

Turkey's literary guerrilla

Trisha de Borchgrave talks to Elif Shafak about democracy's challenges

Meeting on a warm summer's morning in her adopted city of London, Turkish writer Elif Shafak reaches out with a genuine smile that promises to apportion intimacy in degrees. Though she has a Twitter following of 1.7 million, she describes herself as an introvert.

Her latest novel, *The Three Daughters of Eve*, explores the relationship with Islam of three female students at the University of Oxford: the 'believer', who is 'at home' with her religion and 'at peace' with who she is; the 'sinner', who compares dogma and higher authority to garlic, 'the more you use it, the heavier the smell'; and the 'confused', whose God is 'a maze without a map'.

Not surprisingly, Shafak's narrative abounds with contradictions: the deeply pious character whose compassion is less than the atheist's; the 'radiant smile' of the believer championing women's causes in contrast to the tired cynicism of the religious non-practitioner; the meaninglessness of memorized but uninterpretable prayer.

As one of the 'confused', whose affinity lies with 'misfits walking a fine line between faith and blasphemy', Shafak is mindful of the need for exact terminology in her quest for a fluid, egalitarian and pluralistic world. She rejects the word 'tolerance' with its implication of superiority over someone else's viewpoint or lifestyle. She prefers 'co-existence'.

A literary guerrilla, she trains her insights on the way authoritarian leaders bind their citizens to a lexicon of 'myth-making and fabricated lies' and to a single version of history. This struggle against official versions of history is the focus of a couple of her recent works. For her 2006 novel, *The Bastard of Istanbul*, she was accused of sympathizing with Armenian narratives and put on trial on the charge of insulting Turkishness. *The Architect's Apprentice*, from 2013, chronicles the fictionalized lives of characters from the 17th century Ottoman Empire. The author is proud that it breaks the 'monolithic version of history into pieces'.

As the victim of an oppressive regime, she belongs to the family of storytellers whose pen is filled with political ink, even if the work is a romance.

In the same way as she hacks away at official truth, she eschews the language of societal and political division. One of the biggest mistakes Hillary Clinton made in her campaign was to call Trump supporters a 'basket of deplorables', she says. 'Not everyone who voted for Trump is an Islamophobe, not everyone who voted for Brexit is a xenophobe or anti-Europe ... If we single them out based on those concerns we will push them towards the far right, since that is the only space where they won't be judged or looked down upon.'

If there is to be polarization, she warns, 'populist

demagogues love to play the game ... and they'll always be better at it than us.'

As an only child, whose young, divorced mother went back to college to become a diplomat, she had a peripatetic upbringing with close female role models – she was partly raised by her grandmother – and learnt to adapt to new countries and cultures. Today, as an academic, author and public speaker, Shafak refuses to be reduced to a single identity. 'It is through multiple identities that we can hope to overlap with others.'

This leads her to warn that western democracies are making a mistake by failing to embrace inclusiveness. 'It's a shame that the liberal left has not really understood the importance of patriotism, or faith ... It is a wonderful thing to have emotional attachment to one's land, culture and ancestors ... this is what makes us human. Patriotism is too important to be handed over to the nationalists, in the same way that faith is too important to leave to the religious.' One of the biggest challenges for democracy, she says, is how to 'engage in a conversation and create a language that goes beyond our comfort zones and echo chambers'.

What populist demagogues are doing is very dangerous, she says. 'They present themselves as if they were fresh off another planet, nothing to do with the establishment, and the only alternative. But when you look at their own journeys,

these people are equally part of the establishment that they've been criticizing. No one can convince me that Trump is not part of the financial elite in America, or Marine Le Pen is not part of the political elite in France.'

She laments that Turkey missed its moment to join the European Union in 2005/6, and blames both sides: the Turkish AKP government, for failing to fulfil EU criteria that Turkey itself needed in order to advance its 'wobbly democracy', and European leaders such as the then French president Nicolas Sarkozy, who used Turkey as a fear card in his election campaigns. 'When Europe pushes Turkey away the only people who benefit are the isolationists and ultra-nationalists, and Turkish Islamists.'

Shafak is also passionate about LGBT rights. Her fine features harden when discussing the British Tory party's deal with Northern Ireland's ultra-conservative Democratic Unionist Party. 'Women's rights and sexual minority rights are not things that you should be able to negotiate on.'

She celebrates a new era of 'global feminism and revival'. She is a fan of quotas for women, especially in those 'wounded democracies' such as Turkey and Pakistan, where a handful of women have been able to secure a place in politics only by dint of being the wife or daughter of an establishment figure.

Equally, she supports



France's interventionist approach to upholding its laws of *laïcité* or secularism – but not by sending police to arrest women in burkinis on a beach. 'I am against the face veil, for security reasons and at the level of human interaction. I wouldn't want a woman wearing one to teach my children. In times of populism and extremism we are losing the nuance of understanding each other.'

When pressed on why the glass ceiling can still feel like cement, she recognizes that women can sometimes be ungenerous to opening up paths of advancement to other women. Even in traditional societies, she explains, women who hold power through the 'acknowledged respectability of their de-feminized and de-sexualized status as grandmothers' then withhold support towards any new, incoming young bride, based on the premise of 'I suffered, now it's your turn'.

As a self-defined introvert Shafak surprisingly dislikes silence. When I ask why, she hesitates. Perhaps, she says, it was growing up in cosmopolitan Istanbul, a city whose vibrant, multicultural clamour has been hushed by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's oppression. 'Silence is the sound of what they couldn't talk about'.

The 10 novels she has written are her response to that tyranny. 'Storytelling is where we meet people different to ourselves, often prohibited by our own societal thinking', she says. 'In our

public lives we rarely make that journey. It's no surprise that fascism, totalitarianism and authoritarianism are a mass disease in need of crowds, with synchronized energy chanting in unison.'

Is she hopeful for the future? Shafak is reconciled to history's pendulum lurching between internationalism and isolationism. These swings, she says, can only be controlled by democratic principles that slow down nationalist tendencies, keeping them this side of their more aggressive Turkish and Middle Eastern versions.

So can the three women, the sinner, the believer and the confused, co-exist? Yes, she replies enthusiastically. 'Women are talking, but in the private space, among friends, over lunch or coffee, in their houses and cafeterias'. Their fragmentation, which has been long exploited by patriarchal and conservative elements, is yielding to the deeper inter-relationships of female solidarity.

As an upholder of the principles of a free society, Elif Shafak is a relentless humanist, and her view is forever multi-dimensional. But in this she is also a reminder of why others will find it difficult to grapple with the complexity of being alive today, especially when truth is multiple, home is allegorical, certainty is a fault and identity is relative.

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