

Elif Shafak on our common humanity

?Acclaimed Turkish author Elif Shafak discusses the limits to free speech, the cosmopolitanism of her novels and the art of coexistence.



Interview by FSD team member [Irem Kok](#).

IK: As a writer cherishing “[cosmopolitan energy](#)” in your writings, do you think we should be free to speak openly and with civility about all human differences? Do you think there should be limits to free speech?

ES: Free speech is one of the most fundamental freedoms for all of us, east and west. It is the oxygen we breathe. The lesser the freedom of speech the more suffocating a political regime tends to become. Freedom of expression is at the same time "the freedom to become and remain an independent individual". This is so important, especially in strictly collectivistic societies where it is hard to preserve one's individuality.

For me, freedom of speech should be fully defended with the exception being “hate speech”. The kind of discourse that entails verbal/physical violence and directly targets a minority, subculture, individual or group, in short people, who have limited power vis-à-vis the state or mainstream ideology. We need to be aware of the dangers of hate speech, both in the traditional media and the

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new social media.

IK: In your novels, you unravel the difficult question of “encounters with the other” in various forms. Do you think conflict between different values, beliefs and worldviews is an ineradicable component of freedom and source of creativity?

ES: It is true in my novels I bring together people from completely different backgrounds. Life itself, especially in this day and age, is replete with “encounters with the other”. At a most basic level, I believe that in life, if we are ever going to learn anything we will be learning it from people who are different than us, not people who are exactly like us. Rather than hearing the same repetitive echoes, we need to be exposed to multiple voices, multiple interpretations of reality, so that we can understand better. I am not romanticising cosmopolitanism or multiculturalism, I am aware that it is not a bed of roses, or if it is, it has its own thorns; that is its own problems and clashes. However, I do believe that it is in heterogeneous, cosmopolitan settings that art and literature and creativity flourish and democracy can be worthy of its name.

IK: You have lived in Massachusetts, Arizona and Michigan, and you now go back and forth between Istanbul and London. Most countries in Europe and the English-speaking world limit what we can say about others under “hate speech”. What is your perspective on hate speech?

ES: I think hate speech is an important issue and will become even more important with the growth of new technologies and social media. The internet is an amazing ocean of possibilities and connections. It has changed everything and is conducive to a more democratic, globalised, open and fast-moving world. Yet at the same time it has made it easier to generate and circulate slander, gossip, hate speech and misinformation. So how do we deal with this? There are no easy answers. And the legal adjustments are lagging behind the changes that are happening everywhere. That's because technology is changing faster than the law.

IK: Some argue hate speech should be controlled to protect minorities against majority? Do you agree with this statement?

ES: Yes, I do agree that hate speech should be controlled to protect minorities against the majority, individuals against state machinery, subgroups against mainstream culture. Especially discourse that provokes violence against people who are disprivileged or disempowered should be controlled. The problem is in authoritarian countries the trend is just the opposite. Many laws protect the state vis-à-vis the individuals. So it is important to protect the disempowered, not the already powerful. Overall it is important to have a democratic, open society that is aware of the dangers of hate speech.

IK: The question of Islam, in particular Sufism, plays an important role in your writings. In many ways, your writings relate to contemporary discussions on Islam, especially the debate about insulting religion. Do you think there should be limits to how we should (not) talk about Islam?

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ES: It is a tough question. In my opinion the right way to go about it is to keep in mind the reality of the world we are living in, rather than to offer answers on a purely abstract level. And the reality is that we are living in a polarised world where unfortunately too many people seem to take it for granted that Islam and western democracy cannot possibly coexist. There is a two-way traffic of cultural stereotypes, generalisations and simplifications. None of this contributes to a better, peaceful future. Any discourse that buttresses a contentious, divisive and antagonistic approach is problematic in my eyes. I am more interested in showing the things we have in common as fellow human beings, sharing the same planet and ultimately, the same sorrows and joys rather than adding yet another brick in the imaginary walls erected between cultures/religions/ethnicities.

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