetry Making

Our Poets:

Ahmed Mansoor is blogger, human rights activist, engineer, poet and a member of several human rights organisations. He was arrested on 20 March 2017 and sentenced to 10 years in prison on trumped up charges. He spent all the time in solitary confinement. There is currently a new trial against 83 other persons which can result in life imprisonment and death penalty.

Varavara Rao is an Indian poet, journalist, literary critic and human rights activist in his 80s. He has been arrested on several occasions over the last 50 years and is currently on bail.

Mahvash Sabet was a teacher and school principal who had been dismissed for being Baha'i. She was one of the founders of Baha'i Institute for Higher Education and since 1993 the director of the Institute. She spent almost ten years in prison (2008 – 2017) on basis of trumped-up charges. She was rearrested on 31 July 2022 and was again sentenced to 10 years in prison.

Golrokh Iraee is writer, poet and human rights activist. In 2015 she was sentenced to 6 years in prison for Facebook posts about political prisoners and unpublished story about a woman who burns a copy of the Quran after she watched a film about a woman who is stoned to death for adultery. Since then, she has been in and out of prison for years. The last arrest was on 26 September 2022. In April 2023 she was sentenced to seven years in prison for participation in protests and social media posts about protest in Iran.

Galal El-Beairy is an Egyptian poet and lyricist. He was arrested on 5 March 2018 after the release of Ramy Essam's song and music video *Balaha*, for which Galal wrote the lyrics. He was sentenced to 3 years in prison and a fine in Military Court in Cairo. He also faced charges in Civil Court. After serving the 3 years sentence in 2021, Galal's arbitrary detention continues until today.

Alaa Abd El-Fattah is Egyptian-British political activist and government critic. He has been repeatedly arrested during the past decade including for his role in the 2011 uprising. On 29 September 2019 he was arrested the last time. He was sentenced to five years in prison on trumped-up charges.

Ilhan Sami Çomak is a Kurdish poet. He writes most of works in Turkish. He was arrested in 1994 when he was 22 years old. He was tortured and signed a false confession that he lit forest fires in the name of the outlawed PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party). He was initially sentenced to death, but his sentence was then commuted to life in prison which means in Turkey 36 years. During his imprisonment he started writing poetry and published several books. His release on parole is scheduled for June 2024.

Speakers, Supporters & Defenders in order of appearance:

Catherine Davidson is a member of the board of Exiled Writers Ink and teaches Literature & Creative Writing at Regents. She is a novelist, poet & translator.

Simone Theiss is a member of Amnesty International. She uses Social Media (in particular Twitter) to campaign for human rights and raise awareness about prisoners of conscience in

MENA (Middle East and North Africa), in particular Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, Iran and Egypt. She blogs under <https://ciluna27.wordpress.com/> .

Bill Law is the editor of Arab Digest. An award-winning journalist, he reported extensively from the Middle East and North Africa for the BBC. In addition to numerous radio documentaries, his films have focused on the Arab spring and its aftermath, also reporting from West and Central Africa.

Drewery Dyke is the chairperson of the UK charity Rights Realization Centre; he is the International Partnerships Contact Point for Salam for Democracy and Human Rights. Between 1999-2017 he was a researcher at Amnesty International, focusing on Iran, Afghanistan and Arab Gulf states.

Melanie Gingell is a barrister and human rights activist. She has been an associate tenant at Doughty Street Chambers in London, a visiting fellow in international human rights law at London Southbank University and is a member of the Advisory Board of the Gulf Centre for Human Rights.

Lotika Singha is an activist who campaigns for freeing political prisoners, particular in the context of India, her country of birth. Lotika is involved in these campaigns in different ways from raising awareness of the increased militarisation and corporatisation associated with extractive capitalism and settler colonialism to the growing restrictions on academic freedom and labour struggles both within India but also globally.

Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe was held hostage in Iran for 6 years, most of which was spent in Evin prison, in the women's political ward. She has campaigned for a number of her former cellmates since release.

Richard Ratcliffe campaigned for Nazanin's release for a number of years. Since her release, he supports other hostage families, but mainly works as an accountant in London."

Mona Seif is a British - Egyptian researcher and human rights defender. Mona is the sister of Alaa Abd el-Fattah and one of the leading organisers of the "Free Alaa" campaign.

Caroline Stockford is a poet, writer, translator and human rights advocate from Barnmouth in North Wales. She leads projects on freedom of expression the right to a fair trial and linguistic rights for PEN Norway as their Turkey Advisor. She has been running the Ilhan Sami Comak campaign for PEN Norway since 2020.

Readers:

Rajveer Singh Dogra Dogra is from India. He is 22 years old and is studying Acting for Stage and Screen at Regent's University London.

Ali Suleman Razzaq is an Acting Student originally from Pakistan. In 2023, he performed poetry from the *Utopians of Tahrir Square* at the Iraqi Arts Festival, Hammersmith.

Clemence Le Cour Grandmaison is a French Acting Student.

Will Mohamed Hassanin Abdel KhalekHassani is an Egyptian Acting Student.

Anna Sullivan is an actor, director and teacher who has worked in television, film & radio.

Thank you to the following organisations who have provided support for tonight's event:

Exiled Writers Ink was established in 2000 as a London-based literary organisation that supports and amplifies the voices of refugee, immigrant and asylum-seeking writers. We host monthly readings with writers who have roots around the world, provide education and workshops and also lend our support in campaigning for human rights around the world, the cause of so many exiles. This is our third Agit Lit "Words for the Silenced" event in collaboration with local Amnesty groups and Simone Theiss. Please find us on <https://www.exiledwriters.co.uk/>

Amnesty Group Westminster Bayswater meets at 6.45 on the third Tuesday of the month, either at St. Peters Church, 119 Eaton Square, London SW1W 9AL (10 minutes walk from Victoria Station). For more details have a look at the website <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/groups/westminster-and-bayswater> or contact Simone Theiss (secretary_westminsterbayswater@yahoo.com).

The Mayfair and Soho Amnesty group meets at 6.30 on the third Thursday of the month, at either at Central YMCA, Great Russell Street, WC1B 3NQ, or online. For more details contact Nick Hodgson (nickhdgson@aol.com).

Regent's University London is a UK university with a high percentage of founders and alumni in Forbes 30 under 30. It offers degrees in business, psychology, international relations, media and communications, drama, screenwriting and design.

Thank you to **English Pen**, who have supported this event with generous help. They are currently running an on-line campaign for Mahvash Sabet and Galal El-Behairy. If you would like to send letters of support about tonight's event you can join in: <https://www.englishpen.org/pen-writes/>

If you would like to write to Varvara Ro, his address is: Varavara Rao, 707 B Wing, Dheeraj Valley Bldg 2, Mohan Ghokley Road, East Goregaon, Mumbai, Maharashtra 400063 India