

ART ARCHIVES

Under Siege

by LENORA TODARO

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**Nomadic novelist Elif Shafak**[TINAZIMMER.COM](#)

“When I am writing fiction I am a different person with many personalities—and I am very daring,” says Turkish novelist Elif Shafak during a conversation at the Warwick Hotel. “Then in my daily life I return to being a person with anxieties and fears.”

The Bastard of Istanbul referring to the “genocide” of Armenians “at the hands of Turkish butchers.” Another such “enemy” was assassinated on January 19: the Turkish-Armenian newspaper editor Hrant Dink, a dear friend of Shafak’s. The Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk cut short his tour of Germany after learning the news. Now Shafak is shadowed by a bodyguard, complete with earpiece and jerky, roving eye.

Of the 60 or so intellectuals taken to court by the same ultranationalists for “public denigration of Turkishness”—a crime punishable by three years in prison—only Shafak was called out for the words of her characters. Shafak believes the lawsuits are intended to derail Turkey’s bid to enter the European Union by making the nation appear “insular and xenophobic.”

A bestseller in Turkey, *The Bastard of Istanbul* follows two families: one a Turkish clan living in Istanbul, the other Armenians living in California and Arizona (where Shafak teaches part of the year). Through their stories, Shafak explores a political taboo known in Turkey as “the Armenian question,” which asks whether in 1915 the deportation and death of more than one million Armenians at the hands of the Turks was “genocide” or (as the Turkish government contends) part of World War I.

Shafak describes herself as a nomad and a free spirit—a girl raised by her divorced mother, a diplomat with whom she lived in Spain, Jordan, and Germany. “I am someone who is always writing either on my way to Turkey, or away from it,” she says. “When I feel suffocated I leave.” The 35-year-old writer in front of me doesn’t exactly exude free spiritedness, cocooned in a black turtleneck, blouse, and long black skirt. Living under threat makes her careful to stay on message in public. No displays of righteous anger, no emotional leakage—except one watery-eyed moment, while talking about the birth of her daughter in Istanbul during her trial in September 2006. (She was acquitted.) While nursing the newborn in a hospital bed, she watched on TV as protesters burned posters with her picture. “An amazing dialectic was happening within our room,” she says. “On the TV was darkness and violence, and you’re in a room where babies are born every minute and there’s hope and light.”

The Bastard of Istanbul, too, opens dramatically with the birth of a child into difficult circumstances. Zeliha Kazancı’s plans to abort her fetus goes awry. Asya, the daughter born to her,



schizophrenic. The mother of the clan “might have been Ivan the Terrible in another life.” The story’s focus moves swiftly to Asya, a Dostoyevskian 19-year-old Johnny Cash fanatic and the “bastard” of the book. The American-Armenian family, also replete with a brainy daughter Armanoush, functions as a mouthpiece for Armenians’ anger toward Turks. For 100 pages, Shafak skillfully sets up the collision of the two plot lines, when future BFFs Asya and Armanoush will discover the cross-pollination of their family secrets. Along the way, Shafak’s steady glide is punctuated by her characters’ amusing existential freak-outs and winking nods at the raucous finale.

Throughout the novel Shafak attends to the details of women’s daily lives, especially the foods they eat. “It always amazes me how common cuisines transcend nationalistic boundaries,” says Shafak. At the table, the taste of pilaf stirs Armanoush and Asya to realize their families share a history. The Turkish dessert *ashure* anchors the book’s structure with its ingredients shaping chapters and plays a role in the tidy conclusion.

While food elicits memories, Alzheimer’s wipes them away. Some of the most beautiful writing in the book comes in the depiction of 96-year-old grandmother, Petit-Ma, who has the disease: “The words of the prayer she had to utter had all of a sudden fastened together into an elongated chain of letters and walked away in tandem, like a black hairy caterpillar with too many feet to count.” Alzheimer’s raises the question of how one remembers—the same quandary behind the Armenian question. “If the past is sad,” Shafak asks, “would you like to know about it?” Her characters would and would not. Auntie Banu, seeking answers about the Armenian question, says, “Either grant me the bliss of the ignorant or give the strength to bear the knowledge . . . but please don’t make me powerless and knowledgeable at the same time.”

Shafak says she’s reading *Don Quixote* right now. Given her circumstances, it provides an apt comparison. *Quixote* and *Bastard* share a penchant for satirizing nationalism and exploring the ethics of deception. While *Quixote* moves between farce and philosophy, between real adventures and imagined ones, Shafak, against her wishes, is doing the same—moving from a real-life trial of imaginary characters to an imaginative meditation upon mortality and new life.

HIGHLIGHTS

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by GREIL MARCUS

Originally published July 12, 1976

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