

BRAVE VOICE OF ELIF ŞAFAK

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Elif Şafak is an outspoken Turkish novelist, columnist, speaker, academic, and author of 13 books. Born in Strasbourg, France, she's Turkey's top bestselling female writer. She has been called "one of the most distinctive voices in contemporary Turkish and world literature." Şafak's books have been published in more than 40 countries. She has also frequently written about the Genocide of Armenians. The below article is from the April 2014 issue of "Literary Review" of London.—Editor.

Elif Şafak, [Literary Review](#), April 2014

In the Turkish Tunnel

'When it comes to the misfortunes of nations, we must not forget the dimension of time,' Milan Kundera said. 'In a fascist dictatorial state, everyone knows that it will end one day. Everyone looks to the end of the tunnel. In the empire to the East, the tunnel is without end.' There are many tunnels in many countries but, as Kundera observed, they are of varying lengths, and this makes a considerable difference, 'at least from the point of view of a human life'. Turkey, my motherland, is one seemingly endless tunnel of political uncertainty. From one year to the next there is little progress in our juvenile democracy, even though no two days are the same.

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In Turkey politics speaks louder than art, the state has absolute privilege over the individual and self-

ensorship is a routine drill in the life of every writer, though we seldom admit it. Words matter in Turkey. Books, though hard to get published, widely pirated and sometimes banned, nonetheless do not disappear without making an impression. They stay with their readers. A novel is read by three, four, sometimes up to eight people. Novels are not personal items; they are to be shared. They are also to be loved or hated. We either adore or condemn our writers and poets, often for reasons that have little to do with the quality of their writing.

The novel was adopted from Europe towards the end of the Ottoman Empire as a vehicle of Westernisation, modernisation and, later on, secularisation. Early authors were part of a male elite with a mission 'to enlighten the masses'. They spared no effort in telling their readers, through their characters and plots, how much of 'Eastern' culture to preserve and how much of 'Western' culture to embrace. Every character was there to represent something larger than itself. In time, this gave rise to a tradition of 'father novelists'. In a patriarchal society constantly on the lookout for a *Baba* in politics, sports or school, the novelist, too, is expected to act like a father to his readers, even if that novelist happens to be a woman.

Every father novelist has his or her fan club, like a football team; the connection between an author and his or her readers is a deeply emotional one. Readers who enjoy an author's *oeuvre* will also adopt him or her. The writer will become part of the family. At book signings I get to know grandmothers and great-uncles together with children and distant cousins. People turn up together as though it were a family reunion and the writer a long-lost relative now happily found. I meet readers who have quotes or images from my novels tattooed on their bodies. Sometimes they bring me home-made cookies, *börek* or dolma. Sometimes they give me earrings, paintings or paper flowers, or send me handmade necklaces, bracelets and rosaries from remote schools, prisons or women's shelters. These are the times when you know that the stories you produce in your lonely cocoon reach out to people you have never known before and make lifelong connections.

But between affection and aversion there is a thin line. Those who applaud you today might call you a betrayer tomorrow. The change will have less to do with your stories than with a comment you might make in an interview or essay. One critical sentence about your country will transform you from 'beloved national author' into 'national traitor'. When I tweeted about the shocking increase in domestic violence in Turkey in the last decade (1,400 per cent), I received furious responses. 'You can criticize this in Turkish, we don't mind, just don't do it in English,' said one follower. The trouble starts when authors speak out in the international sphere. And the moment an author utters criticism in the 'language of imperialism', he is labelled as a betrayer.

In countries with endless tunnels, words will get you into trouble. You can be indicted for publishing a book, as happened to the Turkish publisher of William Burroughs's *The Soft Machine*; or for translating a novel like Chuck Palahniuk's *Snuff*; or for a comment made on Twitter, like the composer and pianist Fazıl Say, who was given a ten-month suspended prison sentence as a result.

When my novel *The Bastard of Istanbul* came out in Turkey I was sued for insulting Turkishness under Article 301 of the penal code. The story I wrote was about an Armenian family and a Turkish family with a dark, shared history. Several of the Armenian characters in the novel disapproved of the ongoing amnesia and ignorance in Turkey regarding the forced deportation and massacres of Armenians in 1915. Their words were plucked out of the text and used as 'evidence' by the prosecutor. My lawyer had to defend fictional characters in court.

Turkish writers do not have the luxury to be apolitical. Politics is to us what the weather is to the English. We are surrounded, gripped and repeatedly depressed by it. If we care about what is happening around us, we cannot remain immune to politics. However, can we afford to make it our primary path in life? There are moments in the lives of nations that compel authors to make difficult choices. Plenty of writers from the non-Western world who arrive at this crossroads eventually choose activism over literature. As much as I respect that decision, I can't help but believe there must be another way: having a political stance without becoming over-politicised. Can we write novels that send out political echoes without directly speaking the language of politics, which is bound to be narrow and dualistic? It is not easy. As Camus pointed out, 'our era forces us to take an interest in it. The writers of today know this. If they speak up, they are criticized and attacked. If they become modest and keep silent, they are vociferously blamed for their silence.'

We authors from tunnel territories are bound to remain fragmented individuals. We oscillate between a suspicion that art and literature are in vain when civic liberties are threatened and lives are in danger and a stubborn belief that no matter how depressing the situation, the need for stories is as urgent as ever. It is a dilemma that many authors have faced and many more will too.

