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Turkish nationalist spreads EU flags adorned with swastikas as part of a protest outside an Istanbul courthouse during the trial of Elif Shafak. She was acquitted, much to the disgust of the protesters.

A CLIMATE OF FEAR IN TURKEY

ELIF SHAFAK

ISTANBUL – I AM A NOVELIST. When I write, I don't calculate the consequences of what I'm writing. I just surround myself with the story.

That's what I did in writing my latest novel, *The Bastard of Istanbul*. The tale of two families – a Turkish Muslim one in Istanbul, and an Armenian American one in San Francisco – is to me a book about memory and forgetting, about the tension between the need to examine the past and the desire to erase it. It tackles a political taboo – what we in Turkey call “the Armenian question” – but when it was published here in March, I didn't think a work of fiction would get me branded a traitor to my country.

But others thought differently. The novel unleashed a months-long campaign against me by a group of ultranationalist lawyers called the Unity of Jurists, who have forced high-profile prosecutions of as many as 60 writers, journalists, publishers, scholars and other intellectuals in Turkey over the past year under Article 301 of the Turkish penal code, which prohibits “public denigration of Turkishness.”

On Sept. 20, my own trial charges of denigrating Turkishness through the words of some characters in my new novel opened – and closed, with a surprising but gratifying acquittal. It was the first case against a work of fiction under Article 301; if found guilty, I could have been sentenced to up to three years in prison.

I had waited two months for the trial. But when the day came, I wasn't there. I watched the television reports about my own proceedings from a hospital bed not far away, nursing the daughter I had given birth to the previous Saturday. The court had refused to postpone the trial, even though I was due to deliver my child soon.

Listening to the testimony, I felt torn: The writer in me wished I were there to defend myself. But the mother in me refused. At the same time, I was gratified by the huge outpouring of support I had received. And after the acquittal was announced, I felt a stirring of hope that my case could finally start breaking the back of Article 301 and the nationalists' efforts to silence those who oppose their views.

Turkey today is experiencing a severe culture clash. On one side are those who want an open and democratic society that can come to grips with its past and its multicultural heritage, and who support Turkey's bid to join the European Union.

On the other are those who speak the language of fear. Believing that Turkey is surrounded by enemies and that the EU bid should be stopped, they do everything in their power to turn the country into an insular, xenophobic state. They are fewer in number, but their voices are so loud and their methods so aggressive that they manage to manipulate the political agenda and give the country a black eye.

They were certainly aggressive in my case. I was at the supermarket when I got the first call from my publisher, Muge Sokmen, in early June, informing me that a complaint had been lodged against us under Article 301 and that we were to be interrogated by a state prosecutor in a few days. I was surprised, but not too alarmed. I remembered that the charges against Turkey's top writer, Orhan Pamuk, had been dropped last year before he went to trial. And no charges had been brought against a novel before. I



FATİH SARIBAS REUTERS

Elif Shafak, a Turkish novelist, was prosecuted by Turkish authorities because a fictional character in one of her books stated there was, indeed an Armenian genocide. That's a crime in Turkey.

thought we could make the case for freedom of expression, especially in a work of fiction.

The interrogation went well. The prosecutor was reasonable and heard us out. I pointed out that my novel was full of characters with many opinions. It was impossible to judge an author simply by plucking one or two characters out of a book and saying they represented what I believe, as the nationalists had done. It would be like judging Dostoyevsky to be a criminal because one of the characters in his books commits a crime.

The prosecutor apparently agreed. In late June, we received a letter informing us that, having read the book, he saw no grounds for an indictment. He said he found no denigration in the book at all; on the contrary, he considered it constructive. We

breathed a sigh of relief. I thought I was off the hook.

But about 10 days later, I received another call, this time from a Turkish journalist. He wanted to know what I thought about the trial. “What trial?” I asked, in shock. A higher court had overturned the prosecutor's decision. My case was back on. I was to be tried under Article 301.

My publisher and I had kept a low profile up to then, but now all hell broke loose. The media began to clamour about my case; many journalists took my side. A well-known progressive newspaper asked: “Are we going to be the kind of country that prosecutes fictional characters?”

In response, the ultranationalists claimed that my novels are, in fact, planned and written by Western imperialist powers that want to destroy Turkey. They

contended that in the book, despite being a Turk myself, I had taken the Armenians' side by having an Armenian character call the Turks “butchers” in a reference to the Ottoman Empire's deportation and massacre of Armenians during the First World War. I had thus sold out my nation.

I don't know precisely what happened in 1915. But as a writer, I'm interested in people – their stories, their silences, their pain. I believe in recognizing human grief. I find it sad that some Turks can't talk about 1915, that ours is a society with collective amnesia. We haven't come to grips with our past, nor have we recognized how bitter the Armenians are because their grief goes unacknowledged. I would like Armenians to forgive and forget one day, too, but we Turks need to remember first.

I had hoped that *The Bastard of Istanbul*, told from the perspective of the women of the two families, could be a bridge between Turks and Armenians, showing how similar our two cultures are, how much they share. I tried to tell my story with humour and understanding, but all this seemed to be lost on the humourless lawyers who were determined to put me on trial.

Early this month, they started circulating a vindictive notice on the Internet, labelling me – as well as many other intellectuals – sellouts and traitors. The message ended with a gallant call to “all patriotic Turks who love their nation and are aware of their patriotic duties” to be present to protest at the courthouse throughout the trial. Though I had been apprehensive before, this notice, with its alarming language of hatred, really got to me.

But their message of hate didn't win out. At the trial, the lawyers and their supporters showed up in force. But for the first time, they were denied entry to the courthouse, which meant they couldn't intimidate the judges and other court personnel as they had done in the past. And remarkably, they were outnumbered more than two to one by those who support freedom of expression.

Even as I was harassed from one side, I was receiving tremendous support from many other segments of Turkish society – women, Kurds, non-Muslim minorities, Sufis, liberals, conservatives, intellectuals, academics. My novel has been read freely, discussed freely and circulated freely. It has sold more than 60,000 copies, making it a best seller in Turkey. The English version will be published in March.

I have received countless letters from people sharing their personal stories. “I am the grandchild of a most loving woman who I too late in life learned was an Armenian orphaned in 1915 and then converted to Islam,” wrote one. A young university student from Diyarbakir echoed: “I never had the chance to talk about her past with my own grandma, but I believe your novel put me in touch with her spirit.”

Support came from other sources as well – the international and diplomatic community, and even my own government. The day before the trial, I received phone calls in my hospital room from the prime minister and the minister of foreign affairs, congratulating me on the birth of my baby and reassuring me that security at my trial would be tight.

They kept their word, and I think it helped my case. Watching the trial, I felt that I was seeing the start of a transformation in Turkish society, and the hope for a transformation of the legal system and the political culture that surrounds it. There is still a long way to go; others are still being charged and will go through the mill. But I believe my acquittal is an opportunity for Turkey to make a new beginning.

The Bastard of Istanbul is just a novel, but it set off a chain of unexpected events. As I look at my baby daughter, I only hope the chain will end in a free and open Turkey where she can grow up saying what she believes – without fear of any consequences.

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