

EVE BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

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Abstract: This paper intends to pinpoint major issues in Elif Shafak's "Three Daughters of Eve": the rising tension between strict Muslim faith and strict skepticism, the precarious state of Turkish politics as opposed to a seemingly liberal Western mentality, the changing position of women in Islam but also the sexual ambiguities of college life. Moreover, the paper aims at demonstrating that "the Sinner, the Believer and the Confused" are the different selves of the protagonist of the novel. At the same time, the author seems to signal a major clash between the two civilizations which, ultimately, cannot be reconciled.

Keywords: faith, doubt, Muslim, skepticism, confusion

When asked why she was writing her novels in English when Turkish was her native tongue, Elif Shafak answered that she believed it was "an irrational choice, if it was a choice at all." Also, trying to find a logical explanation, she thinks that she has "escaped into this new continent." Elif Shafak was born in France where her father was studying, lived for a while in Spain and the United States. She currently "commutes" between London and Istanbul: "I sent myself into perpetual exile, carving an additional zone of existence, building a new home, brick by brick, in this other land." And this other land is not necessarily Britain, but the English language which has fascinated her ever since she started learning this language, at the age of ten. The immediate consequence of her choice was that she was accused of betraying her country and language, and therefore, was no longer considered to be a Turkish author, although she already was an established Turkish novelist. But for Shafak "separation can be a form of connection. Writing in English creates a cognitive distance between me and the culture I come from; paradoxically, this enables me to take a closer look at Turkey and Turkishness." If Turkey is not her only native country, and Turkish not her only way to communicate with people around the world, one thing is definitely certain: "...I sincerely believe my own homeland is none other than Storyland: a vast expanse where static identity is replaced by multiple belongings and the boundary between dream and reality is fluid."

While dwelling and toiling in Storyland Shafak constantly engages with pressing political and social problems of our times. Thus, in "Three Daughters of Eve" the reader can hear overtones of religious extremism, political upheaval and repression, authoritarian leadership, but also modern feminism and women's rights. The author is clearly preoccupied by acute social issues in her native country. At the posh dinner party at the luxurious seaside mansion of a wealthy businessman the conversations circle around the concept of democracy which in the eyes of the diners is obsolete, at any rate not possible in Turkey: "Democracy is passé", "You'll never get Scandinavian-style democracy in the Middle East". Instead they favour what they call a "benevolent dictatorship". For Shafak this can only mean a menace to human rights and dignity.

Undoubtedly, Elif Shafak's "Storyland" is firmly and inextricably rooted both in Turkish and European reality. The picture we get after reading this novel is one of a more authoritarian, more nationalistic and isolationist country which is unfortunately only inward-

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looking. Shafak considers that it is alarming that not only in Turkey but all across the Middle East so many people believe that a liberal pluralistic democracy is a Western concept not suitable or applicable in that part of the world. The numerous bloody terrorist attacks which took place in the years 2015-16 in Turkey, especially in Istanbul, find an echo within the covers of this book, too. Nevertheless, the traditionally democratic Western world was not spared lots of shifts and crises, turbulences and also brutal terrorist attacks. The book, thus, is not only about a split personality and individual dilemmas and painful doubts. It is also about recent social and political issues which concern us all.

It is without any doubt symbolical that the storyline of Elif Shafak's novel unfolds across Istanbul and Oxford – two extreme points of Europe, if it is possible to trace its boundaries and all this continent stands for. In an interview Orhan Pamuk, the author of "Istanbul", a real love declaration made to this fascinating city, stated that Istanbul is a vast city with conservative, traditional areas, but also places where the new Turkish aristocracy enjoys life and consumes Western culture.

The novel opens a door to a bustling, whizzing, boiling Istanbul, a home for almost eighteen million people. This place which all through history has been known by more than a dozen names – among which Lygos, Byzantium, Augusta, Antonina, New Rome, Constantinople, Polis, Stamboul, Istambul – straddles both Europe and Asia across the Bosphorus and is brutally divided into West and East: "It was so breathtakingly close that Turkey had put one foot through Europe's doorway and tried to venture forth with all its might - only to find the opening was so narrow that, no matter how much the rest of its body wriggled and squirmed, it could not squeeze itself in." No wonder that, like the protagonist of the novel herself, it floats in a state of confusion, not knowing which continent it belongs to.

While Istanbul struggles with traffic jams which seem to turn human beings into fierce brutes, and sane people into lunatics, Oxford with its "cobble streets, crenellated towers, cloistered arcades, bay windows and carved porticoes" is brimming with history. The idyllic picture is completed by the green gardens and quadrangles covered in ivy leaves. The place is imbued with history, culture, timelessness of tradition. While the Ashmolean Museum, the Bodleian Library, the circular Radcliffe Camera, the Sheldonian Theatre, and the Museum of the History of Science dominate the skyline of Oxford, Istanbul at the other side of the continent is compared to "a stormy sea swollen with drifting icebergs of masculinity." Is it possible for the gap between Istanbul and Oxford, between two very different civilizations to be bridged?

Three young Muslim women, the Sinner, the Believer and the Confused, coming from different corners of the world and studying in Oxford join in an attempt to find answers to existential questions linked to religion, love, friendship. The three daughters of Eve, Shirin, Mona and Peri are the most unlikely of friends. And how could a Sinner, a Believer and a Confused even hope to become friends, share the same apartment in Oxford and solve individual dilemmas? And yet, paradoxically enough they stick together for a while, complete each other, have huge rows but also very significant conversations.

The beginning of the novel introduces us to Nazperi Nalbantoglu, Peri as she will be known by everyone in the novel, a thirty-five year old "modern Muslim", but also carrying "a void in her soul", a devoted wife and a caring mother. All along the story we are led back and forth through her life, and travel back and forth from Istanbul to Oxford, from collective amnesia (Istanbul) to accumulation of knowledge, continuity, collective memory (Oxford). Accordingly, the narrative leaps from Istanbul in the 1980s and 1990s to Oxford in 2001 and 2002, only to jump back to Istanbul in 2016. The opening is dramatic, almost tragic: Peri and her unmanageable teenage daughter, Deniz drive to a party at the house of a rich Turkish

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family. They get caught in the crazy traffic of the city, and Peri's handbag is stolen from the back seat of the car by a thug. While trying to get her handbag back, she is injured and nearly raped by the thief. During the wrestling an old polaroid slips from the bag: it is a picture of the three young women and their former Oxford professor, Azur. This is the moment when a host of memories, feelings, regrets, unanswered questions is suddenly triggered off.

We first meet eight year-old Peri who has a mysterious vision which recurs at crucial moments of her life: "Inside the cloud of grey, Peri beheld the strangest sight: a baby – his face round, open, trusting. A purple stain extended from one cheek down to his jaw. He had some liquid dribbling from the corner of his mouth, as if he had just thrown up a little." The girl does not know what to do with this weird apparition. Moreover, she constantly witnesses her parents' religious arguments: Mensur, her father who has a drinking problem is irreligious and resentful towards his wife, whereas Selma, Peri's mother, is a fanatic practicing Muslim. Their beliefs are blatantly different. Paradoxically, religion gradually creates an abyss between them and estranges the children.

In addition, one of Peri's brothers, Umut serves time in prison where he is tortured, the other, Hakan, a rebel who wages war against his father, tempestuously leaves home. Torn between her mother's bigotry and her father's skepticism and contempt, between her love for her siblings and social injustice, bewildered by the recurrent vision, she is unsure about her identity and the existence of God: "While some people were passionate believers and others passionate non-believers, she would always remain stuck in between." In an attempt to bring God into her young life or to get rid of Him altogether, she starts a "God-diary": "I think God comes in many pieces and colours. I can build a peaceful God, all-loving. Or I can build an angry God, punishing. Or maybe I'll build nothing. God is a Lego set." Her father had advised her to keep this diary her whole life, to write and erase to make room for new dark thoughts, to believe and then again to doubt. She will be fascinated by the meaning of divinity, and she will oscillate between devotion and questioning, never solving the dilemma.

Peri's state of confusion deepens when she arrives in Oxford, accompanied by both her worried parents. Although proud of her amazing achievement (no one in the family had made it to university, to say nothing about Oxford), her mother is terrified by the thought that she will be living in this new world, where people don't speak Turkish, are not Muslim and don't read the Quran. Her anxiety increases when she notices students drinking beer, girls wearing 'indecent' clothes or exhibiting their tattoos or, worse, couples kissing in broad daylight. Even Mensur who has made it possible for Peri to become an Oxford scholar is uneasy about letting go of her. Unlike his narrow-minded wife he is aware of the benefits of a European first-rate education, but his pride and joy are darkened by the pain of leaving his daughter in a completely unknown place, across a continent. Peri herself has mixed feelings again: on the one hand she is "ready for her life to soar", and make her parents proud of her, on the other she is in doubt and unsure about her capacity to cope with this entirely new situation, and master the cultural shock.

This is when Shirin, the second heroine, the Sinner enters the novel. Her appearance is as striking and fascinating as a Sultana's. She wears a short pink skirt, high heels, heavy make-up: her lips are painted a glossy carmine, her cheeks are rouged, her eyes are outlined with a purple pencil and shaded with turquoise. Her black curly hair hangs loose on her back. Most of all her dark eyes set apart and the aura about her whole being attract Peri like a magnet.

Shirin was born in Tehran in a Muslim family, but never went back to her native Iran. Afterwards the family spent four years in Switzerland, "sleepy Sion", a too nice and too slow country in Shirin's view. Her father's restlessness led the family further West and this is how

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they moved to Portugal. After two years in Lisbon, when Shirin was fourteen and had to deal with all the teenage problems they settled in Britain where her father soon died: “England was Baba’s dream, not mine, and here I am as British as a treacle tart but as out of place as a stuffed date cake.” When asked about her home she answers that it was buried with her grandmother in Tehran. Unlike Peri whom she considers half-half or a ‘Muslimus modernus’ – in between two worlds - she herself is a wanderer who doesn’t settle down anywhere.

In exchange, she cynically scrutinizes and categorizes the Oxford student community into: social-environmental justice types, the Eurotrash, the public school crowd, the international students, the nerds, and a group of students who radically change during their stay in Oxford due to a mentor, a teacher. Shirin confesses to belong to this last group: she used to be “a ball of anger” in her own terms but was changed by professor Azur who taught her how to “look within.” From a militant atheist she develops into a skeptic: “I put my mind and heart and courage into it. I separated myself from crowds and congregations.”

A non-conformist, Shirin is definitely at ease with herself and the people around her, resonating with them. Sex and sexuality are topics she freely speaks about. Shirin lets herself be seduced and seduces in her turn. A free spirit, outspoken and outgoing, a determined non-believer she also is the Sinner of the group, and keeps the balance between the other two members of the team: the Believer and the Confused.

The third daughter of Eve, Mona the Believer is an American-Egyptian girl who was born in New-Jersey, moved with her family to Cairo, as her father believed that his children should be raised in a Muslim environment. Nonetheless, living in Egypt was harder than the family had expected it to be, and as a consequence, they moved back to the States. Mona wears a headscarf and so does her mother, but her older sister doesn’t. She is described as having bow-shaped eyebrows, her eyes are rimmed with very dark kohl, and she wears a nose stud in the shape of a small crescent. In Oxford Mona has just changed disciplines to focus on philosophy. She is involved in a series of volunteer activities and is one of the leaders of the Oxford Islamic Society. This doesn’t prevent her from writing poems, lyrics for hip hop music which she hopes someone will rap some day.

This daughter of Eve says that wearing a hijab “is a personal decision, a testimony to my faith. It gives me peace and confidence.” Believing in Allah, praying five times a day, being a feminist and an independent young woman are her personal choices, too. When asked to introduce herself at professor Azur’s seminar she states that she is proud to be a young Muslim woman, she loves her religion with all her heart and is ready to counteract all prejudices, especially after 9/11 : “People who don’t know anything about Islam make gross generalizations about my religion, my Prophet, my faith.” Her strong religious belief has the deepest roots in her consciousness and can’t be shaken. She resents being considered a potential suicidal bomber only because she is a Muslim. Although bullied, humiliated, called names, pushed off a bus, deemed stupid – only because of the headscarf – she strongly believes in the Quran and the Prophet, and finds peace in her religion.

Students in the “God” course represent all viewpoints. They debate about faith versus religion, theism versus atheism, justice versus injustice, Descartes versus Spinoza, and become familiar with MOC, that is the Malady of Certainty. When chosen to attend Azur’s course on God along with the other nine students with radically different beliefs, ideas, expectations, tempers, and backgrounds, Peri, the Confused wishes to find God and change Him, make him “apologize” for all the injustices in the world, while Mona wants to discuss honestly about the nature of Allah, and about religious diversity. She wants to be acknowledged as an educated independent young Muslim woman, free to wear a hijab if she chooses to. Both Peri and Mona go through a troubling experience when taking professor

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Azur's seminar. Peri doesn't find answers to her existential questions; quite on the contrary, doubts overwhelm her. Being an eager spirit she senses that the professor makes an experiment using his students as mere targets in conflicts or even small individual tragedies. For Mona this class isn't assuring or encouraging either, as she has to constantly confront animosity or disdain from the fellow students. Most of Azur's students are broken, some threaten to take legal action against him, others complain or have fierce controversies with each other.

Just like the Azur experience the moving together of the three daughters of Eve in an Oxford apartment proves to be a failure. To an observer even their appearances show that a reconciliation is not possible: Mona wears a long umber coat and a beige headscarf, Shirin heavy makeup, a short black dress and high-heeled boots, Peri jeans and a blue trench coat. Shirin, the Sinner and a true disciple of the demonic professor who uses unorthodox methods in class, challenges Mona, the Believer, infuriates her, urges her to speak her mind, contradicts and insults her. Peri's role is that of a mediator, albeit she doesn't succeed in re-establishing peace. The outcome is another fiasco, endless fights, a clash between strong personalities. Consequently, instead of becoming great friends, sisters for life they drift apart; a chasm opens between them - never to be bridged.

Interestingly enough, at a closer look the three female characters, whereas very different personalities, carrying various heritages and expressing multifarious beliefs, can be perceived as three different stages a person can go through life. Thus, young Peri finds herself in the crossfire of her parents' eternal war: Mensur's Kemalist progressive ideas violently clash against his wife's strict Muslim behavior. Peri hesitates between her mother's - and Mona's - faith and her father's - and Shirin's - liberalism. The result is her lasting Confusion, her dwelling in between religion and skepticism, in between West and East, in between Oxford and Istanbul.

When asked how she would persuade someone to read "Three Daughters of Eve", Elif Shafak underlines the fact that we need a measure of doubt and also a dose of faith in order to challenge each other and that "this novel tries to talk about faith and doubt in a completely different way to move beyond dualities."

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