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Migrations

A Meridians Interview with Elif Shafak

In the Fall of 2002, the Five College Women's Center based at Mount Holyoke College, Massachusetts, welcomed a number of women scholars and writers as fellows in the Center for the fall and spring semesters as well as for full-year appointments. Elif Shafak was one of the fellows in residence for the 2002–2003 academic year. Although she came to the Center as a scholar continuing her work on gender and sexuality in the social sciences, a visit to the offices of Meridians during our Fall Open House revealed that she is an accomplished and award-winning novelist in her home country of Turkey. Her first novel, *Pinhan*, published in 1998, was awarded the Mevlana Prize in Turkey—a recognition given to the best works in mystical / transcendental literature. The novel tells the story of a hermaphrodite mystic—a little-known but revered tradition inside the Sufi orders. *Pinhan* explores the question of identity at the nexus of physical and metaphysical definitions. Her second novel, *The Mirrors of the City*, is about a Sephardic Jew who moves to seventeenth-century Istanbul after being expelled from Spain and centers on the themes of estrangement and deterritorialization. Titled *Mahrem* (Hide-and-Seek) in Turkish, her third novel is about “the Gaze,” the sacred, and the female body that must search for its elusive autonomy while being encroached upon by the Gaze—of a masculine God, of society, of the lover. Going through multiple printings, this novel received the Turkish Novel Award (the Turkish equivalent of the Booker Prize) in 2000. In 2002, Shafak's *The Flea Palace* was published, and according to critics, it is the humorously narrated story of an apartment building where characters and stories are interlaced to develop the theme of the seen and the unseen degradation—moral, physical, social as well as cultural—in the heart of the aging city of Istanbul. Within a few months, the novel sold more than 15 000 copies and was widely discussed in the Turkish media and Turkish society. Her current work-in-progress (an excerpt of which follows this interview), *The Saint of Incipient Insanities*, is Elif Shafak's sixth book and her fifth novel, her first in English.

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In this interview, she shares with us her thoughts on nationality, migration, what it means to identify as a “woman of color” in the U.S. context, Turkey’s ambiguous positioning between East and West, issues of sexuality, mysticism, the role of the artist in society, the history of feminism in Turkey and her fiction.

This interview was conducted via e-mail in the Winter/Spring of 2003 with Meridians editor Myriam J. A. Chancy.

Meridians (M): I suppose, Elif, that we should begin by speaking about origins since much of your writing focuses on identity both in terms of personal identities and national identities. You are Turkish, yet born in Strasbourg, France, and educated partly in Spain. How have those migrations come to define you?

Elif Safak (ES): Migrations, ruptures and displacements . . . have played a crucial role in my personal history. I was born in Strasbourg, France, in 1971. I was still a baby when I left the city. After a while my parents separated. My father stayed in Strasbourg; my mother and I came back to Turkey. After that I hardly ever saw my father again.

In Turkey, in early childhood, there was a time when I found myself moving between two cities, two grandmothers, each in utterly different worlds. The grandmother on my father’s side in İzmir was quick to teach me “fear.” Her Jalal (punishing and masculine) God was an ever-watching eye, always watching you and seeing every single move you made down here. Returning from that house I was full of fear and the thrill of the thought of being watched constantly was inscribed in every move I made. And yet, paradoxically, I had internalized the Gaze and developed an inner eye—an eye that would take me too long to transform into a nonintrusive nonjudgmental Gaze. But my grandmother on my mother’s side introduced me to a very different idea of God—a Jamal (beautiful and feminine) God—one that was based on love and with whom you could always negotiate. Her understanding of religion was more fluid, like water, and it was also full of superstitions. A tradition of faith that sees human beings in the image of God and venerates the individual in his/her totality. In time, I came to realize the tension between those who prioritize Jamal and those who prioritize Jalal as aspects of God, that these might have serious implications in daily life, especially for women. My grandmother’s understanding of Islam was not particularly anti-mainstream but from

there, in the years to follow, I could find a gate open to heterodox, heretic interpretations of monotheist religions.

Swinging between these two interpretations of Islam, while swinging between two grandmothers, I learned at an early age that every text is open to different interpretations and even the same God has more than one face.

After that, I went to live with my mother in Spain in 1980, shortly after the military takeover. I was eleven when I left Turkey and when I came back after years I found a country utterly transformed and silenced by the military. In Spain, I was the only Turkish child in an international school.

It is there that I learned about the hierarchy of nationalities, about an unwritten hierarchy even children knew about and were perhaps more cruel in expressing. Being Dutch or English, for instance, was most prestigious. An Indian girl and I in the class were in the lowest ranks. I'll never forget these children shouting "Pope Killers" when they had heard that I was Turkish. It was just after a Turkish terrorist had intended to kill the Pope. There are lots of other examples but the underlying pattern is the same: you are associated with your nationality. I have also observed how foreigners cling to their religious or national identities as a reaction to this process of "otherization." In a way, the more they are "othered" because of their national background, the more they glue themselves to it. It is this tendency to live with and within flocks that worries me.

I was a foreigner in Madrid and when I came back to Turkey, I realized I was an outsider in my homeland too. My feeling of "being a stranger in a strangeland" never totally disappeared. During the following years, I spent a significant part of every year with my mother, who had become a diplomat by now, moving from Amman in Jordan to Koln in Germany.

Family, home, nation, nationality . . . the ways in which we define and categorize these terms are deeply interrelated. I myself have never been raised in a family structure, never had a solid notion of home and was never happy with the national identity or religious labels attached to me. It astonishes me to see how people so wholeheartedly advocate the values of the systems in which they were born, without giving serious thought to one simple fact about life: had they been born into that, rather than this family, they would be equally eager to propagate the values of some other religion, other nationality, race and ethnicity from which they distance themselves so harshly now.

I see nationalism as the most dangerous inclination of our times. And

when I say nationalism I do not necessarily refer to blatant chauvinism or vociferous jingoism. Equally dangerous can be the more “docile” forms of nationalism. Jokes, expressions, caricatures . . . it is in these more subtle and seemingly “innocent” nests that most of the time nationalist fervor finds a safe haven to reproduce itself and to be internalized by the masses. Nationalism is not a naive love that one feels towards one’s country. Nationalism is a very shady pool; what is visible in the surface might not reflect what looms deep down below. Nationalist fervor always goes hand in hand with patriarchal structures and phallogocentric discursive practices.

I do not feel connected to any national identity or to any religious label. There are seas and rivers that are familiar to me, waters in which I swam but have never been anchored. This sense of “deterritorialization” is a constant element in my personal history and in the way I relate, or fail to relate, to the world around me.

M: Can you elaborate on your class status given your mother’s position as a diplomat?

ES: I sometimes tend to think my class position has been a bit “awkward,” if I may say. At first glance, I appear to belong to an upper-middle class in Turkey. One might also think that I was privileged like all children of that group. Underneath, it is a completely different story. All throughout my childhood and youth, I have received almost no financial help at all from my father. As to my maternal grandfather, who was a retired army officer, he made it very clear that should my mother get a divorce and come back to Turkey, she would pay the rent for us to stay in his house. So my mother and I were left with no financial help. It is only after that stage that my mother stopped dreaming of practicing professionally what she loved most in life—music—and became a diplomat.

But perhaps it should also be added that in Turkey what matters more than money or the wealth of a family is who your family is, who your father is. The cultural and ruling elite are almost all of the time the relatives of this or that influential person. These things are not stated bluntly, or overtly, of course, but it is there, in the social etiquette, as if written in the air. Being the daughter of no father, and having no family connections, I now retrospectively realize, was one of the difficulties that I constantly had

to face in Turkey, amidst the threads of social networks there that were too often intermingled with the threads of social power and cultural elitism.

M: Can you elaborate on how you, then, come to position yourself in the United States as a “woman of color,” especially given Turkey’s ambiguous positioning between East and West?

ES: I sometimes tend to think the best analogy that might be of help to understand Turkey’s position and the precariousness of Turkish national identity is the Bosphorus Bridge. As you drive along the bridge in Istanbul, a city established on two different continents, on the one hand you will read the sign that says Welcome to the Asian Continent and on the other end of the bridge you will read Welcome to the European Continent. Turkey’s position in turn resembles that bridge in between, never really welcome in either of these. This in-betweenness in turn might have given Turkey an unusual potential and dynamism. Unfortunately, that was not the case, instead what happened was the intensification of two mutually exclusive albeit interwoven factions—a rigidly pro-Western elite and as a backlash to them, this other conservative camp. Both gorge on each other’s mistakes and both have a similarly simplistic understanding of history.

The fabrication of a purely Turkish language was of crucial importance for the fabrication of a homogeneous national identity. Making language more monolithic was part of the project of making the nation more homogeneous.

In Turkey, for almost every single object we have two different words—one modern, one old and traditional. Depending on which camp you are in, you use this or that word. Turkish nationalists were trying to get rid of words of Arabic and Persian origin. In Greece, Greek nationalists were trying to get rid of words of Turkish origin . . . and so on. All around the Balkans, likewise, national language and national literature, and particularly ethnic stereotypes in fiction were employed to buttress nationalist discursive practices on each side and to exclude “others.” When you are a writer, no need to say, this becomes a huge issue. In Turkey, my fiction has been, from time to time, targeted by some rigidly Kemalist intellectuals who have accused me of betraying the nationalist project because I do like “old” words—words that were expelled from written language once

fabricated by the forefathers of the National Language Building Process. Words I am supposed not to have heard of—given my age and background. Words curbed and erased from the collective memory by the state elite. In Turkey, leftist intellectuals are remarkably ignorant when it comes to religion. Just like many Westerners, many leftist or Kemalist Turks too have a monolithic understanding of Islam. They fail to see the different, and even conflicting, veins of thought within Islam, in the history of their own country.

But, on the other hand, my fiction has also been targeted from time to time by this other camp, mainly because of the themes that I chose to deal with. Hence when, for instance, I wrote the story of a hermaphrodite heterodox dervish, both the language and the content of the novel disturbed people from supposedly opposite poles but with a similarly exclusivist worldview. I am an agnostic who has a deep, deep interest in religious philosophy and history. A combination hard to express in the established patterns of thinking in Turkey because within the dualistic structure of the society there, if you are a leftist intellectual, you are supposed to have no interest whatsoever in religion. And those with an interest in religion belong to those conservative circles that have no critical eye.

Living always in a constant vacuum, with no anchors to tie me to a feeling of security, never fully sure of the ground beneath my feet, never part of a family structure and never feeling fully as part of a collectivity has left a deep impact on me. In a country where collective networks mean so much I found myself tied to a profound and constant feeling of non-belonging.

Similarly, all my life, I have been observing “white” people from a distance, people integrated in a favored, advantaged family, class, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, collectivity . . . people who are advantaged but paradoxically are not fully aware of how advantaged they are because they have never been disadvantaged . . . and observe the distance between them and me, me and them, watch myself move farther and farther from their standpoints and sail farther and farther from their bays of existence.

I used to “feel” like a woman of color. For reasons completely external to me, or pre-given, I found myself positioned in that way. However, in time, it wasn’t a given factor any more. It became a “choice.” Today, I choose to be a woman of color. You know, Toni Morrison has drawn our attention to the mechanism operating behind racism. It is basically an exclusion,

saying, “I am not like that,” that makes it possible to define and buttress the white identity. So the idea of an “us” is a unifying force. I, however, never felt a part of that white “us.” It is deterritorialization, non-belonging, and the constant feeling of being an “outsider,” in addition to outside perceptions of what it means to be from an Islamic country, Muslim or Turkish, even though I am not a practitioner of Islamic religions, that makes me a “woman of color.”

However, let me also add that women living in other parts of the world might have a different lexicon, a distinct terminology; sometimes our conceptualizations are too much pertinent to a certain land, and to the history of that land. I think as feminists we should be careful not to glue the lexicon of a certain place or culture on every example. We should be careful not to build metanarratives, especially since we ourselves have suffered so badly from other metanarratives. In this sense, we should understand that whereas “color and race” is THE paradigm in a certain society, in a different society it is not race but class, in another one it is not class but religion, in yet another all of these at the same time. . . . It is of crucial importance to see this plurality of factors and dynamics, which are deep down below, universally and structurally interrelated.

M: What is the difference for you between “feeling” like a woman of color and being “made” to be one? And then to choose?

ES: There are two different ways to define the concept “woman of color.” The external definition just focuses on the literal meaning—the color of one’s skin. The definition is almost static. It is given to you. This is a definition that solely focuses on race and turns a blind eye to many other factors that are constitutive of identity, including class and sex.

The internal, deeper meaning, on the other hand, focuses on the position of the subject being with and within a context. Hence, as lesbian black feminists have expressed during the arts movements of the 1970s, a black woman can, for instance, find herself pushed to the margins not only by “white” culture but also, and paradoxically, by her black sisters.

M: Well, that’s interesting to me because, as far as I understand it, the term “woman of color” is one that originated precisely to avoid the reduction of racial exclusion or cultural marginalization within a white-dominated

society to skin color only, which is a particularly American problem. It was meant, if one thinks of Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's landmark anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, as an official signpost of the entry of that term into common political discourse in the U.S.A., to unify women from different ethnicities, races, classes, religious, and sexual persuasions under a political umbrella that distinguished their struggles from that of privileged "white" (meaning primarily of European descent) women. I think it was meant to escape the issue of "colorism" that is so much a part of Caribbean and Latin American communities, for example, and to concentrate on the ways in which non-European, non-privileged women could come together because of the similarity of their marginalization and the similarity of their purpose to alleviate the multiple oppressions to which non-white women are subject, especially in the U.S.A. Over time, of course, as the name itself suggests, it has become increasingly redefined in terms of actual skin color but originally, and still, I think, it also made it possible for women who were multiply located, especially mixed-raced women of Latin, Caribbean or biracial extraction, to have a voice within communities of color, to make themselves politically visible even if their physiognomy might otherwise have allowed them to "pass" as "white" as was done in the days of the Harlem Renaissance, for example. Such passing continues under various guises but the nomenclature "women of color" allows for a stop-gap, a space between assimilation and narrow racial or racialized definitions of those "othered" as non-Europeans; it allows for the inclusion of various women, Asian, South Asian, Middle Eastern, and for growing efforts at collaboration across cultural and even linguistic difference. Add to this the experience of exile and "women of color" has a deeper resonance. Is this also why you connect to the term?

ES: For me, to find room for my "multiple selves" had always been difficult both abroad and in Turkey. The moment I step outside Turkey, I am this "woman from a Muslim country." Whenever I go back to Turkey I feel connected to none of the established patterns of thought. It is as if there is always some part of me that I have to censure so that I can find a habitat. I will never forget the first time I started reading Audre Lorde. In an interview I came across, she stated: "There's always someone asking you to underline one piece of yourself—whether it's *Black, woman, mother, dyke,*

teacher, etc.—because that’s the piece that they need to key in to. They want to dismiss everything else. But once you do that, then you’ve lost because then you become acquired or bought by that particular essence of yourself, and you’ve denied yourself all of the energy that it takes to keep all those others in jail. Only by learning to live in harmony with your contradictions can you keep it all afloat” (Hammond 1981). The day I read this passage from her, my thoughts attained clarity, finally. For the first time in my life, I stopped suffering with the thought of how to define my identity and realized I can be woman, writer, exile, bisexual, agnostic, leftist, mystic, a non-Western in the West . . . I can be all of them at once, without leaving some sides of me in the shade so that some other parts can stay in the sun. It is this endeavor to refuse to draw a hierarchy among our selves, that should, I believe, always remain part of the agenda of women’s movements.

Having said that let me also add that minorities are not monolithic within themselves. Within minorities too there are power and status variations, which can be very obtuse. Minorities, people who have been suppressed constantly, have a tendency to live within glass walls of their own, create their own collectivities. Some are happily anchored there whereas some others are never at rest. They are the “Others” of the “Other.” Theirs is the more complex to fathom.

M: Yes—this makes me think of the fact that the inclusive nature of the phrase, “women of color,” has caused some to reject it because it can mean the loss of a particularized or recognized identity—African American, Asian American, etc.—recognized by the powers that be. The most marginalized can sometimes cling to those margins because some aspects of these are of benefit, even if only relatively so. Doesn’t it seem to you too that some of those who seem “well-satisfied” or who create enclaves within enclaves are responding to an imposition of liminality?

ES: That’s right and therein lies the danger. Being a member of a minority is, indeed, very difficult. And yet within every minority there are layers.

Women of color are oppressed and silenced in similar ways. Nevertheless among women of color, too, there are hierarchies, power patterns and layers within layers. This is an incredibly complex, if not intricate, structure. Together with color or nationality and gender we need to take into account other factors. Age, for instance, is a determining factor in non-

Western societies. One of the first things that drew my attention in the U.S.A. was seeing these women in their seventies, eighties, so active in political movements. It was wonderful to see these elder women marching in the streets against the war on Iraq, expressing their views in panels, dynamic and politicized. In my country, women of the same age are considered “too old” to do this and unfortunately they become depoliticized.

In Muslim societies, women are made to age earlier. They appropriate the power and autonomy that come with age. Hence, you see women in their forties acting as if they were too old to do anything new in life. It is a negotiation with patriarchy, a negotiation that dries up their souls.

In Muslim countries “age” is a crucial factor. Oftentimes, women try to benefit from the autonomy that comes with age by getting older as soon as they can. It is ironic but women age more quickly than men in more traditional structures. It is not your actual age that matters but the category in which you can be placed. Getting married is one category, for instance—you are no longer the young virgin. Then, having a child gives you more power because now you have become a mother and aged. Being a grandmother all the more so. And so it goes. Ironically, elder women partake in suppressing the voices of younger women.

M: Why is that the case?

ES: The reasons are complex and deeply interrelated with the fabric of patriarchal ideologies. But, basically, it is related to corporeality and sexuality. To attain the power and freedom so unjustly denied to them all their lives, women cling to the means of power that patriarchal systems let them have. When you are married, for instance, you are placed in a different position than a “virgin.” Once you become a “mother” you are given more power both in the family and in the collectivity. And so it goes. Especially in non-Western societies, women are always defined and positioned within “Life Stages.” Basically, the further you move along these stages, the less and less you are associated with sexuality and the body. A “Virgin” is primarily her body, her sexuality. A mother is less identified with sexuality. Hence, she is given more power. A grandmother is almost sacred; grandmothers are supposed to have no sexuality, no libido and no femininity. Killing the sexual drive in oneself is one way of attaining power in patriarchal settings.

M: I know that in your novel-in-progress, *The Saint of Incipient Insanities*, you are considering what it means for people to define too narrowly in terms of color, race, or national identifications. How does your current work seek to address this particular issue?

ES: My new novel is fundamentally a story of non-belonging. Every year, quite a number of young people arrive in the United States from different parts of the world to obtain their higher education. In many parts of the world, in many traditional homes, there are countless women who take pride in having their sons educated in the U.S.A. These people come here in order to go back, and then most of them simply do not, cannot. My novel questions the idea of national, religious cultural belonging. After 9/11, being Muslim in the U.S.A. is incredibly difficult. I am writing about Moroccan, Turkish students in the U.S.A.—people who come here with a definite purpose in mind, to go back home one day, some of whom will lose that “home” in time and always bear the burden.

Originally, my novel revolved around the idea of being a foreigner in a foreign land. Nevertheless, as I kept writing, and as I kept living in the U.S.A. at the time of the war on Iraq, this other vein of thought began to penetrate my novel, that of being a foreigner in your native land. It should be reminded that I wrote this novel at a time when the Bush administration’s call for war was so vociferous, observing many critical-minded Americans’ sense of estrangement and witnessing that they, too, might be living the life of a foreigner in their homelands. Gradually, but inexorably, this particular character started to take shape in the novel. Her name is Gail. She is a half-Jewish, half-Protestant American woman. Gail is an intellectual chocolate maker. She symbolizes a Dionysian death-drive in a society obsessed with being healthy, eating healthy, living healthy.

Most people lead their lives in their homelands. Some people live the lives of foreigners in foreign lands. And then there are some others, a few others—like Native and African Americans—who lead the life of a foreigner in their own homeland. It is their position that is more difficult to understand. They are the true exiles and expatriates: their bodies seemingly at home, their souls in exile.

M: That is a compelling observation. Can we return to Turkey’s ambiguities? Given that, I think, there is a lack of understanding in North America

about Turkey's positioning culturally, in Europe, in the Middle East, can you elaborate for us on the cultural influences in the Balkans and Turkey that have served to shape its national identity and then explain how those influences are at odds with its Eastern legacy?

ES: All around the world, literature has played an enormous role in culture-building processes. Nevertheless, in some parts of the world, such as Turkey, literature's role has been even more determining. This is what Gregory Jusdanis names "belated modernities" when he elaborates on the process in Greece, for instance. In countries such as Greece, Turkey, Bulgaria . . . literature in general, but novels especially, became the primary site in which the definition of "us" was constructed and the boundary between "us" and "them" retained. Jusdanis, in his *Belated Modernity*, probed the role attributed to the advent of literature. Literature, the art of telling stories, was valorized in the English, French, and German public spheres as an effective means of socializing people into the values of the middle class and national culture. Literature, in general, and novels, in particular, promoted the collective internalization of public norms, conventions, and symbols. Literature had a privileged position in the Enlightenment project of culture-building. As such, it was the first art to evolve into an autonomous institution bearing both symbolic and economic value.

In countries that followed a distinct path and then built a nation-state, such as Greece and Turkey, the fabrication of a national literature played a decisive role in the formation of nationalist identities. Novels, novellas, newspaper articles both fabricated and ossified the texts and contexts of masculinity and femininity in societies on the brink of founding new regimes. This is precisely why the novelists of this era wrote with a mission in mind: a mission to guide their readers toward the basic credentials of the rising nation-state. In their works, ethnic prototypes and gender patterns functioned as cement, holding patriarchal ideology together with nationalist ideology.

Hence, in Turkey, literature was the leading element in the nation-building process and also in the process of modernization/Westernization. As such, novelists were aware of their "mission." They had a mission to teach right from the wrong. The process started at the end of the Ottoman Empire. In my opinion the dissolution of the age-old empire brought along a process of de-masculinization and the "loss of the father" in the

Lacanian symbolic sense. Now the empire had lost its center; it was dissolving. This, in turn, created a deep anxiety on the part of the Ottoman male elite. The possibility of the loss of the father and all the hierarchical and symbolic structuring that came with it was a huge anxiety for the Ottoman male elite, many of whom would find comfort and solace, years later, in the persona and image of a new father, Mustafa Kamel Atatürk, when the republican regime was established in 1923. Between the loss of the previous father and the encounter of another one, there is a stage that corresponded to the latest period of the Ottoman Empire. For me it is interesting to see how that fatherless stage created a deep, deep anxiety and fear on the part of the political and cultural elite.

I should note that most of the writers of that time were people working within and for the state apparatus. They wanted to reform the basic social structures but never truly, radically, to transform it. This created a tradition of writing in which the writer placed himself above his readers, a hidden hierarchy between writer and reader. Women writers too wrote in a similar way. One of the leading women novelists of the following period, Halide Edip Adıvar, wrote with a similar mission, to educate the masses. In her novels, that is why there are more stereotypes than there are characters.

This style of writing, I believe, has left a big impact. Nevertheless, interestingly, fiction in Turkey also became a site of struggle for freedom. For ages and ages fiction enabled Turkish writers and poets to express things they could not express otherwise.

M: Like what, for instance?

ES: Let me give two examples from the past. Huseyin Rahmi Garpınar, a gay writer whose sexual identity was hidden and erased from the collective memory of younger generations, was never able to write openly about his sexuality in the early twentieth century. He was mocked by many writers and editors of his age for being “too soft and sentimental,” for crying in front of everyone, like a woman. He was deeply hurt by the people in the world of publishing and yet never stopped writing. It is in his writings that the fierce voice of nationalism is replaced with the voices of heterogeneity. Another writer, Sait Faik, a *flâneur* with a deep love for Istanbul, fought incessantly against the stereotypes of minorities. His fiction was his weapon to fight against the dogmas of the nationalists.

M: Why do you think that Turkey remains such a mystery for outsiders? Is there something of this mystery, which is essential to retain even if it remains partly veiled by the “exoticizing” or “orientalizing” Western eye?

ES: Turkey is an old country despite the newness of its regime. Its relations with the Western world too have a long past that should be traced back. Many people in the U.S.A. are unaware of this history and, actually, of the history of any country in the world. However, just like the present is connected to the past, the history of a particular country is connected to the history of another. In order to understand and analyze Turkey better, as well as the Middle East, we should be conscious of the past, conscious of history.

Turkish people have still not managed to critically reread their own past, face the mistakes they made, encourage self-criticism. Turkey underwent an incredible transformation on the way from a multiethnic empire to a nation-state. Turkish society and women achieved significant progressive steps. Nonetheless, there are still taboos we refrain from talking about. The Armenian Question is a taboo; the Kurdish Question is a taboo. Turks generally are too obsessed with the idea of how they look to the eyes of foreigners, to the eyes of Westerners. Too busy to prove how different they are from the Arabs or other Muslims, too preoccupied with their image to reform and heal the content of the regime.

On the one hand, Turkey is unlike any other Muslim country in the region and yet it is not “Western” enough. It is this in-betweenness that is a constant flaw in the Turkish national identity. In order to cover that, many people tend to become all the more nationalist, all the more religious, or if they are secular, their understanding of secularism becomes all the more rigid.

How can people be so sure of their own truths? How can you put a full stop after every sentence? We should talk with three dots . . . at the end of every sentence, leave a door open, a door open to the stranger, to the foreigner, to the one I have not met yet because that person can challenge my truth, my reality. I adore and respect fluidity in both writing and being.

M: We’ve talked about what you define as Istanbul’s “cosmopolitanness.” How do you define that “cosmopolitanness” and how does it contrast with issues of national identity in greater Turkey?

ES: I feel connected to cities, especially to Istanbul. I have a profound love for Istanbul. I think Istanbul is a she-city. She plays an enormous role in my fiction. In all my novels she is an active actor, not only a setting where incidents take place. Istanbul is a very old, highly difficult and profusely complex city. It is certainly not the right place for people who like everything in neat shape. It is sad to see how Turkish nationalism waged a war against “cosmopolitanness,” and yet it is striking to notice that despite all the attempts to build a monolithic national culture, the spirit of cosmopolitan culture and the vestiges of the past still survive in the she-city called Istanbul.

M: I’m interested in your views of art as political. I know you also write for dailies/ weeklies/ monthlies. How does this overtly political writing compare to your fictional and scholarly work, as I know you are also a social scientist?

ES: You know, when you admire fluidity it becomes difficult to reconcile art and politics. Nevertheless, I think the endeavor is worth it. We should try to do two things at the same time: to politicize art but also to aestheticize politics.

Art is a site of struggle. It enables me to say the things I cannot say aloud in daily life. Art is rhizomatic, in the way Deleuze and Guattari employ the term. Just like a rhizome, fiction has no definite center, it can move in various directions. Unfortunately, it can also be used as a means of suppression or to reproduce the existing norms and patterns.

For instance, Maurice Ravel composed his *Bolero* in 1928. After a short while, *Bolero* was played in the ferryboats in Istanbul as part of the government’s project of Westernization, to Westernize its citizens as quickly as possible by discouraging them to listen to traditional Ottoman music and “encouraging” them to listen to Western classics.

Now let’s try to imagine being in the year 1932 and living in Istanbul. If you were a middle-aged or old-aged Turkish citizen there, you would have probably seen an utterly turbulent time, the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire—a multiethnic empire—and witnessed and probably supported the fabrication of a new, Western, modern, secular nation-state: the Turkish Republic. Now, the middle-or old-aged Turkish citizen that you are, try also to imagine traveling from one place to another along the Bosphorus,

or for instance from the city to the small islands, in a municipal ferry. The journey in this ship lasts like 40 minutes or an hour. And as you sit still there, you suddenly start hearing this music broadcasted and you are bound to listen to Maurice Ravel's *Bolero*, the world's longest musical crescendo, over and over and over again until you finally disembark.

The whole idea was part of the newly established Turkish nation-state's project to Westernize and modernize its citizens as quickly as possible, by forbidding them to listen to traditional music, and instead forcing them to enjoy Western classics, starting with the *Bolero*. Everybody hated it. No wonder no composers came out of those ship passengers. Fortunately, the government stopped this practice in a few years. It was never repeated but the impact, and the venture, remained behind. What was made to serve the Muses was made to serve nation-states, state projects, patriarchies. So there is no use in romanticizing the position of art or the position of the artist.

But the good thing about art is its potential to do just the opposite. For art has an enormous Dionysian capacity to destroy and disintegrate, decentralize and liberate! Art can serve to buttress what Althusser named "ruptures in continuity." Art can destroy established structures, vested interests, manipulative identities, and congealed stereotypes.

I do write for dailies, weeklies, monthlies for a variety of reasons but first of all to break boundaries. In Turkey, literature circulates mainly among the educated groups in certain cities. I want to break this rule. I want my fiction to penetrate into zones of existence that have been closed to fiction hitherto. I also want the knowledge produced in the West and the knowledge produced in the East to flow into one another, to change and influence each other. What worries me most is that people remain in their own flocks and the language and knowledge produced in each structure remains solidly anchored there. In the non-Western world especially art is part of the fabric of the elite. This appropriation is something that I want to challenge and shatter.

The women's movement, from its early period onwards, has been aware of the dual nature of art in its both constructive and destructive capability. But my personal opinion is that we have not been able to probe the depth and complexity of the triple relation between the feminist world, the art world, and the "real world."

M: Can you discuss more broadly the feminist history of Turkey, beginning, of course, with the 1934 right of vote accorded to women?

ES: It is in Turkey that the secularization process was carried to the furthest point. Usually the Westernization process in non-Western countries makes a distinction between private and public realms. The non-Western male elite is very cautious about this distinction. You can Westernize the public realm but you should not touch the private sphere, the family, which is to say, the woman at home. Turkish modernization is unique in the way it transformed the private sphere, along with the public sphere. It brought forward very important reforms for women. More and more women entered the public arena, more and more legal reforms were made, polygamy was outlawed, women received the right to vote at a relatively very early age and they were encouraged to transcend the traditional role of housewives and mothers. Kemalism had a “feminism” of its own, and yet state feminism was controlled from above. Did all women benefit from these reforms in the same way? No. Upper and middle-class women were more advantageous than lower-class women. Turkish women were definitely more advantageous than Kurdish women, etc. So it is a superficial comment to say that Kemalism emancipated Turkish women: the same process was experienced differently by different women.

My personal opinion is that during the process of the establishment and consolidation of the republican regime, many women were “emancipated.” These were the daughters of the regime. Mothers were venerated as the embodiment of culture in a society whose male order had been badly shattered at the end of the Ottoman era. As Egyptian feminist theorist, Fedwa Multi-Douglas says, when the male order is shattered in this way there follows a fear of female sexuality. This is precisely what happened in Turkey. These “emancipated” daughters were incredibly active and visible in the public realm but in return they were turned into asexual beings, comrades in arms. Sexuality was regarded with suspicion. Femininity was regarded with suspicion. Men with feminine ways were pushed to the margins. As to women with “mannish” ways, that was not regarded with a similar disdain because that too was a way of erasing femininity and replacing it with a either asexual or masculinized appearance. As the Turkish language became more nationalist, it also became more phallogocentric.

M: Do you think, as Cixous suggested some time ago, that there is such a thing as an “*écriture féminine*” or that there is a “woman’s language”?

ES: I do think there are women’s languages but not a woman’s language—not a monolithic discursive practice equally related to by women of all colors or classes. There is nothing inherent in a woman that prevents her from writing in a phallogentric way. That is the power of patriarchy, the ways in which it makes women internalize the premises that silence them, the ways in which it manages to “naturalize” its language of discrimination.

On the other hand, I do agree that women are less fixed in the Symbolic order than men, and hence their language, especially in the oral traditions, is more fluid and iridescent than those of men. As Cixous says, woman is more slippery, less fixed than man. But must women write themselves? Do they have to connect themselves to the signifier “I” and to the signifier of selfhood offered within the Symbolic order? Women in the U.S.A. especially are expected and insistently encouraged “to write their own story.” However, fiction is also a means to destroy the “I” signifier. It has the ability to tell lies, to imagine being someone else, to blur the boundary between the imaginary and the real.

M: Your third novel, *Mahrem*, won the Turkish Novel Award. This is a novel about a woman whose body is grossly distorted as well as how she is perceived by others. Can you talk about your concept of the Gaze, both in terms of how we have come to speak of the Gaze in filmic terms, as an almost Freudian eye, and in terms of the spiritual, third eye? Does your character escape the outer Gaze to find her own eye?

ES: I think the clue to the novel lies in its title. If, as Salman Rushdie claims, the spirit of a culture resides in the words that cannot be easily, directly, fully translated into other languages, and if, as he says, it is to these words that one should focus upon to better attain where and how cultural differences operate, then the title *Mahrem* merits additional attention. Within the very concept of *Mahrem* lies the key to understanding the elusive spirit of a deeply-embedded network of Islamic social settings and individual practices. Etymologically and culturally, the word is connected with “the private sphere,” which is, in turn, associated with family, women, and femininity. *Mahrem* is also related to the word *harem* and

haram, literally “sin.” As such, it has a sexual connotation and refers to that which must remain “unseen.” In a way, “mahrem” constitutes the very boundary whereupon outsiders should stop and not peer inside.

Thereby, the book’s title can be translated into English in varying ways—including *The Hidden*, *The Sacred*, *The Private*, or *The Unseen*, or alternatively, as *Hide-and-Seek*.

In *Mahrem* the structure and plot deviates radically from those of the classic European novel. Its plot is fragmented, taking place in various historical and geographical stages. I also tried to match this fragmentation with different linguistic styles to reflect shifts in the story. As such, the book is a story within stories and a conscious reinterpretation of the narrative tradition of *One Thousand and One Nights*.

M: Since that recalls the myth or archetype of Sherezade, the story teller, the shapeshifter, the woman who emancipates herself through her imagination and through words, was there a criticism implicit in your choice of reinterpreting the narrative tradition of *One Thousand and One Nights*?

ES: Sherezade is a fabulous storyteller but there is one basic thing that she fails to recognize: that every story can be told in different ways, that if she had told the story of the 999th night on the night of 1000th perhaps she would have told it in a different way. Sherezade’s stories are a transmittance of stories produced and congealed previously rather than the writing and shaping of a formless form. Thus, despite the complexity of its structure, the text is not available to be written and rewritten, constructed and destructed endlessly. This urge for an amorphous text in the art of storytelling was a constant motive for me as I wrote *Mahrem*. Throughout the novel, I told stories within stories and then destroyed them one by one. As such, the novel entails, if not embraces, a dialectical flow, carrying along its own negation. Rather than following a linear, progressive understanding of time, I followed a circular, mystical understanding of time that helped me to move to and fro among centuries.

Mahrem is also a poetically expressed account of the tragic sexual trauma experienced by the obese woman while she was playing hide-and-seek as a child. The story takes place in a traditional neighborhood where the codes of chastity are determining. At that time, the girl lives with her grand-

mother—a deeply religious old woman. From the eyes of the girl, the readers watch the codes and boundaries of the life of middle-class women, mostly housewives, in a traditional framework. In an allusion to the trauma, the three main preceding parts of the novel are respectively entitled: “Ready,” / “Or Not,” / “Here I Come.”

During the game, just like all other children in the game, the girl looks for a place to hide. After a brief hesitation she chooses to hide in a coal storage cellar to wait, where she encounters a stranger. This scene is narrated as a game between the girl and the stranger. The language is profusely poetic in contrast with the harshness and bitterness of the incident. The man sodomizes the girl. More than the violation itself, it is the idea, the doctrine of being at the same time watched by God up in the sky that embitters the child’s heart. If God sees everything, he has seen her sin too. It is this siege that she cannot tolerate. There is one other eyewitness to what she construes as a sin: the cat of the landowner, Elsa. The girl feels that she will never be able to reach the sky and ask God why he did not close his eyes. But she can reach Elsa.

The cat’s dead body is later found in a tree.

The child is made to see a psychiatrist. But she refuses to speak. She doesn’t want to reveal, to display. She wants some things to remain private, unseen.

If things can remain unseen, if the intrusive Gaze can be stopped, the story could have been lived and told differently. The opening up of another possibility, an emancipation, for the woman character in the book involves erasing the lines of the previously told story form, hence going back in time.

M: Well, this makes me think of Toni Morrison’s phrase, “unspeakable things unspoken,” and her novel of 1971, *The Bluest Eye*. It also makes me think of Dorothy Allison’s more recent work of 1993, her novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, and the memoir piece of 1995, *Two or Three Things I know for Sure*. In both cases, the authors sought to shed light on unspeakable things, the effects of poverty and marginalization, how male power can become overtly punitive and destructive in sectors of society in which male sexuality is all the power marginalized men have—which is something James Baldwin wrote about in some of his essays, by the way, with regard to African American males—and how that can be turned on the women and

children they are connected to. Of course, the most unspeakable for both was the violation, the sexual violation of female children. In *The Bluest Eye*, the rape of the girl child leads to madness which is reflected in the text's fragmented style; in interviews, years later, Morrison confessed that she had been unable to give the girl a voice, failed to empower her, partly because she did not have the means as a writer and partly because of the times . . . sexual abuse of minors was still a taboo subject in the 1970s. It is still taboo today but much less so, as is evidenced in Allison's work some twenty years later. The differences there are cultural and racial, but class and poverty still figure largely. I say all this, knowing your affinity for Morrison in particular, because I am wondering how readers are led to analyze or consider the violation of your protagonist in *Mahrem* as a child, whether cultural taboos are interrogated or not? I'm also wondering if, in realizing how she is gazed upon and gazes out (as when she turns on the cat), she ever comes to realize the dynamics involved in her aggression, turning the Gaze back on the initial perpetrator . . . is there some space for her to reclaim her body, or is that the point of her obesity?

ES: All throughout *Mahrem*, I told stories, each related to the Gaze. Sometimes the Gaze of a male lover, sometimes the Gaze of God, or the Gaze of a cat as it watches a scene of sexual violation. At first glance, all these stories stand on their own, and each of these Gazes is a separate entity. Nevertheless, connections are already there. We do not need to make an additional effort to look for them. The idea of a Celestial Eye constantly watching you from the sky is connected to the teachings of sin and repentance, which are in turn deeply related to our perceptions of our own bodies. The Gaze of an interventionist God is internalized by women as they look at themselves, their own bodies, and keep watching their bodies to see if they are going to sin (to eat a chocolate cake for instance). The woman here internalizes the Gaze of the subject that locates her in the position of an object and scrutinizes her own body with the same Gaze.

The child's killing of the cat is a violent attempt to stop the Gaze. So too is her desire to become a zero-like figure, puff into a balloon, lose the body she was given, and rise in the air so much so high that she can go up, up right where the celestial eye resides. All she wants to know is how does the world look from up there? All she wants to know is "did God too watch the moment of sexual violation?" Her obesity is a deliberate act of deforming

the form she was encapsulated in, the body she has to take care of so that she can be “valuable as a woman.” She is a woman full of rage against the standards of body and beauty, notions of sin and hell, seen and the seer. She fully understands that her position vis-à-vis the Gaze is constructed within a pattern pretty much reminiscent of the Hegelian slave-master relationship. In Hegel’s terms the relation of master to slave is a “fight for recognition” whose outcome is the sole recognition of the master. The object of the Gaze is given the function to serve the desire of the subject of the Gaze, which can be the society, the husband, or the male God. As she cannot change and challenge this structure, as she fails to deform the master, she starts destroying her own plumage. Not every story of feminine emancipation can be a story of creating an utterly new woman from an old self. Some are stories of self-destruction.

At one point in the book, as she walks along the serpentine streets of Istanbul, the obese woman runs into a scene. A docile, submissive housewife—mother and wife—shatters from a nervous breakdown. Everyone stands watching her sorrow with interest. The obese woman too starts to watch, along with other people.

The novel ends by making the hitherto “object” of the Gaze, the “subject” of the Gaze.

M: As you’ve already revealed, that novel has elements of violence in it, as does your fourth novel, *The Flea Palace*. Is this violence cathartic, an exorcism of some sort? Or is it a symptom of bodily violations, violations upon both individual bodies and the body politic? Is there a violence that can repair what it destroys? As in mysticism, the destruction or surrender, which is not so much a violence but a dissolution? How does one shift from the former to the latter? Is that possible?

ES: I sincerely do believe so. The Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin wrote “The urge for destruction is also a creative urge!” Things cannot be created without taking the risk of destroying the existing patterns. Destruction is part and parcel of the process of creation and construction. Part of the problem in life stems from the fact that we dare to destroy very little. We want to gain without losing anything.

There are always threads of rage in my novels because for me there are no true stories that are not touched by the hand of rage. And after all, as

Mario Vargas Llosa says, literature entails some degree and some sort of a revenge. In and through literature you find or try to find what life has refused to give you.

M: I wanted to ask about your concern regarding the conflation of the writer with his or her art. Can you elaborate on how you wish to be understood as a writer?

ES: I am worried because the artist is restricted by two forces. On the one hand, the progressive groups here in the United States constantly encourage minorities or people from the non-Western world to tell their own stories. This is very important and optimistic but at the same time dangerous because if you are, let's say, an Algerian woman writer, you are expected to tell your own story, the suppression of women in Algeria. Your identity starts to precede your work. The artist is pushed and encouraged to remain in her identity. As a novelist, I find this highly damaging. Since I came to the United States, I have begun to ask myself more often than ever how was I supposed to define and identify myself? What is the category I should be located in? What kind of a novelist am I? I believe that only my work, only my writing can tell that. However, for my work to be translated without delay, I have to be defined beforehand.

And I am worried because the conditions of the age of military machine force artists to make a choice between the Muse and being political, as if these two things cannot coexist. Therefore, categories like African American art, Native American art, Latin American art or Feminist art can become one-dimensional. They dehumanize the artists by negating their individuality. Even when they look liberating, categories slyly damage the work produced and restrict the artist herself. In the U.S.A. there is a persistent tendency to pigeonhole artists, especially those from non-Western worlds or minorities. If you are not a white, heterosexual woman, then immediately they formulate categories to put your work into, such as Chicana literature, lesbian fiction, Third World fiction, etc.

To run counter to the so-called mainstream is one way of developing a feminist context, but one risks being controlled by what one opposes. The "politicization of aesthetics" is still a barely touched issue in the women's movement. For artists, women and men alike, living in those parts of the world where there is an ongoing war, the chances for art are diminishing.

The artist in these contexts is stuck in a predetermined role and deprived of the power of making the odyssey of fantasy. William Blake believed that his poetry had to be difficult to read, that it was in the act of struggling to understand the text that transformations of consciousness actually occurred. Can a Palestinian writer or poet under occupation, for instance, afford to be difficult when the need to be understood is so urgent?

As to what type of belonging I am longing for, I would like to go back to the age-old *Masnawi* by Celaleddin Rumi. In the *Masnawi* there is a passage named *The Cause of a Bird's Flying and Feeding with a Bird That Is Not of Its Own Kind*.

According to the story, a certain sage sees a crow and a stork flying together and doesn't understand why. After all, every bird should be within its own flock. The sage looks at them closely, watches them for some time and only then finds the answer. Both birds are lame and they have fallen out or behind of their own flocks.

Likewise, I prefer and propose to see artists that work hard to remain both political and euphoric—no matter how irreconcilable this seems—as lame birds that rather than being directly identified with this or that particular flock, should be identified with and among other lame birds all around the world, both at times of war and at times of seeming peace.

M: Mysticism and Orthodox Islamic religiosity seem to be at the heart of your work. Why does mysticism have such a hold on you?

ES: In countries like Turkey both religiosity and secularism may and do take rigid forms. Although they seem to look very opposite I think they share a common ground when they retain this rigidity. The left in Turkey is notorious for its lack of knowledge and interest in religious matters. And the right is notorious for its lack of critical eye.

I want to follow a different path. If you want to understand a people you cannot turn a blind eye to religion, religious history, and philosophy. Religion is not only about rules or holy books. It is also about our innermost fears and expectations and hopes. I have a deep interest in religious histories. This is confusing for many people because since I am an agnostic, they cannot understand my interest.

In the Western world there is a tendency to see the world of Islam as a monolithic whole. It is not. It was not. You can trace the paths of the hetero-

doxies, mystics, within Islam back through centuries. It is particularly significant for women because in the mystical movements and formation women found a voice—a voice they could not raise in orthodox platforms.

Orthodox Sunni Islam differentiated itself not only from Christianity and Judaism but also from this other interpretation of Islam. It is the fact that these movements have been pushed to the margins of Islamic history but are themselves Muslim that interests me most.

This being said, I also believe that there are incredible similarities between mystics of each monotheist religion. It is interesting to see that the similarities and overlaps between people who lived in different centuries, different geographical places, under different names and religions. Mysticism has in itself veins of expression that made it possible for people that were otherwise excluded from the mainstream to express themselves.

M: Can we talk about how bisexuality operates as a trope in your work? Earlier, you talked about language and the dangers of women appropriating a phallogocentric discourse. One of the things I do, in my teaching and everyday speech, is to adopt as gender neutral a discourse as possible, which is much easier to do in English than in romance languages like French, Spanish or Italian. I do it precisely because it diminishes the force of the binary of which you spoke about earlier; it also forces people into a space of ambiguity, which makes them uncomfortable. I think that discomfort can be powerful and it can call attention to the ways in which language limits us. Though what Judith Butler calls the “heterosexual imperative” has been challenged since the days of the Stonewall Riots in the U.S.A. and the emergence of gay liberation, it seems to me that people are now fairly comfortable with the idea of two poles of existence. . . . which returns me to the issue of bisexuality. Hélène Cixous argues that there is something called “autre bisexualité” which is the ability to recognize both female and male characteristics within the individual, effecting what she calls a *réparation en soi*, a self-healing. Would you contest this notion, or are you attempting to work out a similar concept?

ES: I knew that I could love people from both sexes at an early age. What I didn't know at that time was the word for it, the name and how that very name would be perceived by other people. In this case at least, we cannot say that “first there was the word.” I remember when I was 13, I started to

feel somewhat uneasy about this, as if there was something wrong with me, as if I had a secret I should not tell to others. And since I had too many secrets already, many too deeply buried inside, I could easily keep this new one to myself. At this new stage, too, bisexuality was perfectly “normal” to me but now I had come to realize that it was not normal for others.

It was only later, much later, that I started to see it was a dilemma, if not a problem, during the time in which I was becoming very politicized and active in the leftist movement, especially interested in the Kurdish movement because I thought Turkish nationalism was oppressing the Kurds. However, the Kurdish left is incredibly patriarchal, just like the Turkish left is. Among Turkish and Kurdish leftists I felt as if I had to make a choice between heterosexuality and homosexuality, that I could not keep this “thing” of an identity, this switch, this state of indecisiveness. And I tried to make that choice but it wasn’t real. It was a phony choice I had imposed on myself, imposed from above. I had in me the ability to love both sexes and I was curbing that ability, destroying it because society, and this includes leftist intelligentsia too, taught me, made me think there was something wrong in that. Only after leaving those stages behind could I learn to carry my bisexuality.

Much later appeared another question. Do your readers have to know it? Should we make the writer’s identity as open as possible or shall we leave it to fiction to tell it? In all my novels, there are homosexual and transsexual characters, themes, bisexual stories. And it is interesting to see more conservative-minded young, middle-aged Muslim women, most with headscarves, read and enormously enjoy these books. It is not only a matter of what you are telling but also how you are telling that story. Nevertheless that sort of flexibility that I observed in Muslim women changed when it came to conservative/Muslim men. I have seen many reactions, especially because of my homosexual characters. Homosexuality is for them *sapiklik*, which means perversion. And in the minds of these people sexual perversion goes hand in hand with religious deviation. As they condemn one they condemn the other.

It is a paradox, however. They don’t know that many transsexuals in Istanbul, the majority, I should say, are very, very religious.

M: How do issues of sexuality entwine with those of national identity,

racial and ethnic and gender issues in your work? It seems that these are mirrors of a kind. . . .

ES: In my writings, fiction and nonfiction alike, questioning established gender norms and patterns of heterosexuality occupy a prominent role. Racism, or nationalism, derive their strength from sexism. Sexist ideology is deeply interwoven with discriminatory practices of every sort.

For me, bisexuality has several connotations. On the one hand, originally, it is something that came along with me, in my life, I always knew my body spoke multiple voices, just like my mind and my soul and my writing. It was “natural.” In time, I realized bisexuality is not only “natural” but also political. It is a means to challenge established patterns of thinking and existence.

Most of our model of thinking is based on dualities. Normal-abnormal, East-West, traditional-modern, feminine-masculine, etc. each side in every dichotomy helps to reproduce and bolster the other side and each duality in turn, helps to legitimize all the others.

As feminist writers, I think we should be aware of these dualities and see how they operate not only outside our communities but also inside us, inside our minds, our lives. Bisexuality, both as a politicized and “naturalized” sexual identity, is a direct challenge to these binary constructions upon which many discriminatory practices and discourses are fostered.

M: In your first novel, *Pinhan*, you told the story of a hermaphrodite mystic in the Sufi orders. Since Sufism has for aim the realization of oneness with the divine, did you think of connecting sexuality to the path of the mystic, which I understand to be one of transcendentalism, for that purpose? To whom is the identity of the hermaphrodite challenging, especially, if, as you’ve said, “transgendered” or “trans-sexual” figures in Turkey are deeply religious?

EF: The hermaphrodite is a serious challenge in a society based on *hudut*—boundaries. Within the Ottoman millet system the preservation of boundaries between different ethnic, religious groups, the preservation of gender segregation was of crucial importance. As long as you remained within the pre-given category there was no problem. It is interesting that the writings

of Christian religious men about the hermaphrodite basically focused upon the body and sexuality of the hermaphrodite. That was the basic concern of Christian mainstream path. As for the Muslim religious men, however, the hermaphrodite was to be discussed in terms of social *huduts*. It was this that preoccupied the Muslim religious leaders most. Where would the hermaphrodite pray in the mosque? With the men in front or with the women at the back or should there be a different place in between? Where would the hermaphrodite be located in a social structure in which “knowing your place and limits” was so crucially important.

My novel follows the footsteps of this vein that deviates from the mainstream and disturbs the mainstream in the challenge it poses to dualities and *huduts*. In southern parts of Turkey in the past there lived a nomadic group known as the *Tahtacilar*, the Wood-people. Whenever they had to cut down a tree, they formed a circle around the tree, prayed and asked the permission of the tree. Only after having been given the permission to do so did they dare to touch and cut down the tree. This is an outcome of a true, sincere pantheism, a circular understanding of life in which everything is connected to every other thing and hence the human being is no superior to the things around him/her.

Turkish reformist elite never paid any attention to these differences in Islam. In a way they made the mistake that many in the West are doing now: to see Islam as a monolithic whole and associate it directly with backwardness. Failing to take notice of the differences in Islam only serves the ends of the fundamentalists on each side.

M: I’m curious, especially given your comments regarding learning from our “others” or from “strangers,” about your exploration of Jewish identity in contradistinction from Turkish identity. I suppose I’m thinking of Camus’ *The Stranger* and the idea that recognizing the self in the other can lead to the destruction of both self and other. Can you comment on how Jews are regarded in Turkey? Are Jews the “other” for Turks? This seemed to be the topic of your second novel, *Mirrors in the City*.

ES: *The Mirrors of the City* is a historical novel that starts in Spain, at the one end of the Mediterranean and ends in Istanbul, on the other side of the Mediterranean. The seventeenth century was a turning point for the Ottoman Empire. It was a time when the fluidity of the earlier ages was

congealed, boundaries started to become more solid. It was also a turbulent time for Russia and Spain. And, it was a period of deep transformation at the expense of *difference*. What happened in Spain was pretty much similar to what would happen in different parts of the world in the coming ages: the elimination of the minorities in the name of building a monolithic “us.” Spain eliminated Arabs and Jews, as well as *conversos*. My novel is about one of these *converso* families and basically the tension between two different ways of dealing with the position of an outcast. The tension is made visible in the persona of two brothers. After being expelled one of them settles down in Venice. There within the Jewish community he openly claims his Jewishness, gets a new name, and his foreignness thereupon comes to an end. For the other brother, however, gaining his Jewish identity is no final panacea. His feeling of otherness is deeper, restless. He has a past to obliterate, a God to contest, and a restless fury. He carries this perpetual feeling of deterritorialization wherever he goes.

The novel brings him together with Islamic mystics who were in turn “the Others” in their own society. It should be recalled that in the seventeenth century the Ottoman Empire started to become more orthodox and thereby more intolerant towards its heterodoxies. Many dervishes were punished, suppressed, and silenced because of their heretic movements and basically because they echoed the oldest tradition of blasphemy in Islam: The tradition of *En-el Hak*. Which is to say I am God or I embody God in me.

M: This is all very interesting to me as I am a descendant of Spanish *conversos* in the Dominican Republic as well as being Haitian . . . it makes me wonder how these diasporas might be interconnected in the Caribbean as well as the Middle East . . . along these lines of sharing affinities with others in other parts of the world, can you elaborate on how you see your work connected to that of other feminist writers, especially by women of color?

ES: My past and my fiction have been deeply shaped by the notion of borders and the endeavor to transcend these. In this respect, I pay great attention to Chicana feminism. Like Gloria Anzaldúa points out, borders are sites where different cultures, as well as identities, classes, races, and genders collide and coexist. I also wholeheartedly support Anzaldúa’s

quest for a “new mestiza,” a mixed race, political identity. I see this as a never-ending quest, a perpetual transition. This open-ended transformation and “crossing over” helps us to overcome the limitations forced on us by dualistic patterns of thought, such as East/West, traditional/modern, feminine/masculine, etc.

M: I deeply agree with that. What issues concerning women’s sexuality are the most pressing for you at this point in your writing career?

ES: One way of empowerment for women has been to erase our sexuality in the eyes of the others. We have too often masculinized ourselves (as was the case in the Turkish leftist movement in the nineteen seventies where women used no make-up, belittled womanly dressing, etc). Women’s empowerment should not rely upon their masculinization or erasing of their sexuality. In this respect, as Audre Lorde underlined, we should see the deepest life force residing in eroticism. One pressing issue for me is to blend the political and the erotic.

M: What new writing projects do you have in store after *The Saint of Incipient Insanities*?

ES: I keep writing for various weeklies and monthlies in Turkey, columns on art & culture. Writing both fiction and nonfiction is daunting, but profoundly renovating. On the other hand, writing both fiction and nonfiction, as well as in both English and Turkish, is more than daunting. I watch myself change into a different voice when I write in Turkish. It is an incredible challenge, not only in terms of grammar and vocabulary but also ontologically—to start writing in a language that is not your native tongue.

I am also developing a project on the memories of grandmothers in Turkish society. Bringing out and giving a voice to those suppressed silences, I believe, can offer Turkish society a chance to launch a critical rereading of her past, an honest and critical rereading of the past—which the society needs so much, no matter how “disturbing”—to be able to have a better future.

M: Thank you for this interview, Elif. I hope we will soon have the opportunity to read your translated works and your new writing in English.

ES: Thank you, Myriam.

WORK CITED

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